MODERNISM AND THE MALE WORLD: THE CRISIS OF MASCULINITY IN *THE BED OF PROCUSTES*

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"And still they come and go: and this is all I know –
That from the gloom I watch an endless picture-show."
Siegfried Sasoon, "Picture-Show"

Abstract

Camil Petrescu's novel The Bed of Procustes *is emblematic of the century's sexual anxiety and anesthesia and of the uninhabitable, fractured landscape that evokes a Procustean bed. The novel's parallel storylines animate male homosocial desire, a crisis of masculinity, and an acute dissociation of sensibility, akin to the "hysteric" disposition of T. S. Eliot's poetry and corresponding to his broodings in the famous essay praising the Metaphysical poets. In Petrescu's novel, the two male protagonists – a poet, whose cultural and personal anxieties both embody and perform male hysteria, and his modernist double, whose own sexual anxiety forges an hysteric identification with the poet that transcends male homosocial bonding – reflect modern man's aesthetic and cultural detachment and disembodiment that The Bed of Procustes, following Baudelaire, Pound, and Eliot, ultimately delineates.*

Key words: modernism, homosociality, masculinity, hysteric, disembodiment, castration

Published in 1933, Camil Petrescu's second novel, *The Bed of Procrustes*, is considered his masterpiece. With its highly unconventional style that merges narrative consciousness and traditional dialogue, it offers both an

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extension of the Proustian novelistic technique and a new modernist fiction in the Romanian literature of the interwar period[2]

From the start, the author-narrator recommends himself as a simple go-between whose role is to put the readers in direct contact with the novel's characters – two pairs of lovers who narrate their lives either directly or through their disembodied voices echoed in their journals or private correspondences. Thus, although the journal and letter writing are a logical extension of the nineteenth-century novel's implicit promise of intimacy, as representations of consciousness they operate in *The Bed of Procrustes* beyond traditional novelistic depiction by simulating a perfect knowledge of other minds without recourse to speech and by simultaneously appropriating and abandoning the distinction between narrative and dialogue, interiority and exteriority.

The novel's first three chapters contain the letters of a strange Mrs. T. to the nameless narrator, who had previously suggested to her that she should write down her interesting life. The bulk of the book includes the diary of young Fred Vasilescu, a dashing man-about-town, pilot, and wealthy heir to one of the country's greatest fortunes. The narrator encouraged him, too, to put in writing his various exploits as a trendsetter on the party circuit of an elegant 1930s Bucharest and his secret, consuming love for Mrs. T. The novel concludes with "Epilogue I," recounted by Fred Vasilescu, and "Epilogue II," written by the author-narrator, who gives a final account of Fred's death.

Beyond detailing his two-year relationship with Mrs. T. and the subsequent two years, when he continued to love her mostly from a self-imposed distance in spite – or maybe because – of her great love for him, Fred's diary also focuses on a particular afternoon spent in the bedroom of a quasi-prostitute and sometime actress named Emilia Răchitaru. It is here that Fred sees the letters she received from George Demetru Ladima, a journalist and poet friend of Fred, who had committed suicide four months prior to the time when Fred visits Emilia. Feigning indifference for the letters in order to deceive the unsuspecting Emilia, who thinks that she is entertaining her late afternoon lover, Fred is shocked to discover upon reading them Ladima's love for this vulgar and crude woman.

[2] Space will not allow me to enumerate the great number of short, disparate articles from literary journals and newspapers that mention Camil Petrescu's indebtedness to Proust. As a synthesis of such views, mention needs to be made however of the respected critic Paul Georgescu's lengthy analysis in two essays, "Frumuseţea adevărului" (The Beauty of Truth) and "Clasicismul creator" (Creative Classicism), both included in his critical volume Printre cărţi (Among books). (Bucureşti: Editura Eminescu, 1973), 86-92, 93-99. After discussing the numerous similarities between the two novelists, Georgescu's commentary emphasizes the different scope of Petrescu's novel, which, unlike the Proustian narratives, dramatizes first and foremost a panoramic view of the Romanian society between the two wars.

