

Jozef Pronek's Underwear: Displacement, Queer Desire, and Eastern European Masculinity in Aleksandar Hemon's *Nowhere Man*

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Abstract: Aleksandar Hemon's first novel *Nowhere Man* (2002) repeatedly expresses in gendered and sexualised terms the degradation of its protagonist, Jozef Pronek, due to his cultural and linguistic displacement as an immigrant in the United States. Dislocation, queer desire, and masculinity in crisis converge in Pronek's interaction with his American girlfriend Rachel and her gay roommate Maxwell. Still, Pronek's immigrant position does not account entirely for his humiliation. Even in the pre-war Sarajevo, Pronek embodies unconventional masculinity, as evident in the humorous descriptions of his first clumsy sexual experiences. Despite his continuous status as an awkward outsider, the protagonist sometimes appears as an object of erotic fantasy. In another part of the novel, Pronek is desired by Victor, a closeted Ukrainian-American graduate student working on a queer topic. Victor's fantasies of Pronek might relate to the Western gaze on Eastern Europe, but they look different in the context of the former's multiple identities and the latter's representation throughout the book. By looking at Hemon's complex portrayal of Pronek, I suggest that we can find some gay inspiration in the unlikeliest of places in Eastern European literature today.

Keywords: Aleksandar Hemon, *Nowhere Man*, Jozef Pronek, displacement, queer desire, masculinity

Aleksandar Hemon is an important and prolific Anglophone immigrant author, of Ukrainian-Bosnian-American background, working in the United States today. His first novel, *Nowhere Man*, presents the life of Jozef Pronek, a thirty-something from Sarajevo living in Chicago, in seven chapters covering much of his life. The plot has autobiographical elements: both Pronek and Hemon are born in Sarajevo, spend time

in Ukraine, and must stay in Chicago when the war breaks out. Almost all chapters have a different narrator, which gives them a different tone. They unravel in many places and times, ranging from the eighties Sarajevo to the nineties Chicago to the early-twenty-first-century Shanghai. Hemon constantly strips his immigrant male protagonist and crushes him. Frauke Matthes and David Williams notice that unlike Joseph Brodsky who found American exile to be 'the ultimate lesson in humility', Pronek's experience 'inevitably proves a lesson in humiliation' (28). This humiliation has a strong gender and sexual component, especially when combined with the character's cultural and linguistic displacement. But Pronek's immigrant status is not the only contributing factor. He has been an awkward man uncomfortable with his position in the world and his body all along. Moreover, his Otherness does not always mark him as a loser; sometimes, inexplicably, even Pronek becomes an object of queer desire.

Cultural displacement and bodily discomfort come together in sexual situations in *Nowhere Man*. For example, Pronek's foreplay with his American girlfriend Rachel consists of her correction of his English:

'Can I turn off light?' Pronek says.
 'The light.'
 'What?'
 'Can I turn off *the* light?'
 'Turn off the light.'
 Rachel turns off the light.
 (...)
 'What is that?' Pronek says.
 'Nothing. It's okay. Come here.'
 'I heard something.'
 'It's nothing. Let's fuck.' (Hemon 202-203)

When the light goes off, Pronek is distracted by some noises. The picture that the narrator paints for us, or rather the sound recording he creates, is somewhat animalistic and not very flattering. Rachel is at first squealing, then roaring; Pronek does not make a noise equally powerful, but seems to be in pain, as though punched in the chest. At last it becomes clear that they both achieved orgasm. Whatever release of tension that Pronek experienced is gone afterwards. Even when he is not tense, he is not relaxed. He is 'untense' (203). The author implies that tension is the character's normal state of being. He cannot control his feelings or his body or his surroundings. When Rachel's roommate Maxwell comes into the room to ask to borrow a condom, Pronek falls to the ground. His actions bespeak at once clumsiness and terror.

Pronek cannot be allowed to enjoy sexual fulfillment with Rachel for long. After another night with her, he goes to the kitchen in her apartment, where he encounters her naked gay roommate Maxwell:

Maxwell was washing a throng of wineglasses, naked, his springy dreadlocks falling on his shoulders.

