His first two works, Nowhere Man (2004) and The Question of Bruno (2001), were well-received. The Lazarus Project (2008) and James Woods’ admiring review of it in The New Yorker established Hemon’s reputation, significantly raising his literary profile in the United States. A native of Sarajevo, Aleksandar Hemon came to English relatively late in life. Stranded in the United States by the outbreak of hostilities in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Hemon began to write in English within a few years of his arrival. Less than a decade later he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship (2003) and a MacCarthur “Genius Grant” (2004). I met Hemon some months ago in New York, when he was in town promoting the collection he recently edited, Best European Fiction 2010, for Dalkey Archive Press. Over syrup-drenched French toast and coffee in a mid-town hotel restaurant, Hemon and I had a free-ranging conversation about some of the key themes of his work, and about his frustration with critics who assume every fictional character is an autobiographical reference. We also paused a moment to enjoy a little punk rock. What follows is a reflection on the theme to which our conversation kept returning: displacement.

Our conversation begins with a minor dispute. Hemon corrects me when I suggest that his writing is preoccupied with exile. Not exile, he says, but “displacement” is the proper word to describe the main characters of his novels, Joseph Pronek in Nowhere Man and Vladimir Brik in The Lazarus Project, characters far from their former homes in Yugoslavia who must confront the inevitable identity issues that arise as they forge new lives in the United States. Exile, Hemon says, implies a noble separation from the plebes and more suitably describes modernists like James Joyce, or one of Joyce’s main inspirations, the mythical figure of Ulysses. A quick glance at the Oxford English dictionary suggests that Hemon—the non-native English speaker!—is perhaps correct. Exile is “the state of being banned from one’s native country” or “a person who lives away from their native country, either by choice or compulsion.” The definition for “displacement,” by contrast, is more neutral, broader, and, I must concede, more accurately describes the rootless, unanchored state of many of Hemon’s characters. It is a word that perhaps also better describes the state of our contemporary world. Displacement, according to Oxford, is:

1. the moving of something from its place of origin
Where is the movie theater? When Hemon returned to Bosnia for the first time after the war he searched in vain for the theater and movie posters that had been such well-known parts of his youth and Sarajevo’s topography. He had a sense of the uncanny as he walked the streets of his hometown. Everything was eerily familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. It was the late 1990s and a great deal had transpired since Hemon’s school and university years in Sarajevo, and his young adulthood in the United States. Hemon had left home in 1992 to participate in a cultural exchange program in Chicago. It was supposed to be an extended, but temporary, stay. A few months after his arrival war broke out in the former Yugoslavia. Hemon decided to remain in the U.S. When the war finally ended, he returned for a visit in 1997. It was not the same place he had left. Sniper bullets, bombing, and the accompanying fires, had dramatically altered the Sarajevo of his youth. With so many pieces of the urban environment gone, Hemon’s “place of origin” had ceased to exist.

Hemon’s characters, like Hemon himself, are part of the millions who have been displaced by one of the great hallmarks of the twentieth century: war.

2. the enforced departure of people from their home, typically because of war or persecution

Hemon’s characters, like Hemon himself, are part of the millions who have been displaced by one of the great hallmarks of the twentieth century: war. The end phases of the three great wars of the twentieth century, the First and Second World Wars, and the Cold War have all been marked by mass migration. At the close of World War I, hundreds of thousands of Russians, Greeks, Poles, Armenians and Germans were either forced from their homes or fled in fear of revolution or retaliatory violence. Adding to this spontaneous movement was the population transfers between Greece and Turkey, who exchanged their respective minority populations. The numbers involved are staggering. According to historian Mark Mazower, 1.2 million Greeks and half a million Turks had to leave their places of origin and “return” to their “national homes.” Even more dramatically, the end of World War II saw the movement of millions of refugees in the closing phase of the war: Hundreds of thousands of Germans, freed prisoners of war, Jews and other former concentration camp inmates, accused collaborators, and Greeks, Poles, Czechs, and Yugoslavs who had been transferred by the Nazis to work in Nazi-occupied factories and were now trying to get back home. Mazower estimates that between 1938 and 1945 there were over forty-six million people on the move in East Central Europe alone. After the war over 11 million people were officially classified as Displaced Persons, or DP.