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Fred's reading of Ladima's letters allows for side commentaries and insertion of stories that, while occasionally connected to Fred's own life and interactions with Mrs. T., expand primarily on the dead poet's thoughts, feelings, and epistolary accounts of his professional hardships and unwillingness to compromise his journalistic and social idealism in order to adapt to bourgeois (Procustean) conformity and political compromise. The well-synchronized episodes, which merge Ladima's stories told in his letters to Emilia with events Fred remembers and recounts while reading Ladima's letters in Emilia's bedroom, offer an ingeniously constructed narrative.

In modernist fashion, it enacts the parallel actions of the two couples, Fred/Mrs. T. and Ladima/Emilia, and counterpoises them within the shifting terms of compulsory heterosexuality. As *The Bed of Procrustes* makes clear, in the twentieth-century Romanian society women had ultimate importance in the schema of man's gender construction, representing an absolute not only of exchange value, but also of being the ultimate victims of the painful contradictions in the gender system that regulates men and the male world.

In the novel's world, the two women appear to stand poised waiting for the men to separate themselves outside the feminine sphere and outside the women's lot. An especially incisive commentator, Fred appears as the socially empowered voice of a higher patriarchal utterance – so very high that it gives him throughout the narrative concrete and potent leverage over mere women. More importantly, his patriarchy is not just a monolithic mechanism for subordinating the female to the male; it is a web of valences and significations that commands women's surrender while asserting the intense and potent male patriarchal bonds and relations that regard women as a subaltern gender. Thus, in the novel's male-centered society, Fred's conception of women's role is integrated within the limits of homosociality, a term Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick designates as "the social bond between persons of the same sex; […] a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual' […] applied to such activities as 'male bonding.'"[3]

Filtered through Fred's eyes, Emilia and Mrs. T. are antagonistic types in relation both to their own sexuality and to male homosocial desire (or man's yearning for male bonding). Conducting his analysis of women as a form of male empowerment that concomitantly uncovers most assiduously the bond between the male protagonists, Fred considers Emilia, for instance, "like a tool that conducts electricity badly or gives you the impression of a discharged battery, because it was initially damaged"; with similar condescendence, he

[3] *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, p.1.

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finds "Mrs. T. seems full of life, which makes her excessively sexual, even in the gestures that are inertial in other women (like laying a napkin on a small table when writing a letter; watching the tram leave)" [245][4]. In the obligatory conservation of gendered roles and of male ascendancy, Fred's views gravitate in both instances around the woman's sexuality, which is meaningful in the novel chiefly within the context of woman representing symbolic goods between men. In those terms, vulgar femininity on display belongs to Emilia, the would-be actress and occasional prostitute, and reticent femininity is associated with Mrs. T. If the coarse and vulgar Emilia sells her body and has no goals beyond wishing to be distributed in a good role on stage, Mrs. T. is a model of beauty and refinement. Devoting her time to the shop where she works as a high-end interior designer, Mrs. T. feels liberated from patriarchal control and indulges in the thought that her job is the source of her self-reliance and power. "This job," she tells Fred, "is my self-reliance, the money I earn gives me the right to be myself, to buy nice books and things, not to be offended by the landlord and be kept safe from indecent proposals" (185). But such self-empowering thoughts cannot enhance the status of women like Mrs. T. within a prohibitive continuum structure of men-promoting-men. In the novel's male-dominated world, the schema of female sexuality, whether it be that of the virtuous or the whore, requires the banishment of the woman, in an affair between men in which the woman's role is intensely moralized and her treatment condescending at best.

In contrast with the two women, Fred and Ladima appear closely tied beyond the categorization of "patriarchy" as mechanisms of the enduring inequality of power between women and men. To the narrative schism within femininity itself that Emilia and Mrs. T. represent, Fred and Ladima appear as malleable and transitive bodies and sensibilities, mutating into both passive and active roles and an elaborate doubling and reversal of identities. Even though Fred has known Ladima only for the four years prior to the narrative present, their encounters during that period touch on the salient points of their entire lives. Further, no matter how different Ladima's reclusive spirit may appear next to Fred's mundane pursuits, such differences are predicated on fundamental similarities. For even though Fred is highly social, a loyal friend and ardent conversationalist who commands devoted friendships, those who know him well recognize his essential solitariness because of "some loyalty and delicacy, a sort of sincerity of life (56)" that also define Ladima's character.

