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## THE PERSONAL IS POETRY: MEŠA SELIMOVIĆ'S *DERVIŠ I SMRT* AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO AUTOBIOGRAPHY

**Abstract:** Following the death of his brother, Meša Selimović spent years trying to compose a nonfiction account of his experience of the event; the results, however, always seemed too raw, private, and unruly, so he set about learning to write novels, sensing that this was the proper destiny for the work. The culmination of this effort, *The Dervish and Death* (*Derviš i smrt*), can thus be read as a testament to the problem of autobiographical writing: the search for an adequate, personal language that will be both relevant to others and pliant enough to convey lived intensity. By examining the novel through the lens of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, as well as Wittgenstein's own autobiographical reticence, this essay attempts to show how the frustrations of creating a cohesive nonfiction account of life events may find their solution in a different form: an amorphous narrative comprising tangles, hallucinations, and fragments. In the end, this rather unlikely pairing of authors attempts to shed light on how each navigates boundaries of sense and nonsense, order and disorder, and truth and falsehood.

**Keywords:** *Derviš i smrt*, *Death and the Dervish*, Selimović, Wittgenstein, poetics

we speak about everything and nothing  
even about the weather  
we even speak of those things whereof we cannot speak  
“Whereof one  
cannot speak . . .”  
this fierce formula  
put forth by Wittgenstein  
was reversed by me  
at just the right moment:  
whereof one cannot speak thereof one must speak  
  
something well known to  
women old men children and child poets  
—Tadeusz Różewicz

### 1. Introduction

It could be said that behind the final, arresting proposition of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, “Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent” (Wittgenstein, 2013, n.p.), lies a dead friend. What began as

an attempt to discover the meaning of logical necessity, that is, why logical truths are necessary and cannot be otherwise, takes a dramatic, mystical turn toward the end, likely as a result of Wittgenstein's personal experience on the front and as a prisoner during the First World War, followed by the sudden, accidental death of his dearest friend David Pinset, to whom he dedicates the work. Ultimately, it is a book in search of the world's meaning, and, as we shall see, the very language of its final propositions suggests that Wittgenstein might be willing, with Tadeusz Różewicz, to reverse his own "fierce formula." Two decades later, after what is regarded by many as a major shift in his philosophy, he would go on to write *Philosophical Investigations*, a meandering account of human language that looks precisely at all the different ways to make meaning beyond the strict boundaries of logic.<sup>1</sup>

In an outline of his novel, *Derviš i smrt* (The Dervish and Death), Yugoslav writer Meša Selimović writes: "the brother is at the foundation of all events in the novel, [and] that is the foundational element of composition" (Selimović, 1983, p. 181). While ostensibly about the dead brother in the narrative, this statement is probably just as true for Selimović himself. Following his own brother's death, Selimović spent years trying to compose a nonfiction account of his experience of the event; the results, however, always seemed too raw, private, and unruly, so he set about learning to write novels, sensing this was the proper destiny for the work. The culmination of this effort can thus be read as a testament to the problem of autobiographical writing: the search for an adequate, personal language that will be both relevant to others and pliant enough to convey lived intensity.

This paper attempts to read in tandem Selimović's novel and the philosophical writings of Wittgenstein, in the hope of uncovering and theorizing certain aspects of the novel connected to issues of language and (autobiographical) authenticity. At the same time, in light of the considerable geographical and cultural space one crosses between the two authors, we gain a new appreciation for the scope and universality of their writings.

