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## War and Exile in Aleksandar Hemon's *The Question of Bruno* (2000)

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### Resumen

El propósito de este trabajo es triple. En primer lugar, se propone analizar la concepción del relato corto que tiene Aleksandar Hemon, un emigrado bosnio quien se ha convertido en una de las voces representativas más destacadas del actual panorama literario americano. En segundo lugar, se adentra a evaluar la crítica al relato corto actual en los Estados Unidos teniendo en cuenta el camino emprendido por muchos escritores noveles quienes ansían el éxito inmediato poniendo para ello en práctica los marcados estándares estructurales y temáticos que imponen las revistas literarias nacionales. Hemon cree que de este modo el relato norteamericano actual, por una parte, desafía su naturaleza solitaria, como bien expuso Frank O'Connor en *The Lonely Voice*, mientras que, por la otra, se muestra incapaz de responder al tiempo cambiante, "el mundo de los refugiados e inmigrantes y su espectacular disparidad económica". En base a esta última noción, se ofrecerá un breve análisis de tres de las historias más representativas de Hemon, publicadas en su *The Question of Bruno*, la obra con la que hizo su debut en el género del cuento.

**Palabras clave:** relato corto, relato corto norteamericano del siglo XX, "voz solitaria", literatura de guerra, personajes marginalizados.

### Abstract

The aim of this paper is threefold. First, it seeks to assess the modes of storytelling seen in the stories by Aleksandar Hemon, a Bosnian *émigré*, who has become an outstanding representative of the new voices in the American literary arena. Second, it assesses Hemon's critique of current storytelling in America in view of the path undertaken by many novice writers, who long for immediate success as they put into practice the thematic and structural standardization imposed by national literary reviews. Hemon believes that, by doing so, current American storytelling, on the one hand, defies its

solitary nature –as expounded in Frank O'Connor's *The Lonely Voice*– and, on the other, it fails to respond to a changing world, “the world of refugees and immigrants and spectacular economic disparity”. Bearing this notion in mind, three of Hemon's most representative narrations, published in his debut volume *The Question of Bruno*, are analyzed.

**Keywords:** short story, twentieth-century American short story, “lonely voice”, war literature, marginalized characters.

Over forty years have elapsed since the critic Thomas H. Gullason published “The Short Story: An Underrated Art”, a lucid article in which he regretted that the short story was still an underestimated genre. Despised by both critics and readers, he considered that they still had an “old-fashioned picture of the short story: a rambling, simple, balladlike narrative, a public, oral art, the property of the storyteller and his community” (1963: 13). In his analysis, Gullason considered that one of the main reasons why the short story was not highly regarded was mainly due to the lack of critical essays and books on the theory of short fiction. He ventured to name three serious critical studies: H. E. Bate's *The Modern Short Story* (1941), Sean O'Faolain's *The Short Story* (1951) and Frank O'Connor's *The Lonely Voice* (1963), though, quite surprisingly, he does not go into any further consideration. What Gullason could never imagine is the tremendous impact that O'Connor's seminal work would have in the years to come. Today, over five decades after its first edition, *The Lonely Voice* is still regarded as a major influence on short story criticism,<sup>1</sup> in which O'Connor had an initial goal in mind: to say, in the words of Russell Banks, what a short story is and is not (2004: 7).<sup>2</sup>

This paper aims to assess Aleksandar Hemon's notion of storytelling by focusing on three of the most representative stories published in his debut collection, *The Question of Bruno* (2000). However, prior to my analysis of these narrations and, in order to gain a better insight into Hemon's work, firstly, I intend to draw a comparison between Frank O'Connor's and Aleksandar Hemon's conception of the short story, in view of their shared vision of the role of short fiction—both writers agree that no other literary art form lends itself better to the needs of the marginal voices than the short story does; then, I intend to

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Charles E. May recently played down the importance of O'Connor's study on the short story in his lecture delivered at the 10th International Conference on the Short Story in English, held in Cork, Ireland, on 19-21 June 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Russell Banks's study introduces O'Connor's 1985 and 2004 editions of *The Lonely Voice*, published by Melville House Publishings.

take into consideration Hemon's critique of the standardization mode exerted by major literary reviews and creative writing workshops and their subliminal imposition on what a good story, structurally and thematically, should be. In this respect, Hemon's storytelling aims to subvert this normalcy of current American literary arena by producing narrations which illustrate O'Connor's concept of submerged population.