In reading Ladima's letters while simultaneously listening to Emilia's stories, Fred discovers that he shares with the dead poet a symmetrical

[4] All citations are from *The Bed of Procustes*, trans. Ileana Alexandra Orlich, (Bucharest: Editura Fundaţia Camil Petrescu, 2008). [Since the Romanian version of "Procrustes" is "Procust" I decided to leave the form Procustes in my translation.]

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articulation of man's dependence on patriarchal heterosexuality as a sensitive register for making intelligible the play of desire and self-identification by which men negotiate their social and gender identity – an aspect Fred addresses unequivocally when he states that "for about two years now I've been feeling the need to always be seen with one woman or another" (79).

Concerning such issues, Emilia's interventions, which are inserted between the readings to provide additional information or clarify the content of Ladima's letters, serve two important purposes. First, they make warranted and explicit Ladima's jealousy and his threatened masculinity caused by his accurate perceptions of her numerous betrayals. Second, through Fred's perceptions of an alarming scarcity of love that Emilia can offer, they reveal indirectly both the mechanisms by which gender inequality is structured and the leap from the relation of heterosexual to male homosocial bonds. Specifically, since Emilia's sexual manipulations are her primary strategy for economic survival, Fred insinuates with apparently timeless authority the process by which, in the schema of female sexuality, woman and whore beget each other, taking their shape from the social dictates of gender difference. Further, since Fred visits Emilia to satisfy his natural quota of sexual discharge, sexuality is a highly charged signifier for differentials of power in which women, split between the virginal and the whorish, submit to men within the context of circulation and exchange, prompting them to seek bonds of higher order and substance with other men.

With Fred enacting his double part as an investigative observer of the relationship between Ladima and Emilia and of his own relationship with Mrs. T., the couples' parallel stories draw on the complementary figures of the four lovers while building up a combination of tension and mystery, a "superior detective emotion"[5] haunting the lovers' lives and deaths. Ladima commits suicide after learning the truth about Emilia and her sexual dalliances, and, after rejecting all pleas of being reunited with Mrs. T., Fred dies in a plane crash that has all the indications of a possible suicide.

For many years, I took Camil Petrescu at face value. As my analysis demonstrates, I have done straightforward readings of his characters and concentrated almost exclusively on homosociality without picking up on the warnings about missing the obvious with which *The Bed of Procrustes* is shot through in the case of the two male protagonists: Ladima fantastically unable to see that Emilia is a paid escort to wealthy and socially influential men and Fred incredibly unwilling to allow for the comfort of Mrs. T.'s love for him. Since translating this novel, I have come to think that there is room in *The Bed of*

[5] George Călinescu, *Istoria Literaturii române* (*History of Romanian Literature*), trans. Leon Levițchi, Milan: Unesco Nagard Publishers, 1988, p. 627.

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Procrustes for discussing not only the dictates of the male protagonists' homosocial bond, but also their ultimate inability or refusal to connect with women as a demonstration of a modernist crisis of masculinity – a crisis both willed and tragic.

Further, if it is true in this novel that both female characters, Emilia and Mrs. T., exist in some meaningful relation to the role of 'lady,' their signifying relation with the two male characters grows more tortuous, adding another Procustean dimension to the men's stories.

Since Mrs. T. is a woman as she is a lady, and since Emilia is a woman not in relation to her own desired role of 'lady,' but only negatively, in a compensatory relation to Mrs. T., what is clear is the centrality of sexuality in the novel and of sex as an especially charged intersection for the exchange of meanings between sexes.