In late 1944, Selimović's oldest brother was tried and executed by the Communist Party—charged with taking furniture from a Communist warehouse. For Selimović, the shock of this injustice was compounded by the fact that he, having fought with his seven siblings in the Partisan resistance, had become an ardent Party member and a firm believer in the socialist revolution. Perhaps equally as haunting for Selimović is that one day after learning about his brother's death (which had happened four or five days earlier), he nevertheless delivered a previously scheduled lecture for the Communist party. He was aghast that he "had the strength to speak, that I did not, as a man, as a brother, rebel against those unnatural obligations that I had imposed upon myself" (Selimović, 1983, pp. 171–172). The pain of his brother's death and the guilt of his inability to rebel against "the revolution that eats its own children" (Selimović, 1983, p. 172) remained with Selimović for decades to come,

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a reworked version of a chapter, "In Search of an Earthly Language: *Death and the Dervish*," from an unpublished doctoral dissertation entitled *Trying to Say the Whole Thing: Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Ethics of Autobiography*, available in PDF format at <http://hdl.handle.net/1773/35574>.

and the question of unnatural obligations, I will argue, can be tied to unnatural impositions at the linguistic and compositional level.

Had he not already had some contact with literature by that time, he continued, “such a tragedy would have led me to the idea of telling someone, in the form of a written confession, about my anguish. That kind of primitive and simplified motivation for writing is ultimately also the most natural” (ibid.). With him, however, things were more complicated: the more he thought about his brother, the less he could find the strength to talk about him. When he finally began writing about his brother, it was too raw with emotion, and “everything turned out too private, too pamphlet-like, a wild lament relevant only to me” (Selimović, 1983, pp. 173–174). Thus began a years-long preparation in which Selimović honed his skill at writing novels, sensing that the work about his brother would take that form. Besides mastering technical matters such as plot, structure, and character, he was in search of a language adequate “for my hand and my soul,” one that was fit for his story (Selimović, 1983, p. 175).

Selimović claims that the only similarity between his life and his novel is the question, “What am I after that sentence, a bereaved and embittered brother or an insecure, uncertain party member?” (Selimović, 1983, p. 176). And yet, we see many other aspects of Selimović’s long effort to write this book in the book itself: rebellion, natural and unnatural responsibilities, the need to confess, and the search for an adequate, personal language—one that is relevant and understandable to others (there is no such thing as a private language, Wittgenstein would remind us), yet pliant and subtle enough to convey a broad spectrum of emotions. Interestingly, Wittgenstein’s philosophy follows a similar trajectory, with its uncompromising need for honesty and its search for the nature of human language.

## 2. The Trial of Faltering Shadows

As sheik of his *tekke* in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Bosnia (in the far reaches of the Ottoman empire), Ahmed Nuruddin, Selimović’s eponymous dervish, has lived an insulated life according to a very prescribed language. When he is confronted with the unjust arrest and execution of his younger brother, the shock provides the initial impetus for his writing, which he imagines as a kind of trial. The opening of the novel, in which Nuruddin introduces himself and his reasons for writing, is indeed one of the most striking moments, and primes the reader for the central conflict between sacred and individual language. The dervish’s manuscript begins with an invocation:

Bismilâhir-rahmanir-rahim!

I call to witness the ink, the quill, and the script, which flows from the quill;

I call to witness the faltering shadows of the sinking evening, the night and all she enlivens;

I call to witness the moon when she waxes, and the sunrise when it dawns.

I call to witness the Resurrection Day and the soul that accuses itself;

I call to witness time, the beginning and end of all things—to witness that every man always suffers loss. (Selimović, 1996, p. 3)

The verses are followed by an author's footnote explaining that they are "from the Koran," and other such citations serve as epigraphs to most of the book's chapters. More precisely, however, they are "a montage of sometimes substantially altered verses from various chapters of the Koran" (Crnković, 2009, p. 81). Here, the alteration involves a crucial omission that changes the meaning of the entire verse: in the Quran, the passage continues, "man is [deep] in loss, except for those who believe, do good deeds, urge one another to the truth, and urge one another to steadfastness" (*Qur'an*, 2005, pp. 2–3). The presence of the Quran, and how it is used, establishes at the outset one of the major conflicts of Nuruddin's narrative: the conflict between sacred language and language as used by an individual. On the one hand, as Gordana Crnković points out, "by starting the novel with the 'Basmala' phrase (meaning 'in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate'), which starts all but one chapter (*sura*) of the Quran, the text calls for the reader's undivided supreme attention, the attention that is given [to] a sacred text" (Crnković, 2009, p. 81). And yet, what follows is far from sacred; rather, it is an individual's account of his personal struggle, in which he calls his own faith into question. Selimović's "poetic" use of the sacred text is also potentially controversial, given that the Quran is considered the direct word of God (Haleem, 2005, p. xv)—not to be paraphrased, much less cut up and rearranged. As if to confirm the transgression at work, Nuruddin's omission of the final line "excludes God as the highest truth and establishes man as the measure of existence" (Andrejević, 1996, p. 152). This removal, however, does nothing to liberate man in a positive sense. He "always suffers loss"—faith and truth not only cannot reverse this, but they have been removed from the picture entirely.

