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Roguish Self-Fashioning and Questing in Aleksandar Hemon's "Everything"

ABSTRACT

This paper examines self-fashioning in Aleksandar Hemon's "Everything," a story about a Sarajevo teenager's journey through ex-Yugoslavia to the Slovenian town of Murska Sobota. His aim? "[T]o buy a freezer chest for my family" (39). While in transit, the first-person narrator imagines himself a rogue of sorts; the fictional journey he takes, meanwhile, is clearly within the quest tradition. The paper argues that "Everything" is an unruly text because by the end of the story the reader must jettison the conventional reading traditions the quest narrative evokes. What begins as a comic tale about a minor journey opens out, in the story's final lines, into a story about larger historical concerns, namely, the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. By introducing contemporary history, Hemon points beyond the closed world of his short story, while rejecting the quest pattern he has established.

Keywords: Aleksandar Hemon, ex-Yugoslavia, quest, rogue, self-fashioning.

Aleksandar Hemon's short story "Everything" was originally published in *The New Yorker* in 2005 as "Love and Obstacles." Later, the story relinquished its title to the 2009 collection *Love and Obstacles*, a series of stories that one can enjoy individually or that one can slot into the Künstlerroman tradition as it catalogues the life of a Bosnian-American poet looking back on the twists and turns of history that landed him permanently in Chicago. *Love and Obstacles* guides us through the Sarajevo-born narrator's years as a sullen teenager ("At sixteen I spent a lot of energy affecting boredom: the eye-roll; the terse, short answers to parental inquisition. . ." ["Stairway to Heaven" 6]), the start of his accidental life in Chicago ("My story is boring: I was not in Sarajevo when the war began; I felt helplessness and guilt as I watched the destruction of my hometown on TV; I lived in America" ["The Conductor" 61]), to a metafictional conclusion when the now-American finds himself at the American embassy in Sarajevo, chatting up an American novelist: "You may have read my story 'Love and Obstacles,'" I said. "It was in *The New Yorker* not so long ago" ("The Noble Truths of Suffering" 187). The stories are funny, full of irony and self-irony, as the narrator looks back on previous versions of himself, previous chapters in his life.

Reviewer Rachel Aspden, writing in *The Guardian*, accurately points out that, for all their playfulness, Hemon's tales are "more than just tricky metafictional vignettes"; they are imbued with an "acute moral sense that raises *Love and Obstacles* far above, as Hemon's narrator puts it, 'one of those brainy postmodern set-ups everyone likes so well because it has something to do with identity' [151]." Hemon's stories offer a series of identities, from a childhood wish to be "an American commando" ("American Commando" 155), to a story where "for some demented reason" the narrator is "introduced" to a group of Bosnian poets "as a philharmonic orchestra conductor" ("The Conductor" 62). In "Everything," which is the focus of this essay, a younger version of the narrator tries to construct a roguish identity for himself. He tries to turn himself into an outsider that willingly lives apart from the herd, in this case, his conventional family.

Hemon uses a cornucopia of traditional literary tropes and genres, most prominent among them, the quest or coming-of-age tale, the riddle, and, more generally, rogue literature. Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines the last as a "genre concerned with the underworld and thus with criminal and quasi-criminal life and activities" (613). The focus on "quasi-criminal" life and invented roguishness is key here, for though "Everything" speaks of dirty deeds, nothing criminal actually occurs within the story. Every instance of roguery is playfully conjured through language, using familiar genre conventions while at the same time satirizing those conventions through overtness.

Set in 1984, before the breakup of Yugoslavia, “Everything” is about a seventeen-year-old who has been sent from Sarajevo to a small Slovenian town to buy a freezer for his family. On the way, he meets two criminals on a train and gets drunk in his destination town; this is at best minimal roguery, though not in the narrator’s mind. In other words, a trivial event is not experienced as such by the teenage narrator, even if the older narrator looks back on his younger self with bemusement. Ultimately, Hemon’s story steers to the existentially serious and away from the carefully constructed coming-of-age quest he has been guiding us through. “Everything” concludes, “When the war began in the spring of 1992, and electricity in the city of Sarajevo was cut, everything in the freezer chest thawed, rotted in less than a week, and then finally perished” (60). The emblemized and distilled history in the final sentence casts a dark shadow over the rest of the story. It trivializes the criminal, roguish behaviour and the social norms that determine that behaviour. In times of war, criminal and barbarous activity become the norm.