From such a perspective, and keeping in mind even a summary account of the novel's plot, *The Bed of Procrustes* strikingly echoes the efforts of modernists like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot to solidify the male's intellectual and sexual anxiety over the "fermenting chaos" or the unruly corporeal, often coded as the feminine. Pound explicitly formulates creativity as "the phallus or spermatozoid charging head-on the female chaos,"[6] while Eliot, somewhat less overtly, complains that Hamlet lacks an "objective correlative" and suffers from "the stuff that the writer could not drag to light."[7] In discussing both Ladima and Fred in their relations to Emilia and Mrs. T., this "stuff" is linked, as I propose to show, to an anxiety and crisis of masculinity (or male hysteria) that found their way in *The Bed of Procrustes* after being drawn from the two favorite sons of literary high modernism, Pound and Eliot, with whom Camil Petrescu was well acquainted from his engagement with the world of theatre and the literati[8].

Grafted into the narrative much like Eliot's catalogued typology of women in *The Waste Land*[9], the two women, Emilia and Mrs. T., stand for bad and good, respectively, womanhood. The choice of sexuality as a thematic

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[6] Remy de Gourmont, *Natural Philosophy of Love*, trans. with a postscript by Ezra Pound, New York: privately printed for Rarity Press, 1931,p.169.

[7] T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," in *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1998, p. 58.

[8] As Director of the National Theatre in Bucharest, Camil Petrescu was very engaged in the cultural scene, which was heavily influenced by Western art and literature. In 1947, he became a member of the Romanian Academy, a status that acknowledged at the highest level his involvement in Romania's cultural dialogue with the West.

[9] Eliot's portraits of women, which suffered great changes after Ezra Pound's cuts in Eliot's manuscripts, include such "types" as the "plain simple bitch" and the "strolling slattern in a tawdry gown." For a detailed list, see T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, ed. Valerie Eliot, London: Faber and Faber, 1971, p. 27.

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emphasis for my discussion brings into salient focus at this point the degraded sex scene between Fred and Emilia, on which most of the narrative is centered. Carried out in Emilia's bedroom, this scene, which also functions as the novel's primary setting, is highly reminiscent of the carbuncular clerk and the typist's sordid encounter in the "violet hour" of *The Waste Land*. For although different in form from the poem, *The Bed of Procrustes* dramatizes, as the poem does, the protagonists' experiences of sexual repression projected against an urban, decayed background and complicated by the pairing of unlikely lovers whose stories, feelings, and confessions trigger dislocated desire and sexual anxiety.

The evolution of male hysteria into a pronounced and even commonplace condition coincided with an array of historical and cultural shifts, of which the most well-documented event in undoing social, gender, and sexual categories was the mass destruction of the First World War. Adding to the symptoms of "shell-shock" and of the "war neurotic" Freud articulates in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write that "the unmanning terrors of combat lead not just to a generalized sexual anxiety but also to an anger directed specifically against the female."[10] Beyond the mass destruction reverberating with a dissentegration or dissociation of body and soul, women appear as emblems of sexuality gone awry. Either as violated ingénues or neurasthenic vamps, women are demonized through mid-century modernism for their newly acquired liberties and targeted for the modern male's wounding, or even castration.

Like Eliot and Pound, who did not participate directly in war, Camil Petrescu was highly conscious of the male body's fragility and its potential resemblance to the female hysteric, replicated outside the trenches as the less easily definable traumas of social angst. His first novel, *Last Night of Love, First Night of War* (1930), dealt primarily with the specter of sexual anxiety, the trauma men exhibit after serving in battle, and their overtly feminine response to shock translated into a crisis of masculinity. Petrescu's second novel, *The Bed of Procrustes*, develops its characters' threatened masculinity by complicating their social and cultural circumstances and affective engagements and by delving further into the mechanisms and paradigms of masculinity in crisis.

Maximizing the veneer of respectability she possesses, Emilia secures Ladima's love by calculatingly lying about her scandalous and publicly-known sexual encounters. Located primarily at the crossroads of Emilia's observations and Fred's readings of Ladima's own letters to Emilia, Ladima's character and sensibility are framed in Fred's consummate narrative. Its calculated

[10] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 2., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, p. 260.