While the use of the sacred text subtly dismantles the idea of sacredness, these verses also prepare the reader, in their "supreme attention," to be alert to the form and sound of the language. In this novel, the physical elements of language are as relevant as semantic meaning (Crnković, 2009, p. 82). Indeed, Ahmed Nuruddin conceives his manuscript as a trial whose witnesses could give nothing but poetic testimony: ink, shadows, the natural world, the cosmos, the soul, time. Furthermore, his own words often seem to have conjured, or even been written by, these elusive elements, as though they finally enact the merging with the world that he so desired but could not attain. This separation between the holy word's truth and the "judicious lie" of the literary has a long, illustrious history, which Hamid Dabashi, in reference to the Persian tradition, calls "humanism." Such a tradition, Dabashi argues, has existed "neither despite nor because of Islam," but rather represents "a literary manifestation of a cosmopolitan urbanism" that "spells out an entirely different universe of moral and ethical obligations" (Dabashi, 2012, p. 2). As opposed to Islamic scholasticism, this humanism is marked by "the primacy of language and the fragility of the subjects (in plural) that have occasioned it" (Dabashi, 2012, p. 10). It places the human at its center, celebrating the creative act and plying words in all possible ways: through sound, imagery, wit, irony, brevity, grace, and expansiveness (Dabashi, 2012, p. 7). Ahmed Nuruddin's staging of his own trial happens not within the world of Islamic jurisprudence, but rather in the dynamic, unpredictable, volatile moral universe of the human word.

We will further explore these ideas in the sections to follow, but for the moment let us return to Nuruddin as he introduces himself and his text in arabesques of contradictions:

I begin this story of mine, for nothing, without profit for myself or others, from a need stronger than profit and reason, that an inscription (*zapis*) by and about myself remain, the written torment of conversation with oneself, with the faraway hope that some solution will be found when the account has been settled, if it is, when I have left a trail of ink on this paper that waits like a challenge. I do not know what will be written, but in the hooks of the letters something will remain of that which was in me, no longer will it vanish into the eddies of mist, as if it had never been, or as if I did not know what had been. In this way I will be able to see myself as I become, that wonder I do not recognize, and it seems to me a wonder that I have not always been what I am now. I am aware that my writing is tangled, my hand trembles at the task of disentanglement before it, at the trial I am commencing, and I am everything at that trial, judge and witness and prosecutor. In everything I will be as honest as I can, as anyone can, because I am starting to doubt that sincerity and honesty are the same: earnestness is the certainty that we are speaking the truth (and who can be certain of that?), while there are many honesties, and they do not agree with one another. (Selimović, 2004, p. 11)<sup>2</sup>

Although he initially claims that there is no profit or reason to his writing, through this dense, “tangled” passage a picture gradually emerges of Nuruddin’s dynamic, complex need to write. He intends to leave an “inscription” or “write-up” (*zapis*) about himself, or more specifically of conversations with himself. He also wants to leave a trace of himself in the text, as if this will allow him finally to recognize himself. He makes interesting use of the present tense at one point, suggesting that he is emerging along with the text itself: “to see myself as I *become*” (“*da vidim sebe kako postajem*,” emphasis added). Only when all is finished does he hope to find a solution—possibly to those unendurable conversations with himself. His project is an attempt at disentanglement (*otplitanje*), while the writing is tangled (*zpleteño*): this is one of the central paradoxes of the text, where form and intention seem to work against each other.