Studied in depth and quoted extensively by both short story critics and practitioners, *The Lonely Voice* addresses the solitary nature of this genre, which hinges on lonely characters, or as O'Connor put forward, "outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society" (2004: 18). The Irish writer and critic claimed that in the short story we may find "an intense awareness of human loneliness," not to be found in the novel (19). Though they derive from the same sources, the most striking difference between the novel and the short story is not so much formal as it is ideological (20). Hence the short story has always favored and had a special predilection for marginal individuals, characters left aside by the novel, a form that, according to Russell Banks, "posits a 'normal' society and offers us a hero whose actions define that normalcy" (Banks, 2004: 9). Though O'Connor acknowledged that his perspective drew substantially on intuition, he believed that the geographical distribution of the novel and the short story was contingent on a country's societal structure and, besides, he determined that, for some reason, the short story seemed to have always flourished in fragmented societies, populated by large pockets of submerged population. The short story writer does not construct his narrations around a plot development; instead, as Richard F. Peterson contends, he "by necessity seeks out a point of crisis, a moment of conflict and revelation" (1982: 54). In the case of Hemon, this moment usually comes at war times—as it occurs in 'A Coin'—or through alienation and displacement, as happens in the Bosnian *émigré* protagonist of "Blind Jozef Pronek and Dead Souls", narrations published in Hemon's debut collection, *The Question of Bruno*.

At the end of the 1980s, Clare Hanson also wondered why the short story had been neglected in both academic and non-academic critical circles and, though she never alluded to Gullason's seminal article, she believed that this art form had become 'popular' in a pejorative sense. Unlike Gullason, who defended the long literary tradition of the short story, Hanson stated in her introduction to *Re-Reading the Short Story* that "it took a long while for the novel to establish itself as a 'serious' art form: the short story—a recent form—is still struggling" (1989: 1). She also went beyond in her assessment as she acknowledged that "the short story offered itself to losers and loners, exiles, women, blacks—writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling 'narrative' or epistemological/experiential framework of society" (3). Thereafter she went on to write

that those exiles she was referring to were “not the self-willed *émigré*, but the writer who longs to return to a home culture which is denied him/her”, and brings attention to the cases of Katherine Mansfield, Nadine Gordimer or Doris Lessing, writers literally and physically exiled from their home countries and internally and emotionally exiled in their adopted country. Hanson concludes by stating that “for such writers, the short story has offered a prime means of expression” (3).

It is common ground that some of the voices of short fiction in America in the last century came from writers who were born abroad and left their homeland in search of a better life. Many of these authors used their mother tongues as a means of representation of the reality they had left behind, as well as the difficulties they encountered upon arrival in America. These are the cases of Abraham Cahan, who published his short fiction in English and Yiddish, Helena Stas, who wrote her fiction in Polish, Carl Wilhelm Andeer in Swedish or Ole Amundsen Buslett in Norwegian, just to name a few authors.<sup>3</sup>

The literary works of exiles reflect this reality and still today the short story continues to offer itself as the most genuine literary form to express their life experience in their new country, and the English language as the most conventional vehicle. Along the years, many of these exiles to the U.S. were forced to leave their country for political reasons, or as a result of the war outbreak at home. Such are the cases of Ha Jin, a Chinese award-winning writer who refused to go back to his country after watching televised coverage of the brutal repression at Tiannanmen Square by the Chinese government, or Aleksandar Hemon, a Bosnian journalist who sought asylum when war erupted at home. Hemon had arrived in the U.S. as a beneficiary of a cultural exchange programme. Once his application was accepted, he worked at a variety of odd jobs while improving his English. When the Yugoslav wars broke out, he decided to remain in the U.S. and learn to speak proper English in no more than five years. Quite surprisingly, within three years, Hemon began to write in English short stories that he eventually sent to literary magazines. This fact did not go unnoticed as critics began to compare him with Joseph Conrad or Vladimir Nabokov, not because Hemon wrote in an adopted language as they did but, as Jenifer Berman remarks, because “Hemon’s pitch-perfect diction and virtuosic command of the English language are shocking only in that you wish others wrote so well, and with such zeal for formal challenge” (Berman, 2000).