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cleverness stirs deep compassion for the betrayed and tormented Ladima and contempt for the promiscuous Emilia. Looking in one of Emilia's drawers at a photograph attached to a pile of letters tied with ribbon, Fred talks about Ladima's tall and thin looks, with round eyes and large, deep sockets… with a sergeant-major's moustache and a hairdresser's parting, with his black alpaca jacket and white shirt, the collar always too wide, starched, with big round cuffs, like rain pipes, pinned with pink cufflinks onto the shirt, while the other cufflinks were small sticks, of course in gold – who knows what souvenir… He would have had a beautiful head, if he hadn't been so old-fashioned… I don't think he was more than 35-40 years old. (90)

Ladima's unhappiness is in the first place about Emilia's depravity, i.e., her numerous erotic encounters that divide her ever more from Ladima's purity and devotion. His most piercing emotion seems attached to jealousy and to the subsequent suppression or concealment of sexual desire bound to turn Ladima into a disabled man, split between erotic servitude to Emilia and an incorruptible political and artistic engagement that makes him feared by the establishment (the corrupt political scene of Nae Gheorghidiu and his friend, the wealthy Tănase Vasilescu, Fred's father) and highly respected as a gifted poet and director of the prestigious journal *Veacul* (*The Century*).

Ladima's naiveté regarding Emilia reveals a pattern of refusals, suspending rather than negating the possibility of being duped and producing an unlimited – because undefined – psychological potential, which is far from ascetic, prudish, or transparent. Although he is not, as the literary critics of Communist Romania considered him, the exploited artist destroyed by the pressures of capitalism and material deprivation[11], Ladima exemplifies a passing away of a certain type of artistic sensibility. His penchant for chivalric posturing (he risks his life to defend Mrs. T. from an insanely jealous Fred), lengthy and passionate letters, and lyrical expression, which once connected an individual with tradition, seem to be facing the endless vertigo of modernity, while his journal writing (an alien usurper of storytelling) is an indication of his sustained effort to cope with the abbreviated nature of modern life. But this gradual atrophy of narrative and lyric form required in an age cut short by the shift to information can only partially justify Ladima's isolation and lack of

[11] Once again, space will not allow me to mention the numerous names of critics who regarded Ladima as a victim of capitalism, a latter-day Bartleby of the journalistic world. Chief among such views is Sorin Arghir's commentary in his "Preface" to the Year Edition of Patul lui Procust, (Bucureşti: Editura de Stat pentru Literatură şi Artă, 1957) Arghir writes: "Prin Ladima, Camil Petrescu înfăţişează, de fapt, tipul proletarului intellectual, prezintă condiţia de viaţă a acestuia în societatea burgheză." (Through Ladima's character, Camil Petrescu portrays, in fact, the intellectual, proletarian type, presents his [the intellectual's] living conditions in a bourgeois society.) (my translation)

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connection to his social circumstances, especially since he continues to be highly regarded as a poet and feared as a journalist with a poisonous pen.

The profound significance of Ladima's inwardness and of his involvement with Emilia is best captured in Rimbaud's verse that Ladima himself, painfully aware of his condition, writes to Emilia in one of his last letters: "Des serpents géants dévorés par des punaises" (274)[12]As each of Ladima's letters addressed to Emilia that Fred reads is almost always followed by Emilia's vulgar commentary, Ladima's disembodied voice reverberates as that of the ideal poet constructed in Eliot's theory of "dissociation of sensibility" and of a spectral Fisher-King whose sexual anxieties are coincident with Ladima's personal experiences of sexual repression. Focused on journalistic writing and his own poetry, Ladima has only once been involved sexually with Emilia and stubbornly saves their intimacy for a muffled and distant future of married bliss. Further, Ladima's sudden and impervious infatuation with Emilia on the one hand, and his social prominence on the other, reveal Ladima's double personality – a split pointing to the "hysteric" relationship between mind and body that represents a dominant version of the crisis of masculinity in modernism.

According to Eliot, a "dissociation" or split between intellect and emotion, a "disparity between idea and image," reflects a "progressive deterioration of poetry since the thirteenth century."[13] In his essay on Milton, Eliot broods: "In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered."[14] Such literary dissociation, which according to Eliot energizes innovation of the modern lyric, explains Ladima's superior creativity, which even his detractors are forced to acknowledge. A prolific and talented poet, Ladima is the very embodiment of what Eliot hails when he proclaims the dissociated subject as the ideal poet: "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates."[15] Inserted in the letters to Emilia, Ladima's verses provide an imaginary space where he articulates his brooding and anxieties over personal experiences. Hinging not upon his erotic desire for Emilia but upon the impossibility of his sexual self-identification through her, Ladima is an off-screen spectator who sees but refuses to accept Emilia's promiscuity while seeking refuge in his regenerative verse. Detaching physical engagement from his consciousness, Ladima forges a hysterical identification with Emilia

[12] Huge snakes devoured by bed bugs.