The paradox is reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s concept of *Übersicht* as an elucidating method (Wittgenstein, 1998a, p. 973). Clarity, Wittgenstein maintains, requires courage—hence the dervish’s shaking hand. And yet, some things cannot be surveyed, as Hans Sluga argues, including the form of human life (Sluga, 2011, p. 110). In such cases, whatever disentanglement can be hoped for must occur in pieces, rather than at the level of totality. How small the pieces are depends on the part being surveyed, and if they are small enough, the contradictions between them may indeed lead to a tangled form. The act of writing in order to see oneself is a Sisyphean task: becoming happens along with the writing, and there is never a moment when the task is finished. In that sense, the story really is “for nothing, without profit” for the writer or others. Be that as it may, Nuruddin harbors hope for some kind of outcome,

<sup>2</sup> Some citations of the novel are my own translations of the original *Derviš i smrt*, while elsewhere I use the Rakić-Dickey translation. My translations owe much to the latter, but with modifications particularly to syntax in order to more closely reflect the original.

however flawed. He seems to embrace paradox as he declares his writing to be a trial in which he must accuse, testify, and judge. But such an undertaking is enormous: to render a true, complete account with the intention of disentangling, achieving clarity, and passing judgment is not possible.

Nuruddin, however, seems to have found a working approach for his autobiographical record that mirrors the eventual shift in Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy, from logical propositions to the context-specific meanings of language games. By distinguishing between being honest (*pošteno*) and being earnest or sincere (*iskren*), Nuruddin—and, we might speculate, Selimović—overcomes the impossible injunction to write, with certainty, the (logical) truth. Instead, he has set “honesties” as guideposts, however contradictory or confusing they may be. This approach resonates with the literary humanism discussed above, particularly with one of its most brilliant exponents, Sheykh Mosleh al-Din Sa'di Shirazi, better known simply as Sa'di. The 13th-century Persian poet and prose stylist famously put forth the idea that “a judicious lie is better than a seditious truth” (cited in Dabashi, 2012, p. 1), and the tradition that sprung from Sa'di “is replete with gems of worldly wisdom, at the heart of which always dwells the twist of a verbal pun informing a moral paradox, where harmful truth-telling, for example, must yield to the wisdom of a white lie. Only in the literary space—with poetic license—thus crafted and made viable can a lie be celebrated and privileged over truth” (Dabashi, 2012, p. 2). In *Derviš i smrt*, Ahmed Nuruddin thus decides to reach for whatever worldly wisdom he possesses (in his case, generally tortuous and tortured experiences interspersed with moments of intense beauty), which often amounts to paradox and puzzles. Nonetheless, this seems to be the only way for him to go on.

As we shall see, the “testimony” of his text is far from any reasonable litigation; rather, it is much like the non-logical language that Wittgenstein describes in *A Lecture on Ethics*: nonsensical expressions whose “nonsensicality [is] their very essence” (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 11). That is to say, they cannot be rephrased as “a statement of facts” (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 6), and even amount to a “misuse” of language (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 9). In Wittgenstein's view, this is characteristic of statements connected to ethical and religious experiences (and we might add aesthetic experiences, given that he equated the aesthetic with the ethical<sup>3</sup>). His point was not that such expressions had no value; rather, it was a warning against attempts to establish a logically founded “science” of ethics. Nevertheless, the use of these nonsensical expressions, such as “how extraordinary that the world should exist” (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 8), reveals the human tendency to want to go “beyond significant language” (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 11). Like Nuruddin, Wittgenstein sees this as “useless”: “This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense.” That is not to

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. “The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connexion between art and ethics” (Wittgenstein, 1998b, p. 83).