From a cursory glance at the narratives included in *The Question of Bruno*, his first volume of short stories, one perceives Hemon’s innovative formal experimentation and brilliant

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<sup>3</sup> For further insight of short story writers who published their works in their immigrant tongues, see Werner Sollor’s “Non-English American Short Stories”.

combination of fiction and reality in pieces such as “The Life and Works of Aleksander Kauders” or “The Sorge Spy Ring”. In view of the thematic content, the stories of this collection could be easily categorized as “war literature”—some of the most remarkable narrations in this collection have the Bosnian Civil War as a backdrop. This is, in part, due to Hemon’s interest in history. Hemon’s belief, that claiming that History should be taken as an exact representation of “truth”, is almost as equally dangerous as contending that the Holocaust is fiction (Berman, 2000). Thus, assuming the dominant discourse of history as being “true”, inevitably leads us to set aside the voices of those who live on the fringes of society. Concerning the relationship between fiction and reality, represented by History, Hemon acknowledges that “the unclear borders between fiction and history are of the utmost political importance, because both history and fiction provide models to organize the practice of human life” (Berman, 2000).

As regards the current panorama of American short fiction, Hemon has been very critical with the attitude of publishers or creative-writing workshops, as they favor those narrations that meet standards of Americanness. In this sense, he has denounced the role of the standardizing machinery—“an army of freshly trained creative-writing infantry” (*Bold Type*, 2002)—which dictates what good stories should be, that is to say, “about the American life written by Americans for Americans in all their colorful diversity, meeting high American standards of storytelling, published in *The New Yorker* and similar magazines”, producing examples that “work to imagine a community, and not just a literary one, but a national one” (Hemon, 2005: 211). Hemon has admitted in interviews that he cannot stand “the stories about Midwestern boredom..., the stories about junked-up drunks trying to find a little love in a brothel, the stories about divorced academics going through their annual crisis at some godforsaken conference” (*Bold Type*, 2002); or narrations in which fifty-year-old white Americans go through a divorce or are immersed in their daily routine, or those ones of spiritually hollow Americans who live in malls and amusement parks. In his critical view, these stories do “largely fail to respond to a changing world (including the United States)—the world marked by disappearing borders and the global expansion of capital; the world of refugees and immigrants and spectacular economic disparity” (Hemon, 2005: 211-2). Without being fully aware of the impact of his critique, Hemon’s iconoclastic stance of what American traditional modes of storytelling should be addressing to brings a reminder of how current short fiction has diverged from its original conception.

As can be expected, the stories of *The Question of Bruno* do not accommodate to such heading of Americanness denounced by his author. It is noteworthy that some narrations

in this volume consist of brief disconnected-fragments told by different narrative voices. These stories challenge, both structurally and thematically, the traditional modes of storytelling in American short fiction. Nonetheless, though denied by Hemon himself, some of his structurally disjointed stories recall the political break-up of Yugoslavia, a multiethnic and multireligious country which disintegrated after the Bosnian Civil War (1992-1995).

Fantasy and reality converge in “The Accordion”, a narrated account of the arrival in Sarajevo of a poor Ukranian accordionist named Hemon on the day Gavrilo Princip assassinates Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife. In this story, the presence of a fantastic element, the accordionist, catches the Archduke’s attention a moment before his assassination. The narrator disregards the cheerfulness and clamor of the populace and focuses on that humble figure, holding an accordion with a missing key.