[13] T.S.Eliot, "Lecture I: Toward a Definition of Metaphysical Poetry," *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard, New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993, p. 227.

[14] T.S.Eliot, "Milton II." Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot, ed. Frank Kermode, New York: Harcourt Trade, 1975, p. 266.

[15] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent,", *The Sacred Wood*, p.31.

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through a systematic corporeal self-mutilation and passive participation in his own sexual fantasy involving Emilia and their relationship of love.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from Emilia's vulgarity and cheap sexuality, Mrs. T. is the epitome of elegance and grace. Her strong sexual desire and erotic encounters with Fred speak of a woman trapped in the cage of her own passion. But her satisfaction of being understood is tainted because Fred, the man she desperately loves, does not wish to stoop to self-exposure. There is, in Fred's reticence and even in Mrs. T.'s behavior, a certain vacillation between two lovers' communication with each other and an entrenched cynicism about the dishonesty of social signification. They always meet in remote locations in the country to secure and protect the secrecy of their relationship from Bucharest's high society, in which both of them are highly visible personages. Swinging between a Romantic belief in psychological interiority and a Realist attention to the social significance of a couple, the relationship between Fred and Mrs. T evinces the characters' conflicted psychological selves that wish to be utterly transparent and yet resent the suggestion that their secrets are legible.

As Mrs. T. cannot ultimately fulfill her lover's fantasy of silent communication and his attempt to reconcile the surface/depth dimension of his life, Fred appears broken and amputated emotionally like someone who both dissects and mutilates his own flesh. His feelings toward Mrs. T. reveal an acute discomfort with her body and a particular resistance to female corporeality that hinge upon his identification with hysteria. More often than not, Fred's reflections on Mrs. T., and especially his fragmented close-ups of Emilia half naked in her room, echo Eliot's portraits of women and the great poet's own discomforts with female corporeality fractured into multiple women in both *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*. As in the two poems, *The Bed of Procrustes*'s thin plot pivots upon the tropes of sexual anesthesia and castration enacted by both Fred's and Ladima's characters.

While visiting Emilia, Fred acts and comports himself much like Prufrock when he confesses his essential fear and dissociation of women and shows his hysterical symptoms to be both etched upon his body's surface and projected elsewhere: "I've never been married, I haven't even lived with a woman, and any woman that's ever undressed simply, for me, made me hold everything inside, astonished, the way one's breathing is held when waiting for something to happen" (44). Like Prufrock, who is afraid to drown in the sensuality of the alluring mermaids "in the chambers of the sea," Fred is afraid of Mrs. T.'s love even though he spies on her every move while letting his friends mock her for pursuing him. For much like Ladima's repudiation of his sexual needs and his glaring self-deception that perpetuate his excruciating pain, Fred's refusal to accept openly the real object of his desire (whether

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involving casual sex or particularly the obsession with Mrs. T.), gives the most haunting portrait of the two men's essential loneliness, the longing or "stuff" that they could not fully articulate even to themselves. This "stuff," which even the writer could not drag explicitly to light, schematizes the two male characters' crisis of masculinity, or the male hysteria, which *The Bed of Procrustes* ultimately delineates.