say that it has no value; on the contrary, “it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it” (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 12). Indeed, in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein often examines expressions that may have no logical sense, exploring what their use can tell us about human psychology. Likewise, Sheikh Nuruddin’s differentiation between certainty and honesty offers a subtle distinction in terms of how one approaches such expressions. While speaking them with *certainty* might imply the confidence of a scientific statement of fact and an eye towards consistency, approaching them with *honesty* suggests an awareness that what one is saying may seem nonsensical and contradictory. Indeed, though they are of “no benefit,” the dervish’s tangled lines have value as a testimony to the tendencies of the human mind. This, it seems, is precisely what Meša Selimović intended. In one interview, he talks about how his novel has no single, foundational idea—an unavoidable condition for a novel without a theme. Rather,

summarizing my life experience, I wanted to express the intensity of life in its many aspects, impressed by the inconsistency of human thought, the rapid and unexpected turns of emotions and moods. Following my own path, and at my own risk, of course, and wanting only *to say and not to prove*, I created characters who are quite inconsistent, who very often contradict themselves, who do not respect or remember a thought from yesterday or the moment before, whose actions do not lead to a crucial decisive step, so it looks as though I as a novelist lose time analyzing human zigzagging, but the final act happens unforeseen, like psychological unexpectedness. (Selimović, 1977, p. 295, emphasis added)

The zigzagging and nonsense are crucial factors in composing this record of torment.

There seems something inherently “honest” in the zigzags when dealing with human life, and Selimović’s comments are strikingly resonant with Wittgenstein’s preface to *Philosophical Investigations*. Here, he admits that the cohesive, linear form he had hoped his work would take did not come to fruition; rather, he writes, “my thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination. —And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For it compels us to travel criss-cross in every direction over a wide field of thought” (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 3e). This compact set of comments comprises a whole host of issues for autobiography and philosophy, where one begins with an aspiration to create an integral whole, and in the process of writing the work starts to swerve and resist. However, lest we read this as a universal apology for all formal flaws and shortcomings in any writing, we must bear in mind Wittgenstein’s note that such a procedure was connected with the nature of the investigation. *Philosophical Investigations* set out to create a complete description of the ways in which we use language, i.e., expose the different “language games”<sup>4</sup> that exist and

<sup>4</sup> By the time he started working on *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein’s view of language had changed, from logical propositions with fixed relation to the state of affairs they describe, to an infinite array of language games—occasions when we use language, each with its own rules and ways of meaning. While these language games share various affinities from one to the next, they have no

the ways they can be conflated; in other words, it was an investigation of language in its ordinary, everyday use, material that truly seems to unfold infinitely in all directions. Finally, his comments contain a central tenet of Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy: the character of one's subject (be it language or oneself) must not appear accidental, but rather fully exposed and integral to the work. Hence, the crisscrossing and the zigzagging are the natural forms suited to the nature of these particular writings.

### 3. The Rebellion of the Personal Tone

In both works, we might view the formal inconsistencies and gaps as essential "honesties." Returning to *Derviš i smrt*, a few of the compositional features of these honesties will be briefly sketched as they appear in the rest of the novel: first, the spontaneous, physical nature of ordinary, human language—and the deep need for such a language; second, the meaning-making role of lyrical elements; and third, instances of distortion within the narrative. The first is the idea of a human language, which Nuruddin both contemplates in his narrative and exemplifies in his writing. In speaking, however, Nuruddin finds himself often incapable of expressing himself without relying on the familiar language of the Quran or the communal, impersonal talk used by dervishes at the tekke. This rigid form of communication is most fiercely defended by the *kadi*, or municipal judge, when Nuruddin seeks his help to free his brother. In this encounter, Nuruddin runs up against the iron wall of his beloved text when he is trapped in a vicious language game with a man who seems more dead than alive. As the *kadi* incessantly "reel[s] off phrases from books," the idea of a "human language" takes on a new significance for Nuruddin. He suspects that the *kadi* has "forgotten all ordinary words, and that was a terrible thought: not to know a single word of your own, not to have a single thought of your own, to be unable to say anything human, to speak without need or meaning, to speak in front of me as if I were not there, to be condemned to speak by rote" (Selimović, 1996, pp. 144–145). For the first time, perhaps, he senses the value of those "honesties," or even a judicious lie (where veracity has no connection to value)—not as superior to holy writ, but as separate and equally necessary. The dervish's futile attempt to "draw [the *kadi*] into human conversation" (Selimović, 1996, p. 146) illustrates the contrast between spontaneous, individual discourse and the strictly prescribed code of the law:

When I said why I had come, he answered with a passage from the Koran:

*Those who believe in God and the Last Judgment do not associate with the enemies of Allah and His prophet, even if they are their fathers, or their brothers, or their kindred.*

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single, universal thing in common (*PI* §65); therefore, it is impossible to reduce all language to a strict definition or expect it to behave in predictable ways across the spectra of occasions. This creates problems in philosophy, where so-called "superconcepts" (e.g. "thinking") presume that one can arrive at a fixed definition of a word. He hoped that creating an overview of language games and the boundaries between them would help reduce such misunderstandings.

I cried out:

“What has he done? Will anyone tell me what he has done?”

*You who are faithful, do not ask about that which might cast you into distress and despair if it were told to you openly.* (Selimović, 1996, p. 145)

In this exchange, what has been the dervish’s language of solace, light, and justice is turned against him in a battle between earth and sky, a man’s “ordinary words” versus the “words of the Creator.” “I tried to place my minute troubles on the scale of ordinary human justice,” writes Nuruddin, but “[h]e drove me to apply eternal measures to my case, if I were not to deprive it of any value at all. At that time I was not even aware that I had lost my brother in those dimensions of eternity” (Selimović, 1996, p. 146). Worn out from desperation, Nuruddin retreats, dismayed that he has forgotten his brother, and concerned that he has said what he should not have, “[b]ecause even the Koran is dangerous if you use God’s words about sinners to refer to those who decide who the sinners are” (Selimović, 1996, p. 147).

The dervish’s behavior in this scene marks a significant change, no doubt brought on in part by a conversation with his new, charismatic friend, Hassan, just prior to the meeting with the kadi. In that exchange, Nuruddin opens up to Hassan with unusual vulnerability, expressing his desire to help his brother and his humiliation at having failed so far. As opposed to measuring his words carefully, here he speaks “to satisfy a need that was growing inside me, to fill myself with tenderness and warmth”; Hassan’s presence seems to draw from him “an unusual, inner truth” (Selimović, 1996, p. 127). However, this frankness is quickly withdrawn when Hassan responds with an enthusiastic offer to help Nuruddin’s brother escape prison. Dismayed by the way Hassan has misinterpreted his words, Nuruddin tersely rejects the offer, arguing that a prison break would not clear his brother’s name—it was better to defend “justice” and free his brother through legal avenues (unaware that such avenues did not exist). Hassan tries to persuade him to reconsider, warning that the dervish’s attempt to save justice and the world will only result in a senseless death, and nothing will change. But Nuruddin will not be swayed:

“Then that’s the will of God.”

“Can’t you find any other, more human words?”

“No. And I don’t need them.” (Selimović, 1996, p. 131)

But the subsequent encounter with the kadi makes it clear that Ahmed Nuruddin *does* need “human words,” particularly when the language of justice cannot admit the reality of his very human brother. Nuruddin’s ongoing effort to access a “human language” becomes a major component of his narrative, and, it could be argued, the very narrative itself.

In contrast with the kadi, Hassan exemplifies Nuruddin’s concept of human language, in its combination of wisdom and nonsense. Whereas Nuruddin often regrets the way he says or does not say things, Hassan always seems to find the right thing to say and the right way to say it—although it is not a matter of being articulate or suave, but rather of being sensitive, patient, and honest. He is even able to calm an unbroken