This paper argues that the narrator’s self-fashioning as a roguish individual journeying through an imagined “underworld” is made equally trivial. Hemon subverts genre and trope expectations as fantasy gives way to a grim historical reality. The paper focuses on self-fashioning of roguishness and on the traditional quest genre. At first, these aspects may seem worlds apart. However, roguishness and genre come together in the final paragraph of Hemon’s tightly-constructed story that leans heavily on genre expectations. “Everything” proves itself an unruly text because, ultimately, we cannot rely on conventional reading patterns to make sense of the quest narrative that Hemon writes. The final sentence moves us away from fictional narrative and points to a grim chapter in modern history. The narrator of “Everything” performs roguishness, and the story itself is roguishly unruly because it directs us away from the story’s apparent focus as it moves from personal story to larger history.

ROGUES AND SELF-FASHIONING

In his seminal 1980 work *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Stephen Greenblatt argues that the 16th century saw “an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process” (10). To be clear, while it would be misguided to stamp Greenblatt’s theory onto a short story and author from another era—late 20th-century, post-Tito Yugoslavia is not Elizabethan England—one point of Greenblatt’s theory remains especially applicable to Aleksandar Hemon and his fiction: “Self-fashioning is always, though not exclusively, in language”

(20). The narrator of "Everything" is conscious of the opportunities that travel, language, and awareness of a literary tradition offer for creating himself as a stranger in a land where his native language is not spoken (even if Slovenian is in the same linguistic family as his native Bosnian).

Self-fashioning is nothing new for Aleksandar Hemon, and much of his non-fiction mirrors his fiction. Having found himself in the United States when the Yugoslav war broke out in 1992, the Sarajevo-born writer turned to English. Starting from "insufficient English, devoid of articles and thickly contaminated with a foreign accent" (Hemon, "The Lives of a Flaneur" 104), Hemon progressed to become a leading stylist in his second language, often inserting autobiographical vignettes from his life in America into his fiction.

More rewarding than hunting down flashes of autobiography in Hemon, and of more interest for this essay, is the role self-fictionalization plays in his works, even as extra-literary reality and fiction come close to converging, as in "Everything." In *Nowhere Man*, for example, this fictionalization is playful, as Hemon impishly dances between the real and the performed. The Ukrainian-born, Sarajevo-raised Jozef Pronek finding himself in America, canvassing (as Hemon did) for Greenpeace. Each new door he knocks on gives Jozef, now known as "Joseph," the opportunity to act out a new version of himself. Each area of Chicago gets to know a different Pronek. As this passage shows—and as anyone who has lived abroad can attest—how we can and do fashion ourselves depends very much on the audience and on how much we can expect that audience to know about us:¹

To a young couple in Evanston who sat on their sofa holding hands, Pronek introduced himself as Mirza from Bosnia. To a college girl in La Grange with DE PAW stretching across her bosom he introduced himself as Sergei Katastrofenko from Ukraine. To a man in Oak Park with chintzy hair falling down his shoulders, the top of his dome twinkling with sweat, he introduced himself as Jukka Smrdiprdiuska from Estonia. (Hemon, *Nowhere Man* 127)

"Mirza from Bosnia" and the absurd "Sergei Katastrofenko from Ukraine" are minor lies, since Pronek was born in what is now Ukraine and raised in what is now Bosnia. In the Ex-Yugoslav context, "Mirza"

¹ Our audience is crucial to how we perform and fashion ourselves. If a Slovenian converses with another Slovenian in Slovenia, there are limitations to the stories he can make up about himself. If he speaks with an American, he has a blank canvas because his audience will not be familiar with his home country. Or, in the words of Luigi Gussago, "rogues are defined by the situation, the setting they live in or, at times, that from which they are expelled" (7).

is clearly a Bosnian name, though it is unlikely the young couple would appreciate that fact. Introducing himself as “Katastrofenko” is bolder: Pronek is sure that the college girl with “PAW” emblazoned across her chest would not pick up on the absurdity of the name.² The faux-Estonian name “Smrdiprdiuska,” meanwhile, derives approximately from the Bosnian for “smelly fart.” If Pronek seems to be mocking his audience, it is tempting to return to Hemon himself, whom America taught to “endure questions about Bosnia and Yugoslavia and their nonexistent relation to the nonexistent Czechoslovakia” (“The Lives of a Flaneur” 104). A secondary point is that names seem fluid and changeable: on the one hand, they are chosen and we are sometimes free to label ourselves as we please; on the other, seemingly stable political references (“Yugoslavia,” “Czechoslovakia”) can disappear overnight.