*The Archduke’s gaze breaks through the crowd and he can now see the man’s strong arms and the accordion belts squeezing the man’s strong forearms. He can see the beige and black keyboard and he can see that one of the keys is missing; he can see the dark rectangle in place of the missing key. The coach passes the man, and the Archduke thinks he can sense the man’s gaze on his back. He’s tempted to turn around, but that would obviously be unseemly. The Archduke wonders about these strange people, about this man who doesn’t seem to possess any hatred toward him and the Empire (not yet, at least) and he begins to wonder what happened to that key. Can you play a song without that key? How would Liebestod sound with one of the notes never being played? (Hemon, 2000: 90).*

History succumbs to fiction as the noble figure of the Archduke is mesmerized at the sight of the humble accordionist. In Hemon’s narration the Archduke’s fate is sealed when, after having immersed himself in his thoughts of the accordion’s missing key, he fails to react when he sees Princip’s pointing gun right in front of him. Hemon’s story successfully subverts History as the reader is fully aware that one of the moments that changed the course of history—the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife that led to the outbreak of the First World War a month later—was caused by the astonishment that this very modest accordionist provoked on the nobleman. Later in the story, however, the narrator reveals that “most of this story is consequence of irresponsible imagination and shameless speculation” (2000: 91) as what really happened was that, after having escaped from a failed assassination attempt, the Archduke’s open car—in Hemon’s narration it was a coach drawn by horses—reversed after having taken a wrong turn. This unfortunate manoeuvre ended up with the car being parked right in front of the assassin, who had enough time to fire two shots, the first bullet wounding the Archduke in the jugular vein,

the second inflicting an abdominal wound on the Duchess.

The second story, “A Coin”, is Hemon’s most dramatic narration in his short story collection and, in the words of Daniel Orozco, compels “the reader to view a world rendered–by repression and war and displacement–abruptly alien and unfamiliar” (Orozco, 2000). “A Coin” recalls the most horrible moments of the Bosnian Civil War. Fragments of two different stories told by two different narrative voices intersperse with one another: one story is told by Aida, a woman who works for the foreign press helping them to get-by in the besieged city of Sarajevo, and the other by an unnamed Bosnian expatriate unable to go back to his country, and trapped in his Chicago apartment. Their letters do not always reach their destination, either because they get undelivered or because they were never sent. In his solitude and quiet anguish, the Bosnian emigré watches the news in his apartment in Chicago to get just “a glimpse of Sarajevo”, portraying the scarce interest of American TVs in the conflict. His life has become “solitude and nothingness” (Hemon, 2000: 125) and one feels sympathy towards his miserable situation: his self-seclusion in his apartment watching the news from Bosnia, and his disconnection from home, though he keeps on writing letters who Aida probably never receives; and what really terrifies him is not knowing that when he rips “the exhausted envelope, she may be dead” (2000:120). But in Hemon’s storytelling a difficult situation is usually followed by a chaotic one. Aida lives in the besieged Sarajevo and her letters feature a detailed description of a city in which snipers shoot children, women, old people and even stray cats and dogs. They sometimes kill dogs just for fun when they do not find people to shoot at, in a sort of macabre competition:

*Shooting a dog in the head gets you the most points, I suppose. One can often see a dog corpse with a shattered head, like a crushed tomato. When snipers shoot dogs, anti-sniping patrols refrain from confronting them, because of the permanent danger of a rabies epidemic. When an unskilled, new or careless sharpshooter only wounds a dog and the dog frantically ricochets around, bleeding, howling, biting anything that can ease the pain and fear, a member of the anti-sniping patrol might even shoot the dog, aiming, as always, at the head. (2000: 131-2)*

Through the descriptions of Aida’s letters, Sarajevo becomes a *memoria passionis* of repulsion and horror.<sup>4</sup> Scared citizens prefer to remain unflinchingly at home for fear of being shot. One of the most horrifying episodes occurs when Aida’s relative, Aunt Fatima, passes away as a consequence of her asthma. Her dead body will be kept in a room until

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<sup>4</sup> For the theological meaning of *memoria passionis*, see Johannes B. Metz 1999: 12.



the terrible stench forces family members to stuff the cracks between the door and the frame with rugs soaked with vinegar and perfumes. Eventually, after being unable to bury the corpse on the ground, they will decide one night to throw her out of the window.