The last years of the Cold War and the first years of the twentieth century have likewise seen a remarkable increase in the number of migrants. According to the United Nations, quoted in a recent article in The New York Times, the number of migrants worldwide has increased by 37 percent in the past two decades. Most of these migrants are moving to more industrialized parts of the globe. In the past two decades the number of migrants in North America has increased 80 percent, in Europe 41 percent. If you add tourists and travelers to this number, a group known as “temporary migrants”, then the planet appears to be a mass of moving bodies. (According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, there were 806.8 million tourist arrivals worldwide in 2005.) Unlike the displacement created by World Wars I and II, today’s permanent and temporary migrants are not only fleeing war and persecution, they are also fleeing the economic and psychic pains of modernization in search of jobs or a better way of life.

3. the amount by which a thing is moved from its normal position

When placed in water, an object, like a boat, forces a portion of the water to move from its “normal position,” to another place amidst the seemingly endless sea. War and modernization cut a similar path, plowing their way through the sea of human and animal life, destroying the natural and manmade habitats that stand in
the way of their ever-receding destinations. Ruthless and dispassionate, bombs and wrecking cranes displace people, mountains, flora and fauna with reckless abandon. Military and modernization campaigns create a class of peoples known as the “displaced,” who lodged from their “normal position,” must either find a new home, or perish in the rubble.

It is possible to measure how much water is displaced by a submerged, or partially submerged, object. But how does one measure the amount by which a displaced person is moved from her or his “normal position” when the damages of war and the drive to modernize force them from their natural habitats? Geographic distance reveals very little about the perceived distance between one’s place of birth and one’s new home. To get to zero, to establish a baseline of stability, a foundation solid enough to be worthy of the label “home,” requires a great deal of effort and, as the case may be, a great deal of self-reinvention. In the new setting, or environment, the narratives of self that formerly made sense no longer apply.

Through characters like Pronek and Brik, and the fascinating Szmura in the short story, “Szmura’s Room” in Love and Obstacles, Hemon’s fiction explores this issue of the pains and pleasures of attempting to reinvent oneself. Even as Pronek wanders the streets of Chicago imagining himself inhabiting different roles in increasingly fantastic scenarios, he keeps bumping into the headline, “Bombs in Grozny,” implicitly reminding him that he is not only far from home but that home is no longer a stable, physical space to which he can return. Identity, Hemon tells me, is hard to reinvent. It’s a confusing process to try and reassemble yourself. Take Pronek again. In his new home, Pronek keeps changing his identity, trying on numerous hats—Greenpeace canvasser, English as a Second Language instructor, private investigator. But such willed self-invention begins to take a psychic toll on Pronek until finally erupting in a sensationally physical and violent display of his pent up frustration. (I am not Pronek, Hemon reassured me, contrary to what some reviewers have suggested. Pronek, he added, is an exploration of possibilities.)

4. psychoanalysis: the unconscious transfer of an intense emotion from its original object to another one

One possible response to the destruction of home is to transfer one’s attachment to another object and to latch onto new, seemingly stable, narratives: to nationalism or religion. In the face of the crumbling foundation of the Yugoslav state some Yugoslavs turned to their ethnic community and to the dream of finally establishing a homogenized nation-state. On the occasion of the arrest of Radovan Karadzic—the former president of the Serbian Democratic Party, a hard-line nationalist organization, wanted for inciting Bosnian Serbs to murder thousands of Bosnian Muslims—Hemon penned an op-ed piece for the New York Times. Karadzic, Hemon writes was “a prosaic nobody…a mediocre psychiatrist, a minor poet and a petty embezzler before the war” who sought greatness by linking himself to the Serbian nationalist movement. Well-acquainted with Serbian epic poetry, Karadzic cast himself in the role of “the hero in an epic poem that would be sung by a distant future generation.” If the account of a Belgrade newspaper is to be believed, even while in hiding, Karadzic couldn’t resist publicly reciting one such poem in which “he himself featured as the main hero, performing epic feats of extermination.” Karadzic is only one man, albeit a particularly vile specimen, but there have also been many others who, unable to find their footing in the ordinary world of anonymity, have transferred their ego onto the nation, attaching themselves to a glorious national destiny.