Like the fictional Pronek in Chicago and the non-fictional Hemon in the same city, the seventeen-year-old (nameless) narrator in “Everything” finds himself in a new place. For at least the length of the story he is a nomad striking out for strange lands, where the strange and unusual can happen. He takes a train-and-bus journey from Sarajevo to the Slovenian town of Murska Sobota in search of a freezer for his family; on the way, the young man is introduced into a world of roguish behaviour. Though fearful of this world that he encounters in a railway compartment, he adapts to it and dreams up his own counter-version of roguishness. He shares a compartment with two foul-mouthed men who claim to be former convicts. Soon the “budding poet” (Hemon, “Everything” 41) fashions himself as a societal outsider.

“Everything” begins with a combination of roguishness and containment as the narrator awakens in his railway compartment to find himself in the company of two criminals. They have frightening voices: “one of them was mine-deep and spoke with a southern Serbian accent; the other was mumbly and uttered words with the inflections of a Sarajevo thug, the soft consonants further softened, the vowels stuck in the gullet” (37). Hemon neatly plays with a double-audience (as he did with the pungent pun “Smrdiprdiuska”). The vast majority of *New Yorker* readers will not be able to identify “a southern Serbian accent,” and even the well-described inflections of the Sarajevan can only be translated as meaningless sounds if one does not know the language. In other words, few readers will be able to match the accents to anything they have ever heard. The reader co-creates, imagining some version of what such a character must sound like.

² For Hemon’s own take on the meanings of “katastrofa” and his alter-ego (“Sergei Katastrofenko,” “an imaginary Slav, probably Ukrainian” that has the “voice of a Sarajevo street thug”), see “Katastrofa.”

The criminals' conversation is barely speech because the sentences are without grammatical subjects or auxiliary verbs. Rather, it consists of a list of states where the Serbian and the Bosnian are not wanted:

"France," the Sarajevan said.
 "Refused entry."
 "Germany."
 "Refused entry."
 "Greece."
 "Never went."
 "Refused entry."
 "Got me there," the Serbian said, and chortled. (37)

These syntax-poor lines show self-fashioning as the two brag about *not* being wanted. The Serbian and the Sarajevan are playing a verbal game of cards, aiming to outbid each other. For them, being "refused entry" is a badge of honour because it shows how wicked they are. The "Serbian" eventually admits defeat—in this rogue's world, the Sarajevan trumps the Serbian because he is the less desired, since more border guards have turned him away.

From the perspective of a North American reader, who might link Yugoslavia primarily with the wars of the 1990s, it is tempting to read this exchange as pure allegory—perhaps "refused entry" could be a foreshadowing of future displacement through war? Perhaps the bickering individual "Serbian" and "Sarajevan thug" are stand-ins for countries that will later be at war? Indeed, Hemon maps much of the territory of Ex-Yugoslavia and its individual republics. The narrator travels from Sarajevo in the company of a Serbian and of another Bosnian, disembarks in Zagreb (in present-day Croatia), and makes his way by bus to Murska Sobota (in present-day Slovenia). Hemon maps much of a state that no longer exists, and "Everything" is in part an "autobiographical reminiscence" that documents the "radical divorce between two times"—Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslavia (Longinović 150, 152). This radical divorce is, in narrative terms, that of the typical position in which "an external focalizer, usually, the 'I' grown older, gives its vision of a fabula in which it participated earlier as an actor, from the outside" (Bal 161). The narrator looks back on a naïve self who lived in simpler Yugoslav times.

More important for this article than focalization and reminiscences is the nomadism that was, as Bryan Reynolds writes (in reference to rogue culture in 16th-century England), "a decisive . . . characteristic of criminal culture" (58). The two criminals in "Everything" are in motion and, at least in the narrator's mind, outside the realm of laws. Still more important is

that, though we can assume that the two thugs actually are criminals, they linguistically perform roguishness through a series of tall tales or even lies as they recall their time in the same jail:

“Did you know Tuka?” asked the Sarajevan.
 “No.”
 “How about Fahro?”
 “Which Fahro?”
 “Fahro the Beast.”
 “Fahro the Beast. His nose was bitten off?”
 “Yes, that Fahro.”
 “I didn’t know him.”
 “Which cell block were you in?”
 “Seven.”
 “Rape?”
 “Burglary.”
 “Burglary was Six.”
 “Well, I was in Seven,” the Serbian said, peevishly.
 “I was in Five. Manslaughter.”
 “Nice.” (Hemon, “Everything” 38)