horse with his gentle, soothing speech, and Nuruddin's description of this event most vividly illustrates his friend's gift: he approached the animal "carefully, without haste, . . . without trying to trick it, right until the horse stopped, calmed by something, maybe by Hassan's steady movements, maybe by his soft, indistinct words, which gurgled constantly, like water in a stream, maybe by his concentrated gaze or his lack of fear or anger" (Selimović, 1996, p. 119). Here we see Hassan's uncanny ability to sense the needs of another (be it an animal or human); this keeps him closely connected to the world in both its wild and domestic forms, and his speech seems to be the bridge between the two. Hassan's words exemplify sura 14.24 from the Quran, which appears as the epigraph of chapter 13: "A beautiful word is like a tree, its roots are deep in the ground, its branches rise up to the sky" (Selimović, 1996, p. 310). In the context of the novel, it is a potent summary of what Nuruddin so admires in Hassan and aspires to himself: a language that is rooted in the earth—of human experience, of concern for others, of one's own inner need to speak (maybe for no reason)—and at the same time reaching beyond the ordinary, perhaps with pleasing sound, with intelligence or wisdom. Most importantly, a tree is something that lives and grows, that bends with the wind and changes with the seasons.

At one point, Nuruddin comments that a "personal tone is poetry, an opportunity for distortion, or arbitrariness" (Selimović, 1996, p. 59). If human language possesses both a firm, physical point of origin, as well as other wilder, "untamed" elements essential to its meaning, Nuruddin's *zapis* is replete with it. Indeed, the language of *Derviš i smrt* is one of its most striking features: Gordana Crnković posits that the novel's enduring popularity "may itself be largely attributed to the specific intensity and force of [its] language"—that is, "a language of a human, mortal individual that is both the language of prose and the language of poetry" (Crnković, 2009, p. 80). We might say that prose is the roots of the tree, while poetry is the branches. The novel's language gathers particular intensity at the beginning of the second part, when Nuruddin, released from jail himself (after being inexplicably arrested), spends days on end alone, steeped in memories, and writes long, poetic passages about his childhood and his youth as a soldier. It opens with a melancholy recollection of a small boy he befriended during his military service, the son of a woman who housed young Ahmed's group of soldiers. More precisely, and very tellingly, the second half of the novel opens with poetry—a child's verse that expresses an irrational fear and inchoate sadness:

Long ago, a child spoke of his fear. It resembled a nursery rhyme:

In the attic  
there's a beam that hits your head,  
there's a wind that bangs the shutters,  
there's a mouse that peeps from the corner. (Selimović, 2004, p. 217)

He continues in a gentle, fragmented tone to describe the friendship with the boy, whose charming, fantastical world is symbolized by an elusive "golden bird." Brutal reality, and terrible guilt, enters when the mother is shot for housing enemy soldiers. The dervish then reminisces about his own childhood, and how now, in

his present state, he occasionally manages to think “like that distant, lonely boy . . . All is a beautiful secret . . . bright reflections encircle everything, deep happiness and deep sadness. They weren’t events, but moods, they would come by themselves sometimes, like a soft wind, like a quiet twilight, like an indistinct glittering, like intoxication” (Selimović, 2004, p. 225). They would come in “broken-off images,” pieces of memories of faces, moonlight, and laughter, and like these memories, he feels “fragmented, all in pieces, reflections, shimmers; made entirely of accidents, unknown reasons, of a sense that had existed and been put aside, and now I no longer knew what I was in that chaos. I began to resemble the moonlight” (Selimović, 2004, p. 225). The childish song, the shards of memories mysteriously retained and recollected here, are examples of Wittgenstein’s nonsense, that illogical language that nevertheless comes from a deep need. Here, we might posit, is an honest explanation as to why Selimović may have found an “ordinary” nonfictional account of his experience unsatisfactory: the attempt to put life in an orderly language seems antithetical to the experience of subjectivity, much less of memory.

Wittgenstein tells us that ethics and aesthetics are beyond the realm of logical language. If the ordering principle of autobiography strives for a logical language, the fluid aesthetic space of a novel allows a multitude of contradictory honesties. This brings us to the third and final aspect that will be addressed here: the many instances of poetic (indeed, personal) “distortion” and “arbitrariness” within the narrative, as seen in a very striking pattern of realistic scenes that take on surreal characteristics, which are never explained but rather subtly folded into the narrative. The most obvious example is in the figure of Is-haq, a fugitive who takes shelter in Nuruddin’s tekke and whom Nuruddin refuses to help. Is-haq later seems to reappear under circumstances impossible to confirm, taking on mercurial, almost supernatural qualities, hovering as a symbol of the rebellion Nuruddin himself finds impossible to enact. And yet, his own descriptions of Is-haq are themselves a form of rebellion: he writes without metatextual commentary or reference, as any acknowledgement of the inconsistencies would cancel out the rebellion and make it an exercise in literary style. For him, writing is the utopic space to “realize his full potential” as he cannot in “repressive reality” (Andrejević, 1996, p. 140).