After all, Hemon notes, a stable physical environment also provides a stable psychological environment. According to psychoanalysis, the unconscious transfer of an intense emotion from its original object to another one is a common response to the destruction of home. In the case of the Yugoslav state, some Yugoslavs turned to their ethnic community and to the dream of establishing a homogenized nation-state. This sense of stability was necessary for them to cope with the trauma of war and displacement.
safe because there might be snipers. In the face of such instability some become war criminals. Why? I ask Hemon. Why, do some people turn to violence and nationalism? Whereas others do not? Is it random? Well, Hemon speculates, part of it can be explained by the fact that once you cross the line you keep going that way. In the face of a constant, daily sense of displacement, when the stable network of people is torn asunder, it’s hard to turn back. One of his long time friends surprised him with his volte face turn to Serbian nationalism: This is partly, Hemon reflects, because in times of catastrophe what seems a stable identity can fall apart. In the context of a literal, physical destruction—and the values linked to home—ethics may also become fluid. In other words, lacking the continuity of the physical space that constituted home, all continuities are torn asunder. In the case of Hemon’s childhood friend, the state of fragility that accompanied the disintegration of the known environment pushed him to turn to the nationalist project of creating a unified Serbian nation-state. His friend, Hemon says, ultimately couldn’t distinguish his own narrative from the national one.

But what, I wonder aloud, prevented Hemon from falling apart or from turning to nationalism? It’s a constant negotiation, Hemon explains, between the state and other narratives. Still, I press him, how did you land on your feet, avoid schizophrenia? I landed on English, he answers. In Europe the native tongue is axiomatic. English didn’t displace Bosnian Serbo-Croatian. It did provide me with a sort of anchor, though.

All Roads Lead Home?

Hemon’s prose offers an appealing mixture of serious introspection interspersed with moments of banal absurdity. Rambling, alcoholic priests, intensively sincere but naive young environmental activists, violent poets, and megalomaniacal macho outsiders, his insecure but sympathetic antiheroes, blunder and stumble their way through America, inspiring self-reflection. Part of the drive to read fiction is to overcome a sense of isolation, to discover connections with people and places with whom we otherwise would never come into contact. When I read Hemon in particular, I am always tempted to weave my own story into his novels and short stories, finding points of identification with his fictional creations. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that during our conversation, when Hemon begins describing his return home to Sarajevo, my thoughts immediately turn to my own return home after a period of extended absence.

Unlike Hemon, I reflect, when I returned home to Southern California for a visit in the late 1990s, I wasn’t looking for the movie theater. The Mann Six Theaters, though it had grown to the Mann Ten, was still there. (It has since closed.) But where, I wanted to know, had the kale and cornfields gone? The rows of Tapaia Brothers corn and the sickly sweet, slightly putrid stench of kale were endemic to my memories of my desert home in the far reaches of Los Angeles County. When I left for the first time in 1992 it was to study in Hawaii. I never lived there again, instead moving ever further away to such places as Provo (Utah), Athens (Georgia), New York, Seoul, Seattle, Prague, and Berlin. During my studies and travels abroad my hometown underwent an intensive campaign of urbanization and gentrification. Local civic authorities courted developers and wealthy white professionals, resulting in the decimation of nearly all of the elements that made home familiar. In the place of the corn and kale fields, a large, groomed park and baseball diamond now stood, with the aspirational name of “Central Park.” Newly planted trees and strip malls lined the former dust-and-tumbleweed main road, Bouquet Canyon Road. Scores of SUVs clogged Bouquet’s once quiet two-lanes, which now led not only to the freeway entrance but to a recently opened, and very successful, mall with an indoor carousel over which hung a mural of orange groves populated by smiling white and brown faces, wearing beatific expressions of joy to match their Sunday best.