The conversation is intimate and familiar. Even if the criminals are not particularly close, they are part of a criminal subculture that has much in common, including, it seems, a language of sorts.³ They are, for example, fairly familiar with the layout and design of a particular jail, and they are equally familiar with a rogues gallery of seasoned criminals that include the nicknames “Tuka” and “Fahro the Beast.” This macho exchange, however, is also a performance put on for the young narrator. Perhaps they are embellishing their crimes, perhaps they are lying. Crucial is that their speech acts and self-fashioning terrifies the narrator: “It was not unreasonable to believe that they could smell my fear and were just about to cut my throat and take the money” (38).

Despite the catalogue of “rape,” “burglary” and “manslaughter” and the grisly possibility of having one’s nose bitten off, Yugoslavia was in fact a safe place that enjoyed low crime rates. Actually, it is entirely “unreasonable” to expect even convicts to murder an innocent child on the off chance he might have a stack of cash for a freezer when they have no chance of escape (the fun of *Murder on the Orient Express* is that it’s

³ The first American dictionary of slang, namely, New York police chief George Matsell’s 1859 *Vocabulum; or The Rogue’s Lexicon*, had law enforcers in mind (Green 60). Matsell’s Preface argues: “The rogue fraternity have a language peculiarly their own, which is understood and spoken by them no matter what their dialect, or the nation where they were reared.”

hard to flee the scene of the crime). The narrator has been taken into their performed world, duped by a show put on for him. What the narrator sees and hears on the train works as a catalyst for his own performing of roles. The narrator, fashions himself another type of rogue, one who longs to move outside social norms, albeit not in the manner that hardened criminals do.

This poet-rogue-in-training has come prepared for his journey:

I equipped myself for the expedition: a fresh notebook; extra pencils; a book of Rimbaud's—my bible (*As I was floating down unconcerned Rivers / I no longer felt myself steered by the haulers. . .*); . . . and a single contraceptive pill I had gotten in exchange for *Physical Graffiti*, a double Led Zeppelin LP that I no longer cared about, as I had moved on to the Sex Pistols. (41)

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Most salient here in terms of identity are the reference to the "contraceptive pill" and to Rimbaud, whose long poem "The Drunken Boat" permeates the story. "Everything" contains many quotations from the teenage French poet's long lines about a steerless boat drifting away to sea. If the narrator is fashioning himself, the choice of Rimbaud as a "bible" is not coincidental.

For a young and rebellious literary lad, the attraction of Rimbaud is evident: Rimbaud wrote virtually all of his heady, ground-breaking poetry when young. He was, by any standards, famously immoral, and perhaps possessed "diabolical powers of seduction" (qtd. in Schaffer 76). For those reasons, he is a model of roguishness for the narrator.⁴ Referring to Rimbaud's works as his "bible" is not a mere cliché, since the narrator aims to supplant traditional morality with his own lascivious desires (in this case, to lose his virginity). The narrator understands his "expedition" to be a Rimbaud-like rebellion against his stable upbringing, for he longs to break away from the "banal, quotidian operations that constituted my parents' existence"—parents who "wanted me to join the great community of people who made food collection and storage the central organizing principle of their life" (Hemon, "Everything" 45). Like the criminals on the train, he wants to live as a rogue outside society.

The narrator links roguishness especially to sex, including an obsessive desire to lose his virginity as soon as possible. After escaping the criminals on the train, now on the bus from Zagreb to sleepy Murska Sobota, he sees a man "invested in a crossword puzzle . . . , fellating his pen" (44); as

⁴ To quote Luigi Gussago again: "social outcasts and rejects aspire to a place among the great heroes of history" (13). The well-read young narrator of course picks Rimbaud as his type of hero.

he practices the “lines” he will utter on approaching the hotel reception, his “rehearsal quickly turn[s] into a fantasy in which a pretty receptionist checked me in with lassitude, then took me up to the room only to rip her hotel uniform off and submerge me into the wet sea of pleasure” (46); “diabolical powers of seduction” indeed. This particular fantasy is deferred, however, because it turns out that “the receptionist was an elderly man, hairy and cantankerous, his stern name Franc” (46). On seeing an American woman with her husband in the hotel, the narrator now imagines tempting her into infidelity:

I began imagining a conversation I would have with the woman, should we happen to share an elevator ride, while her unseemly husband was safely locked up somewhere in a distant reality. In my high school English, I would tell her that I liked her face flushed with pilgrimage, that I wanted to hold the summer dawn in my arms. We would stagger, embracing, to her room, where we wouldn’t even make it to the bed, et cetera. Her name, I chose, was Elizabeth. (47)

But for all of the narrator’s desires to move outside society in rascally ways—especially in the desire to take the married woman—the narrator’s performing of self is as one-dimensional as that of the thugs he meets on the train. Though his fantasies of travelling beyond Yugoslavia, “of simply going on, into the *infinity of lifedom*, never buying the freezer chest” but travelling “past Murska Sobota, to Austria, onward to Paris,” may have seemed lively to him, they are a commonplace teenage adventure (45–46); these teenage fantasies are a variation on the romanticized trope of escape, of drifting to sea, like a helmless boat drifting “into the wet sea of pleasure,” lines half-pilfered from Rimbaud’s poetic boat that moves from inland river to “le Poème / De la Mer” (“Le Bateau ivre”). In the context of picaresque fiction, these youthful dreams are indicative of the “fascination with incessant, aimless travel” that the narrator believes gives him space for self-fashioning (Gussago 4).

Furthermore, the narrator’s youthful desires to escape family confines mirror those of Edmund White, who, in the foreword to his 2008 biography *Rimbaud: The Double Life of a Rebel Hardcover*, sounds exactly like Hemon’s narrator: “Buoyed up by the sensual delirium of the long poem ‘The Drunken Boat,’ I would float off into daydreams of exotic climes” (1). White continues: “As an unhappy gay adolescent, stifled by boredom and sexual frustration and paralyzed by self-hatred, I longed to run away to New York and make my mark as a writer; I identified completely with Rimbaud’s desires to be free, to be published, to be sexual, to go to Paris” (1). White’s lines could easily appear in “Everything.” In each case

the autobiographical narrator looks back on his younger, more naïve self from a distance of many years. In other words, both the fictional narrator and the biographer White enjoy "the temporal and psychological distance from which the narrating self now reports the considerations and feelings which the experiencing self had at the time" (Stanzel 95)—a stance evident by the gushing vocabulary of "buoyed up by the sensual delirium" (White) and "flushed with pilgrimage" (Hemon). The narrator in "Everything" looks with benign bemusement on the younger self: "For I was a budding poet; I had filled entire notebooks with the verses of teenage longings and crushing boredom" (41). However, as an identity marker, Rimbaud is no more original than a mass-produced Kafka or Sex Pistols t-shirt. What Hemon offers the reader in "Everybody" is a performance of imagined roguishness that is generic, and it is to the matter of genre that the second part of this paper now turns.

GENRE AND THE ROGUE

"Everything" relies heavily on two genres or narrative trajectories: the riddle and the quest narrative. Each of these narrative patterns focuses especially on meaning, and in the case of Hemon's story, the highlighting of a central riddle and the focus on a quest narrative set up the unruliness of the story's conclusion. The ending of the story—against all expectations—offers none of the closure one expects from a riddle or a quest tale. For the book version of this story, Hemon highlights the riddle because "Everything" is provided as an ersatz-solution to the story's central puzzle. In other words, titling the story "Everything" instead of the earlier *New Yorker* title "Love and Obstacles" directs our attention to the story's central riddle. Fittingly for a popular form of literature, the riddle is told by the "Sarajevan thug." Although he has been speaking to "the Serbian," even if well aware that the teenager is listening in on his racy conversation about criminal misdoings, the Sarajevan now turns to the narrator. He asks him to "figure out this riddle":

It has no head, but it has a hundred legs, a thousand windows, and five walls. It is never the same, but it is always almost the same. It is black and white and green. It disappears, and then it comes back. It smells of dung and straw and machine oil. It is the biggest thing in the world, but it can fit into the palm of your hand. (Hemon, "Everything" 42)

As Tom Shippey writes, "the point of a riddle is the contrast between misleading surface and hidden solution" (xxvii); as with many riddles, we may not know the answer, but we remain aware that "with a good riddle

there ought at least to be a single correct solution (even if, as is sometimes the case with the Old English riddles, no one is sure what it is)" (xxviii).