‘Good morning, Maxwell,’ Pronek said, but was not sure that he heard him.

‘Hey, good morning,’ Maxwell said, glancing at Pronek, but not turning toward him. Pronek wanted orange juice, but all the glasses were being washed by the naked Maxwell, so he sat at the kitchen table, trying not to look at him. But his shoulders were wide, the blades resembling armor plates; his biceps shapely and round, twisting toward his elbows, the morning light absorbed by their brownness; his spine curving into a shallow valley above the half-moons of his butt. He turned toward Pronek.

‘You’ve never seen a black man’s body, have you?’

Pronek was terrified – he didn’t want Maxwell to think he was gay.

‘No.’

‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it.’

Pronek felt an urge to run out of the kitchen, toward the safety of the bedroom, but was paralyzed. Maxwell’s body was beautiful. (...)

‘Would you like to touch it?’

He made a step toward Pronek, who leaned back, glancing around, pretending that he didn’t see and didn’t care. Maxwell’s thighs were thin, curls strewn over their curves.

Aaron walked in, naked, his penis dangling, long and thick, his skin pink.

Pronek looked away, at the friendly blank wall. (206)

But even before being forced to face a male body comfortable enough in its surroundings and in its appearance to be nude so openly, Pronek exhibits his usual awkwardness. He is walking barefoot on a cold floor. Hemon does not describe Pronek’s body in that scene; the reader only learns that he is ‘tiptoeing like an elephant ballerina to protect his soles from the cold’ (205). Maxwell’s soon-to-be-glimpsed body provides a contrast. If Pronek is physically awkward and uncomfortable, Maxwell is the opposite because his every movement exhibits grace. He is ‘washing a throng of wineglasses’ rather than prosaically doing the dishes. Pronek cannot greet him in an audible voice. The reader, like Pronek, might not wish to look at Maxwell, out of bashfulness or fear. The author announces the need to look with a ‘But’. ‘But his shoulders were wide ...’ Pronek does not want to look, afraid of his own reaction or Maxwell’s possible reaction. However, the character’s corporeal perfection requires a detailed appreciation. Hemon’s description follows Pronek’s gaze which moves from Maxwell’s arms down his back to his buttocks. Maxwell’s live body, jiggling and shimmering in all the right parts, contrasts with our hero’s paralysis. The black man’s beauty is intimidating, his masculinity beyond question, whatever his sexuality. His shoulder blades look like ‘armor plates’, indicating that even fully naked, Maxwell feels strong, protected, as if wearing full armour. This foreshadows his aggression towards Pronek, turning towards him and asking to be touched, a playful

type of aggression that Pronek, not understanding the linguistic and cultural code of this milieu, takes seriously.

Some sense of threat remains, however humorous, as an American literally at home in his body moves towards a confused, clumsy immigrant. The conventional relationship of power between men is reversed here because a heterosexual feels out of place and intimidated while a homosexual teases him. It is clear from elsewhere in the novel that Rachel's roommate and his boyfriend's mocking of Pronek can be cruel. Maxwell underlines his racial difference to the frightened and paralysed Pronek who desires a retreat to Rachel's bedroom. Hemon acknowledges, once again, Maxwell's beauty. As he approaches Pronek, the hapless protagonist tries hilariously to show his lack of interest. The narrator again describes what the character sees: Maxwell's crotch, shapely and covered with curly hair. Here Hemon both escapes having to describe a black penis and subtly indicates that Pronek avoided looking at the organ. But at that moment, Maxwell's boyfriend, a white man named Aaron enters, and Pronek cannot avoid catching the glimpse of his full-frontal nudity. Even in its flaccid state, Aaron's member is 'long and thick', its size adding to Pronek's insecurity.