An even more intense blurring of outer events and inner fantasy occurs near the very end of the book when Nuruddin narrates his last encounter between himself and his sweetheart. Namely, Young Ahmed was thought to have died in battle, and when he returns home, she has been married off to someone else. On a walk beside the river, Ahmed summons her “shadow, her absent face, to say goodbye”; suddenly, she appears: “I succeeded in . . . creating her out of the green bushes, out of the water’s reflection, out of the sunlight. She stood, distant, entirely shadows. If a breath of wind came up, she would disappear” (Selimović, 1996, p. 449). The reader has little indication as to whether this is fantasy or reality, particularly as Ahmed seizes her and pins her to the ground, then stands to see her “reborn, strangled, white on the grass, which was green, like bile; she was transformed into a white river pebble, grown into the ground, a bear’s foot bloomed from her armpit, snowdrop bloomed from between her thighs, catkins from a poplar drifted over her light skin”

(Selimović, 1996, p. 451). The sheer force of the prose casts everything into doubt, leaving us with a chaotic, poetic rendering of love, violence, grief, and estrangement. The “judicious lie” of the passage reveals a truth: that the beloved is both present and absent, lost forever at the moment of physical contact. This compositional principle is one of imperceptible transitions, in a movement similar to Wittgenstein’s image of language like a thread through which no single fiber runs continuously; rather, we spin it by twisting fiber on fiber, and from this overlapping the thread derives its strength (Wittgenstein, *PI* §67). To return to where we began, perhaps we can say that for Ahmed, as well as Selimović, the absent brother is the force behind this twisting.

For all his failure to live in the ordinary world and speak in a human language, writing remains the space where the dervish can use a poetic, personal tone. Wandering, fragmentation, entanglement, and moments of brilliant clarity are integral to the text, which is both the fictive narrator’s rebellion and the actual author’s chosen alternative to “unnatural” orders that we impose upon ourselves. In the end, Selimović’s search for a natural language and Wittgenstein’s search for the nature of language lead them both on long, winding journeys that their texts faithfully document through their own poetic versions of “honesties.”

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## **LIČNO JE POEZIJA: DERVIŠ I SMRT MEŠE SELIMOVIĆA KAO ALTERNATIVA AUTOBIOGRAFIJI**

### Rezime

Za roman Meše Selimovića *Derviš i smrt*, kao i filozofiju jezika Ludviga Vitgenštajna, moglo bi se reći da se zasnivaju na odsustvu i gubitku: za Selimovića, gubitku njegovog brata, a za Vitgenštajna, traumi iz Prvog svetskog rata i smrti njegovog najdražeg prijatelja. U oba slučaja za ishod imamo dela koja su „isprepletena”, koja se kreću „cik-cak” i prave izlete u besmisleno, sve vreme usredsređujući se na potrebu da se pošteno predstavi potraga za prirodnim jezikom, ili prirodom jezika. U Selimovićevom romanu ova težnja se ispoljava kroz pripovedačevo razlikovanje između „iskrenog” i „poštenog”, gde se prednost daje ovom drugom. U romanu možemo identifikovati tri karakteristike poštenog: spontanu, fizičku prirodu običnog ljudskog jezika, zatim, ulogu liričnosti u pravljenju smisla, i konačno, izobličenje u naraciji. Na kraju, sudbina Selimovićevog teksta, gledano uporedo sa Vitgenštajnovom filozofijom, otkriva nam nešto o poetskoj prirodi ličnog jezika i njegovom odnosu prema književnoj autentičnosti.

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