In communication and genre terms, the Serbian's reaction is fascinating. He understands the form a riddle takes yet seems unable to offer any logical response. The Serbian, cryptically, offers "house" and "elephant" as potential answers, before forcing his third solution on the riddle:

"Everything," the Serbian said. "It is everything."

"With all due respect, brother, that is probably not the correct answer."

"Who says?"

"Well, everything usually does not work as an answer to any riddle, and it does not disappear and come back."

"Says who?"

"Everybody knows that doesn't happen."

"I say it does."

"Everything cannot fit into the palm of your hand."

"I say it can," the Serbian said, and got to his feet, his fists clenched as tightly as ever. The Sarajevan stayed in his seat, shaking his head, apparently deciding against smashing the Serbian's face in.

"All right," he said, "if it is that important to you, it is everything." (43)

The exchange is a portrait of how riddle-solving does *not* work. Here, the logical solution to the riddle—the ever-satisfying solution that allows us to see the harmony of literal and figurative meaning coming together—is replaced by the threat of force and then consent. "The Serbian" appeals to the authority of strength and force ("fists as tightly clenched as ever"), a force that the Sarajevan counters. What should be an intellectual and logical struggle to find the answer to the riddle becomes a matter of agreement, as the Sarajevan uses passive aggression ("if it is that important to you. . .") to allow the illogical answer "everything" to take over his story. The answer is illogical because it is too all-encompassing to be the answer to a riddle.

This retreat from what should be the resolution means that the Sarajevan dispenses with the riddle form. He takes the riddle to an extra-textual realm and robs us of narrative closure by not giving us the meaningful ending "that, as humans, we are physically wired to want" (Sutherland 68). After setting up a form of narrative that necessarily implies neatness and closure, Hemon provides the randomness, chaos and perhaps tragedy of real life. In plain English, he doesn't tell us the answer. By withholding the solution (even as his new title focuses on it), Hemon uses the "Sarajevan thug" to go rogue on the riddle genre because, technically, it is not a riddle if no solution is provided.

Hemon's withdrawal from riddle conventions neatly foreshadows the major genre that Hemon employs: the quest narrative. The narrator tells us with comic bluntness that we are reading about a quest. "The truth was," explains the narrator, "my destination was Murska Sobota, I had a wad of money in my pocket, my mission to buy a freezer chest for my family" (Hemon, "Everything" 39). Using the word "mission" to describe a trip to buy a freezer is comic because, though "mission" may retain the etymological sense of "sending abroad," the word has too much gravitas for the purchasing of a freezer. The clash between "freezer" and "mission" is thus incongruous and therefore funny⁵—travelling to Murska Sobota to buy an emblem of domesticity is hardly a *Sir Gawain* journey or Franklin's quest to find the Northwest Passage.

The announcement of the quest in "Everything" is presented with pomp and ceremony when the narrator's father calls a "family meeting" in order to intone: "There arrives a time in the life of every family . . . , when it becomes ready to acquire a large freezer" (39). (In the original *New Yorker* version of the story, this line reads, more prosaically, "there comes a time. . ." In the book version, Hemon opts for the Latinate and thus more elevated "arrives" than the Germanic "comes.") The inflated language is lost neither on the reader nor the familial audience in "Everything." The narrator's mother "rolled her eyes at my father's rhetoric" and the audience-aware narrator says: "I made sure that I was visibly indifferent to all that was said" (39). Even at home he is performing his identity to his familial audience.

Regardless of how trivial the object of the quest may be, Hemon is consciously and comically working with a vital and fecund archetypal pattern. As Christopher Booker writes,

no type of story is more instantly recognisable to us than a Quest. Far away, we learned, there is some priceless goal, worth any effort to achieve: a *treasure*; a promised land; something of infinite value. From the moment the hero learns of this prize, the need to set out on the long hazardous journey to reach it becomes the most important thing to him in the world. (69, my emphasis)

Recognizing the importance of the quest tradition is crucial for understanding "Everything," including Hemon's final turning-away from genre tradition.

⁵ Hemon is, however, careful to point out that the freezer was "the biggest model available on the lousy market of socialist Yugoslavia" and the father "had somehow discovered that the best price was in Murska Sobota" ("Everything" 40). The object of the quest may be incongruous but it is not absurd or without motivation.