Part of Aida's job consists in editing footage shot by TV crews. She cuts the images and edits them choosing the most telling images in the hope that blood and dismembered citizen bodies will arouse response from worldwide TV viewers. To her great dismay, she decides to stop editing footage once she sees that those harrowing images never get broadcast: international televisions reduce the impact of those nasty war episodes by cutting their length down, thus reducing the footage to only a few frames: "At the beginning, I was trying to choose the most telling images, with as much blood and bowels, stumps and child corpses as possible. I was trying to induce some compassion or understanding or pain or whatever, although the one to two minutes that I would later recognize as having been cut by me would contain only mildly horrific images. I've changed my view" (2000:122). She will eventually decide to put those images on a separate tape that she labels 'Cinema Inferno', a censored copy of war horrors: "there once was that corny idiotic movie *Cinema Paradiso*, where the projectionist kept all the kisses from films censored by a priest. Hence I christened the tape 'Cinema Inferno'" (123).

The Bosnian War becomes a media conflict. Aida knows that human remembering may not be acknowledged, as their suffering is the consequence of a conflict which takes place in Yugoslavia, an Eastern European country that many Americans at that time still believed was a misspelling of Czechoslovakia. As Matthes and Williams have pointed out, the American moronic attitude of confusing countries and wars "inverts popular stereotypes about the 'civilized West' and 'barbaric East' (2013: 30). War footage becomes a technology of remembering and a testimony of the suffering witnessed by the Bosnian population, that may end up in oblivion. By doing so, Western TVs perform a misrepresentation of human agonies, as the most horrific war images are disregarded. Aida reveals at end of this story how human powers of endurance overcome fear as life must go on in a city surveilled by snipers, waiting for a peeking head or a targetable citizen running from point A to point B. Life and death in the end metaphorically become the two sides of a coin: once it is tossed you never know which side of the coin will be upper-most:

*When you get to Point B, the adrenalin rush is so strong that you feel too alive. You see everything clearly, but you can't comprehend anything. Your senses are so overloaded that you forget everything before you even register it. I've run from Point A to Point B hundreds of times and the feeling is always the same but I've never had it before. I suppose it is this high pressure of excitement that makes people bleed away so quickly. [...] But once you get to Point B everything is quickly gone, as if it never happened. You pick yourself up and walk back into*

*your besieged life, happy to be. You move a wet curl from your forehead, inhale deeply, and put your hand in the pocket, where you may or may not find a worthless coin; a coin. (Hemon 2000: 135)*

The third and longest narration, “Blind Jozef Pronek and Dead Souls”, is also the most autobiographical story in the volume—an account of the life of a Bosnian *émigré* in Chicago, which resembles to a certain extent that of Hemon himself. The original story may be found in a reduced version of it, “Blind Jozef Pronek”, that came out, curiously enough, in *The New Yorker*, to be later re-published in the anthology *The Best American Short Stories 2000*, guest-edited by Edgar L. Doctorow and Katrina Kenison. Two years later, Hemon produced a novel, *Nowhere Man* (2002), the complete history of Pronek’s life, his adolescent years in Bosnia, and his arrival in America. Bearing in mind Pronek’s decision to leave his motherland, it follows that this character is Hemon’s alter ego though, unlike Pronek who showed a sense of survivor’s guilt, Aleksandar Hemon does not seem to feel guilty about having left war-stricken Bosnia so as to seek refuge in the U.S. (Matthes & Williams, 2013: 28).