In my case, the destruction of the physical environment that constituted home and its swift replacement with new structures, made my attempt at self-reinvention possible, or even conceivable. The absence of continuity is part of what made my self-reinvention possible. Other ruptures also severed my ties to home and my childhood self. My mother’s untimely death when I was on the cusp of puberty and
my entire family’s eventual abandonment of the religion of my childhood—Mormonism—for reasons intellectual and personal, all found their metaphoric extension in the sudden and dramatic transformation of my hometown. The destruction of the known, however, pushed me to explore new narratives and to reconstruct the ones of my past. In other words, with the environment that created me torn asunder by bulldozers and death, I was in a sense freed up to reconstruct my personal narrative, my links to larger ones, and to indulge the myth that I could ex nihilo create and follow my own path.

Even though I was born in California, I abandoned my hometown, my Mormon roots, and my national identity, and sought to reestablish myself in connection with a cosmopolitan elite, the wandering bourgeoisie, in search of experience and cultural capital. I studied and scrubbed toilets in Hawaii, cleaned houses and sold books in Seattle, taught English in Asia, backpacked in Europe, volunteered in France and Italy, studied Czech and babysat in Prague, learned German, conducted research, and gave birth in Berlin… The wheel of self-reinvention, and the drive to move, went on and on.

The wheels of self-reinvention can spin too fast, though. With the accelerated pace of moving in my early thirties and the complete exhaustion of my financial resources, things began to move so fast for me that they felt out of control. The birth of my son and a gradual but firm embrace of motherhood finally anchored me to one place. Pragmatism supplanted the fanciful. The stark reality that I was my son’s sole economic provider and source of stability killed my wanderlust and averted my gaze from dreams of artistic and intellectual greatness. My life became defined by the more earth bound, immediate goal of ensuring that my son had, quite literally, a place to call home.

If there is a reason I misunderstood Hemon as preoccupied with exile, not displacement, perhaps that’s because I projected my own experience onto his work. It was me, not Hemon’s characters, who had adopted the state of exile as a lifestyle, who had unconsciously sought to become a part of the noble class of great intellectuals and writers who had distanced themselves from their places of birth, and countries of origin. In my naive snobbery, I identified Americans as plebes from whom I wanted to separate myself. Thus, instead of recognizing the actual gulf that separated myself from Hemon’s fictional creations, who did not choose to escape, but were forced to leave home by war or persecution, I read Hemon’s work with a superficial eagerness to find links of identification.

The ongoing, internal, exchange with Hemon and his characters reminds one that home is more than a merely imagined space. It is also a physical reality. Over the course of the past century the relentless pace of war and modernization have permanently altered the physical environment, amplifying the separation between the past and present, between the longed for home and the reality of displacement. The resulting environmental damage goes beyond endangered animals, carbon footprints, and oil spills. It extends to the psychic level, creating a new community of the rudderless in search of a home to which they can never return.

Our conversation coming to an end—Hemon has already missed the first showing of the movie to which he had hoped to take his family—Hemon gamely turns to me. Oh, you’ve got to hear this song, he says, handing me his iPod. (Hemon is known for writing with punk rock playing in the background.) I put the earphone up to my ear and hear—of all things!—the British band Gang of Four shouting, “At home he feels like a tourist…” I’ve listened to the song many times since. I still don’t know what the lyrics mean. Yet, every time I play it I end up shouting along with the chorus, singing in unison with my imagined cohort—with Hemon, with Pronek, Brik, and Joyce—“at home I feel like a tourist.” Perhaps you might like to crack open a novel by Hemon and sing along too.

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