Throughout “Everything,” Hemon frolics with the language and diction of the quest tradition, and eventually the narrator, who had been “indifferent” to his father’s desire to freeze food, speaks amorously of this object in a shop in Murska Sobota: “In the window, a humongous freezer chest glowed as if in a heavenly commercial” (49). The *New Yorker* version differed slightly, highlighting the quest-object even more: “In the window an enormous freezer glowed like a treasure chest in a commercial” (Hemon, “Love and Obstacles”). The term “treasure chest” implies a venerable and archetypal object, while the “commercial” undercuts the treasure’s status because the goal is an object available for immediate purchase. Similarly, the near-oxymoron “heavenly commercial” yokes the divine with the earthly. However, as mentioned, the narrator’s goal on this quest is not merely to acquire a freezer for his family but to enter manhood by losing his virginity. In other words, there are two simultaneous quests: the stated goal of travelling to buy a freezer, and the narrator’s desire to enter manhood.

In his classic *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye observes that, unlike religious quest patterns,

in the secular quest-romances more obvious motives and rewards for the quest are more common. Often the dragon guards a hoard: the quest for buried treasure has been a central theme of romance from the Siegfried cycle to Nostromo, and is unlikely to be exhausted yet. (179)

Frye speaks further of the quest pattern’s adaptability—“Translated into ritual terms the quest-romance is the victory of fertility over the waste land. Fertility means food and drink, bread and wine, body and blood, the union of male and female,” while in “dream terms, the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfilment” (180). In “Everything,” the narrator’s father clearly states the point of the treasure-hunt: “The ice box in the fridge was no longer spacious enough to contain the feed—meat, mainly—for the growing children; the number of family friends was so large that the supplies for an improvised feast had to be available at all times” (39). The narrator, like any rebellious teenager, has no interest in domesticity and growing families.

The word “treasure” appears (again) in the story, this time referring not to culinary but to sexual appetites. The narrator describes his younger self, his true aim in travelling to Murska Sobota: “I needed to find places with a high density of youth, where comely Slovenian girls stood in clusters, steadily rejecting the clumsy advances of Slovenian boys, conserving their maidenhead for a pill-carrying Sarajevo boy, his body a treasure to squander” (Hemon, “Everything” 48). The narrating figure lampoons his

teenage self's nervousness through the language and trope of classical romance: "maidenhead" is an archaism plucked from the realm of a courtly love tradition. Though the narrator overcomes a few real and imagined obstacles on his quest to buy a kitchen appliance (e.g., the criminals in his train compartment), the real obstacles for him are those littering his imagined road to non-virginity, a road that in his mind is linked to roguishness and filled with potential dangers and possible adventures.

After a drinking session with a local drunk, the narrator feels elated at having experienced life just as his roguish idol Rimbaud surely had:

And as I stepped out on the vacant streets of Murska Sobota, a wave of euphoria surged through me. This was experience: I had possibly lost my head and experienced a spontaneous outpouring of strong emotion; I had just drunk with a disgusting stranger, as Rimbaud surely did in Paris once upon a time; I had just said Fuck the fuck off to the responsible life my parents had in store for me; I had just spent time in the underworld of Murska Sobota and come out soaked with sweat and tears. (52)

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By equating himself with Rimbaud, by imagining that one drinking session in a sleepy town, which he refashions into "the underworld of Murska Sobota," constitutes saying "fuck the fuck off to the responsible life" of bourgeois society, the narrator slides from self-fashioning into self-delusion. Saying a few four-letter words is unarticulated rage; the teenager's Murska Sobota malaise is nothing compared to Rimbaud's errant ways. And yet, the vulgarity links the narrator to the criminals he met on the train. In a double-transgressing of conversational rules, the Sarajevan had asked the narrator: "Do you fuck?" (40). The rudeness breaks the conversational rules of polite society as the thug linguistically positions himself as an outsider; also, Hemon breaks with literary decorum by clearly announcing a central concern of the narrator. "Will he copulate?" appears to be the central question of "Everything." The choice of words links the narrator lexically to that *other underworld*, that of a "sexually indulgent . . . criminal culture . . . whose norms were vastly different from that of official culture" (Reynolds 62). The difference, of course, is that late-20th-century teenage randiness is not a great diversion from the norms of "official culture."