Pronek's physical instability fits well with his psychological disintegration that scholars often link with the physical falling apart of his homeland, former Yugoslavia. His immigrant situation is, unsurprisingly, related to his awkwardness and discomfort. Yet Pronek's lack of understanding of codes, cultural as well as linguistic, is not the only factor to blame for his tragicomic behaviour. Even before he was an immigrant, when his country was still intact, our hero did not fit the stereotype of a confident man at home in his body and in control of his sexual performance. This is the first scene in which Pronek attempts to lose his virginity:

Here is the winter pleasure inventory: blue skies, white snow, suntanned faces, crisp air, speed, slopes, fireplaces, warm rooms (...). It was in a Jahorina cabin (...) that Pronek climbed to an upstairs room with one Aida. She was willing to let him explore 'the jungle below the equator.' Pronek, however, got completely lost in the jungle: he kept banging his knees against the sides of the bed, and his head against the wall. He had great difficulty pulling off Aida's tight jeans (...). With his underwear stranded at the Antarctica of his feet (the room was unheated, save for their cumbersome passion)[,] he attempted to penetrate her panties, convinced that he was up against a sturdy hymen. It was an unmitigated fiasco – she started laughing uncontrollably, when Pronek, in the middle of it all, said: 'Let me just love you.' (50)

The passage begins with an invocation of an idyllic winter landscape, Jahorina near Sarajevo, in the eighties, often imagined as the golden age of former Yugoslavia culminating in the Sarajevo Winter Olympics (1984). Two geographical terms, the jungle and the Antarctica, underline the incongruous hot-cold dynamic between the couple.

The language of exploration and conquest to refer to sexual activity, with the man in the position of power, occurs commonly in literature. But here Hemon subverts such tropes. Pronek does not explore because he is not a macho adventurer who bravely enters the wild, never-before-penetrated landscapes; he gets lost in there. '[T]he jungle below the equator' seems out of place in a winter resort, in a room heated only by two human bodies. Again, Pronek is not only unable to take possession of a female body, but he also cannot control his own. He bumps his knees on the bed and his head on the walls. The narrator imagines the man's body as a landscape, not only the woman's. Pronek is an absurd kind of a globe or a world map with his feet standing in for the Antarctica. His actions are desperate and ungraceful. He can only undress his sexual partner incompletely and with difficulty. Far from being a great explorer, Pronek can hardly carry out the act of undressing *himself*, his underwear is 'stranded' at his ankles. Aida shows amusement at his endeavour, as Pronek's uncontrolled body inspires an uncontrolled laughter in her. His failed attempt at smooth talking, 'Let me just love you,' crowns the deed or its lack.

We have so far only looked at passages showing Pronek as an awkward man uncomfortable with his body, his usage of language, and his place in the world. There is another point of view, rare and misleading, but not without a certain charm or even beauty. It comes from the chapter containing Pronek's adventures in Ukraine during the country's transition in the nineties. Chapter 3 titled 'Fatherland/ Kiev, August 1991' is narrated by one Victor Plavchuk, a Ukrainian-American professor of English literature, who was a graduate student writing on *Queer King Lear* when he met Pronek in Kyiv. Victor searches for his identity, trying to deal with his Ukrainian father's fraught legacy. He also happens to be a closeted homosexual who falls in love with the unlikeliest of candidates:

I did not want to fuck Vivian (...). Even as she talked, I kept imagining Jozef in his bed, in his shorts, absentmindedly curling the hair around his nipples. Ah, get thee to a nunnery! (107)

Wide awake, I would stare at the ceiling camera, wishing I could get my paws on those tapes and watch Jozef waking up in the morning, his skin soft, with crease imprints, the fossils of slumber, on his bare shoulders; or see him making out with Andrea. I would close my eyes, and my mind would wander with my hand across his chest, down his abdomen. I would stop it on the underwear border, forcing myself to think about Vivian – you have to understand that I had never been attracted to a man before. It frightened me, and it was hard sometimes to discern between fear and arousal: the darkness throbbed around me, in harmony with my heart. (109)

... I felt a cramping urge to locate Jozef and break the news to him, to produce wonder in his heart and excite him. So I flew upstairs (...). I burst into the room without knocking, and Jozef was naked. I could not help noticing – and I was

too excited to try – a hair vine crawling up from his sooty crotch to his navel, and curls spiraling around his nipples.