In the longer version published in *The Question of Bruno*, Jozef Pronek is a young writer invited to the United States as a “freedom-loving writer” (Hemon,2000: 157) and, especially, after the publication of a news report about the pre-war climate in Yugoslavia. Hemon manifested in interviews his little interest in autobiographical fiction which, in his opinion, emerges as “a consequence of extraordinary imaginative/ cultural laziness” as well as “the common craving for ‘reality’ as ‘America’ as it appears to us in the media and different representations is largely an illusion” (*Bold Type*, 2000). However, despite his words, there seems to be traceable links between Hemon and his character Jozef Pronek: both are Bosnian immigrants in the USA, who happened to leave their country a few months before the outbreak of the Bosnian Civil War; they both took residence in Chicago, and made their living working at odd jobs; distance from home, on the other hand, impaired their capacity of reaction when they watch televised coverage of the Bosnian war; and, finally, they experience feelings of isolation and cultural shock, increased by American patriotism and cultural clichés. Storytelling becomes, in the case of Hemon, the most appropriate means to convey emotions and frustrations of the real author and his *alter ego*, Jozef Pronek. Nonetheless, there should be pointed out a remarkable difference between them as, unlike Hemon’s, Pronek’s life follows a downward path throughout narration until the moment he apparently finds a new identity in American society.

“Blind Jozef Pronek and Dead Souls” is conceived as the journey of the protagonist through different American cities until he finally settles in Chicago, to which he has been

invited by Andrea, a young American girl Pronek met in Kiev at the time of the independence of Ukraine. Though Pronek seems to have been invited by the American authorities, his situation slowly changes from bad to worse. The red-carpet treatment given to Pronek on his arrival at JFK and the assurances of custom officers and government officials that he will have a great time in the best country in the world, will soon become his worst nightmare. The fact that the government official who arranges Pronek's entrance into America is called Virgil foreshadows the protagonist's misadventures in "hell". Pronek's troubles in America are, by and large, the consequence of the clash between two realities; on the one hand, the imagined America envisioned by newcomers, a land of opportunities where you can always fulfill your dreams provided you work hard; on the other, the twentieth-century American way of life, harsh and hostile to foreigners. This aspect was already pointed out by Sola Buil for whom, "the central character, Pronek, walks a path towards inner change leading him to his own self-anagnorisis and self-discovery. His recognition of his lack of identity is an individual instance of the failure of the American dream" (Sola, 2006: 880-81). If we assume that his quest for identity is Pronek's primal motivation, we should also regard this novella as a sort of *bildungsroman* in which young Pronek, described as both a sympathetic but rather naive character, struggles for survival and for a new identity. Unmistakably, the collapsing of Yugoslavia into different nationalities finds strong parallelism in Pronek's personality as well as in the disintegration of both his soul and identity.

When Pronek arrives in America, Bosnia is on the verge of a civil war. The forge of a new identity is not an easy task for this young Bosnian, who does not seem to know what the purpose of his visit to the US is: "I do not know right now, sir. Travel. I think they have programme for me" (Hemon, 2000: 140). Moreover, the peculiar attitude of Americans towards foreigners converts Pronek into a sort of alienated character with a deep sense of displacement. Abstract concepts such as patriotism or liberty banalized by overuse end up being articulated by Hemon as a mockery device. Thus, when Pronek arrives at JFK airport, he orders a regular beer just to hear the waitress ask him to specify what kind of beer as "this is not Russia, hun, we got all kindsa beer" (2000: 141). Pronek, however, will soon find out that affective links may be established as soon as, for example, a foreigner shows interest in American sports. Thus, when Pronek is met by Simon, the government official who comes to Washington airport to collect him, he makes a stronger acquaintance with him after engaging in a conversation about the Redskins. Pronek will soon be invited "to his home in Falls Orchard, Virginia, to meet his wife, Gretchen, and his four daughters" (146).

Pronek's visit to Chicago occupies a large section of the story. Though his initial intention is to pay a short visit to Andrea, his infatuation of her, along with his envisioned projects of future life together, will contribute to enlarge the gap between the two realities colliding in Pronek's life. Again, the unrealistic love affair with Andrea manifests itself in the epistolar exchange between the two friends as they fabricate romantic memories that never existed:

*In one of her letters they drank sweet wine, whereas in Kiev they had drunk infernal vodka all the time. He remembered her fragrance, although they were both perpetually stinky and sweaty in the city where waterpressure was eternally low, [...]. They remembered, with painful intensity, dancing cheek to cheek—in reality (and reality is our business), they idiotically trotted to the rhythm of anachronistic German disco, while hirsute Ukrainian men swarmed around her, repeatedly trying to rub their perspiring bodies against her. (157)*