In a section of "Everything" that spoofs facile Freudian symbolism, the sexually frustrated narrator returns to his room, but "[t]he key would not enter the lock, no matter how hard I tried to push it in" (54). It is of course the wrong room; his sex drive has propelled him to the American woman's temporary abode across the hall. "She flashed a barely perceptible smile and I understood we were in it together now" (55). He has, of course, understood nothing, not least because he cannot communicate

with her in English and because “barely perceptible” is a synonym for absent. This is one final attempt at roguishness—engaging in sex but also luring the married woman away from her snoring husband. Of course, this is delusion: the narrator leaves his door “open, in case Elizabeth wanted to put her dull husband to sleep and then tiptoe over to my frolicsome den” (56)—it is a final attempt at a sexual tryst in a nomadic realm beyond the constraints of bourgeois society. Instead, it is not “Elizabeth” that comes to call but the hotel receptionist Franc, one of the few characters to be given the solidity of a real name. The narrator has, as Ed Pavlič writes in a *Quarterly Conversation* review, “to fend off a material, verifiable (if benignly paternal) attack from a Slovenian hotelier who has had it past here with our narrator’s delusional (if self-consciously Rimbaudian) mischief.” In other words, the would-be rogue escapes his family, only to run into another author figure, an ersatz-father.

The older narrator speaks almost kindly of Franc as he reflects on the beating he received in the “hotel ambitiously called Evropa” (Hemon, “Everything” 39). “He was a good, if unpleasant, man, Franc was,” he notes, adding: “He didn’t kick me in the face, as he could have done. He didn’t spit on me, but on the floor next to me” (57). Pavlič is correct to point out the paternal aspect. When Franc beats the narrator for his impudent and lustful behaviour towards Elizabeth, we are taken back to an earlier line in the story, where the narrator reflects on his youthful attempts at poetry: “My soul soliloquies often made Father regret that he hadn’t belted me more when I was little” (45). Franc and the narrator’s father are connected by a corrective urge—poetry and poetry-infused delusions are dangerous. By the end of the story, the narrator seems to have been brought back into the family fold: “When I arrived home, begrimed with having been away, breakfast was waiting” (60). As one reviewer writes, “[t]he tragicomic dénouement returns him, sadder, wiser, hungry—and still a virgin—to the comfort of home and breakfast” (Levy 66).

This review implies that “Everything” ends with domesticity, with a return to the normality and banality of family life, “food collection and storage” and maternal nourishment, which in a sense it does. However, “Everything” concludes with a short paragraph and a final sentence that trivializes the rest of the story—with its odes to self-fashioning and imagined roguishness:

The same day, Mother washed the denim pants I had worn in Murska Sobota, with the pill in the change pocket disintegrating—nothing was left except a nugget of foil and plastic. The freezer chest arrived after seventeen days. We filled it to the brim: veal and pork, lamb and beef, chicken and peppers. (Hemon, “Everything” 60)

The pill, which had represented the narrator's hopes, is destroyed. In structural and quest terms, the father's goal for his son has been achieved: a freezer has been purchased and delivered.

But Hemon's neat wrap-up of an archetypal pattern we all know is unravelled by the final sentence of "Everything." The final words undo the "heavenly" symbol of the freezer as a symbol of planning and plenitude: "When the war began in the spring of 1992, and electricity in the city of Sarajevo was cut, everything in the freezer chest thawed, rotted in less than a week, and then finally perished" (60). The ending of "Everything" renders the rest of the story paltry, from the quest to lose virginity, to the neat and archetypal quest story. Structurally, the final, 34-word sentence is insignificant, as it takes up approximately half a percent of the story. Semantically, the sentence looms over and seemingly eradicates the content of all that has preceded it. "Perished" is a brilliantly mis-chosen word, since "meat" has of course already died. The verb brings together thoughts of human demise as well.

By upending a seemingly whimsical tale about a trip to a sleepy town in what was once a common state, Hemon goes rogue on the quest narrative. After overtly satirizing literary conventions and tropes—travelling to purchase a freezer is hardly a grand quest, and getting drunk in a small ex-Yugoslav town is at best minimal roguery—Hemon's story veers towards the historical. "Everything" directs us towards the non-fictional scenario Hemon describes in "Let There Be What Cannot Be," where a "petty embezzler" moves from the margins of history to the mainstage: "It was only during the war, performing on a blood-soaked stage, that he could fully develop his inhuman potential. He was what he was because what could not happen did in the end happen" (61). These lines offer a gruesome parallel to the narrator's belief in his ability to fashion himself as a rogue. "Everything" is a story that, by introducing a nadir of modern European history, rejects the quest narrative and thus turns the story outward, moving us from delusions of teenage self-fashioning to historical horrors.

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