'There's been a coup!' I nearly hollered.

'What?'

'There's been a coup!' I hollered.

'What is coup?' It was rather annoying, his ignorant calm, his boxers sliding up his alabaster thighs. (113)

For Victor, our protagonist is attractive due to his perceived exoticism. Because he comes from Eastern Europe, he seems more confident, more carefree, and, finally, more masculine. Slađa Blažan attributes this attraction to a typical case of 'the Western mystification of the Balkans', stating that 'Jozef Pronek is a screen onto which Victor projects his fantasies in a very conscious manner' ('How Sexy Is It?'). While true to a degree, her view needs to be qualified and Victor's fantasies about Pronek need to be analysed in the context of the entire work. Blažan does not take into account Victor's vulnerability: his own complicated relationship to Ukrainianness and his repressed homosexuality. Nor does she find humour in the situation. Victor and Pronek are roommates during their stay in Ukraine. Pronek, ever the Balkan macho, spends his time in the room frolicking in his underwear. Through Victor's eyes, these undergarments look quite different from those that used to hang, abandoned around the Antarctica of Pronek's feet in the mountain lodge. The shorts reappear in Victor's musings. Every detail of Pronek's body that stays in Victor's memory seems precious. How could this be the same person who is so physically uncomfortable in the rest of the novel? Victor's language becomes poetic, and this poeticism does not carry the sting of irony that we witness in depictions of Pronek's deflowering earlier. It carries a nostalgic yearning.

Though the image of Pronek playing with his chest hair could appear comic, the imagining of his morning glory, 'his skin soft, with crease imprints, the fossils of his slumber, on his bare shoulders' (109) comes as a surprise. Victor spins small imperfections of a beloved torso into something sublime. '[T]he fossils of his slumber' invoke a larger-than-life, preternatural quality of an ordinary person's sleep. We can read the later scene in *Nowhere Man*, the morning light playing against Maxwell's naked body in the kitchen while Pronek feels trapped, as an inversion of this situation: Victor, tormented with a desire that he cannot accept, observes his roommate's supposed superiority. Whereas Pronek sees the naked body he does not expect and might not wish to see, Victor has to imagine the one he yearns for. He can only allow himself to go so far. His imagination, for the moment, stops 'on the underwear border' (109). Victor is terrified by his longing, protesting too much when he tells the reader that this was his first time finding a man attractive. We are witnessing the power of a projection. '[T]he darkness throbbed around me, in harmony with my heart,' says Victor. Jozef Pronek gets to be the very Heart of Darkness in somebody's feverish mind. Like Blažan, we can talk here

about the fantasy of Eastern European savagery. But we can also see the phenomenon, at least in this case, as a proof of the power of imagination. Everyone, no matter how pathetic, might have a chance to star in someone else's wet dreams and nightmares.

Furthermore, Pronek's shortcomings, for instance his imperfect English, appear to Victor's mind like signs of strength. After he finds out about the coup happening in Kyiv, Victor barges into their room to catch Pronek in the nude. This is another scene which will repeat itself later, but in reverse, when Pronek encounters Maxwell. No trace of self-consciousness is found in the Ukrainian scene. Victor has enough time to ogle his roommate, to notice his delectable 'treasure trail'. Pronek does not panic as he does when Maxwell suddenly enters Rachel's room in Chicago. He does not understand the word *coup*, he does not use English articles properly, and even when he gets a sense of what Victor is talking about, he is unmoved. According to Victor's memory, Pronek is not a paranoid, displaced character. This may be because he is not an immigrant yet, but Hemon has allowed us to glimpse Pronek in his Sarajevo days, enabling us to question Victor's depiction.

The fact that a 'nowhere man' could inspire admiration and fervent desire indicates potential inherent in a character, however hapless, however clumsy. Pronek, like anyone else, has more sides than apparent at first glance. He is absurd, a caricature, and, at the same time, warmly human. He might yet become a queer icon, despite himself.

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