Andrea had made Pronek a "gracious invitation" to visit her in the hope that that visit would never occur. It was about then when Pronek got an official invitation so "he put Chicago in his itinerary". Pronek finally settles down in the unromantic and filthy apartment Andrea shares with her boyfriend. Again, the conflict between reality and fantasy pops up as Pronek fails to put behind him this dreamworld his turbulent mind has made up. The image of Andrea, "his Statue of Liberty, a symbol of emotional freedom" (160), the girl with whom he envisions a happy future when they make love, will actively contribute to his definite alienation and the final dissolution of his identity. Once she leaves him to go back to Ukraine with the excuse that she needs to take a break, Pronek will accept living without shelter in the wilderness that American society has become for him.

Survival in this land of opportunities requires abiding by the American rules; and proof of his acceptance is the way he dresses up for his first job interview. His business attire is, in part, Carwin's, Andrea's boyfriend: "a tie with a Mickey Mouse pattern, lent and consequently tied by Carwin; a vomit-orange jacket, also generously lent by Carwin, who hadn't worn it for years, one size too small, hence rather tight in the shoulders, so Pronek, with his arms protruded, looked like a sad forklift" (178-9). In the following months, the reader witnesses Pronek's descent to the lower layers of the American working system, as he will be hired as a busboy in restaurants or by a Chicago bakery where he will earn his living cutting open croissants and spreading Dijon mustard inside them until he finally finds an opportunity in the house-cleaning agency of Andrea's mother.

The end of the story is quite surprising. In his new American condition, Pronek visits his family back in Bosnia once the war is over. For him, listening to family and friends' stories

of the cruelty of the conflict makes him totally aware of a terrible war whose consequences are underestimated by many American citizens. A visit to Sarajevo leaves the reader in confusion and wonder, as they may end up questioning the following: up to what point Pronek's descent to the American gutters of the labour system—having his identity literally obliterated—his eventual self-resurgence and final societal acceptance, may be compared with the anguish, fear and alienation suffered by the Bosnian population after years of a horrible Civil war and concentration camps? Bosnia had also succeeded in getting a new identity as a nation but, did Pronek find his? The reader cannot be certain. When he decides to go back to the United States, Pronek will stop over in Austria, where he will be denied access without a visa. His new self-pursued identity and Bosnian citizenship do not seem to be a legal proof for the Austrian officer, who will not even accept Pronek's alien resident status in the United States. This liminal situation prompts him to wonder how life would be living in “a transit zone of Vienna airport, pickpocketing for a living, robbing Americans blind every time a planeload of American optimism and resolve was delivered” (210).

I would like to conclude by saying that the way Hemon articulates his storytelling brings fresh air into the American literary arena. His recurrent theme of the exile, the isolated character immersed in a society he does not fully understand, evokes that sense of displacement and alienation which characterize O'Connor's intuitive vision of the short story. In “The Accordion”, the presence of the fictitious Hemon's ancestor prevails over the historical figures of Archduke Franz Ferdinand or Gavrilo Princip. Here, the *Grand Récit* – the one represented by History– gives way to the force of the *petit histoire*, that humble narration represented by the accordionist and the missing key. In “A Coin” Hemon illustrates the horror and brutality of the Bosnian Civil War when Western media turned a deaf ear to Bosnian genocide. Scott Blackwood, critical reviewer of *The Question of Bruno*, stated that “in Hemon's stories, as in Kafka's, fantasy and suffering are intertwined” (Blackwood, 2000). Jozef Pronek's naïvety and Hemon's humane treatment convert him into a modern Akakyi Akakievich, the modest clerk protagonist in Gogol's “Overcoat”, whose sole presence has long inspired compassion and hope. Like him, Pronek becomes an unforgettable voice as he denounces passively that the situation of immigrants should be addressed as a common problem, and a worldwide issue.

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