As a modern hysteric, Ladima corresponds to several of the type's characteristics enunciated in Pierre Janet's *Psychological Automatism* (1889) and *Mental State of Hysterics* (1892). According to Janet, the hysteric was a victim of "dissociation of personality" suffering from "mental disaggregation" and "psychic weakness."[16] Whenever Emilia entertains her callers, Ladima plays cards in the room next door with her sister and, whenever Emilia is away from home with one of her many clients, he assumes that she is in her native town of Buzău to oversee family affairs. Even when he has occasional outbursts of jealous rage, Ladima ends up crawling back to Emilia and begging for her forgiveness, thereby showing all the signs of an "unassimilated second self, independent of our known one."[17] By clinging to Emilia's promiscuity as cover for his castration, Ladima acts like a prototypical modern hysteric, whose body is neither fully under the control of consciousness nor entirely accountable by psychological discourse. His dissociated "second self" gravitates in exclusively mechanical ways toward Emilia, whom he sees, in spite of all evidence pointing to the contrary, as an image of innocence and femininity, wronged by critics and jealous colleagues who refuse to admire her great talent as an actress.

Precisely because the possibility of loving a woman like Emilia is socially improbable, Fred is shocked to learn of Ladima's letters to her. As he cringes at Emilia's touches and panics at the thought of being found naked in her room by Emilia's sister, Valeria, whose voice he can hear on the other side of the door, Fred is actually projecting the habitual way in which he always retreats fearfully behind his circumspection from even the most tacit or intimate offers (notably Mrs. T.'s) to bridge the distance between himself and others. As an inactive lover following Emilia's body and movements whenever she hands him the letters or brings him coffee, Fred crafts himself into a disembodied observer enacting on an immediate level Baudelaire's dandy poet/spectator conceived as "a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness."[18] Akin to Baudelaire's gaze in his paradigmatic poem "To a Red-Haired Beggar Girl," Fred's camera eye objectifies Emilia's female body so that he himself

[16] Quoted in Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. Vol. I, Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, Publishers, 1913, p.219.

[17] ibid.

[18] Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life, " *Les Fleurs du Mal*, trans. C. F. MacIntyre, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947, p.105.

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can become what Pound, following Baudelaire, crafts: a spectator that is simultaneously a sexual agent ("enacting the copulation of images" [of Emilia's body]) and a disembodied observer[19]. Impelled by an intoxicating personal identification with Ladima while reading the poet's letters, Fred also offers himself as "a contrasting disembodiment"[20] while lying in Emilia's bed.

Thus, although Fred visits Emilia on a sexual quest, he seems to extend his body through projection and displacement into a state of intense revulsion whenever she touches him. Fred's alienated body, which seems controlled by another master, performs the "dissociation of sensibility" that structures many modernist works and that here, in Fred's case, underscores the male hysteric's paradoxical attraction to and disavowal of the corporeal by enacting the copulation of the juxtaposed images of Emilia's body for Fred as the disembodied observer. Sitting "dryly" on her bed, Fred observes Emilia undressing in silence:

> "Her arms stretched, she lifts her coffee-coloured dress over her head, then her chemise, and she remains naked, with a full midriff, with soft and a little smoky skin, only waiting for the body to bend, to become thick lines. Her breasts are held, like those of a dancer in a shell, in the black net cups of her brassiere (nets which remind me of those used by men to hold their hair in place). A blue belt presses a little into her stomach, and from its sides hang the garters that stretch her stockings. Framed between the belt and the two garters which descend on the inside of her thighs, there's a little blond flower on a little flesh cushion, an equilateral triangle because of the width of the young belly, the centre of her woman's magic. This undressing seems unbelievably precise, for me it's like a threshold stepped over, as I know how long the way here can sometimes be, and how uncertain. […] This strong white woman who sensed I like watching a naked woman, undoes her belt at the back, and it comes off with the entire apparatus of wide elastic bands, leaving the body naked, like the back of a young horse once its harness is off. The net caps on her breasts also come off. She sees me looking at her and asks surprised, the way you ask someone if they won't sit down, with big dull eyes, like stagnant green waters, "Won't you undress?" She is waiting, thrown on the wide, king size bed, a corner of its green cover aside, after she cautiously put a small towel under the pillow. I feel her a stranger in my arms, a separate body, maybe because I am a little obsessed with the thought that her sister in the kitchen may discover the evolution of this visit (although it's certain that's exactly why she won't barge in, that they have an understanding), but also because Emilia lends something programmatic to this fact which, under these circumstances deserves its dictionary name, i.e. it is an "act." (76-7)

Fred's fantasy of impersonating Ladima corresponds to another primary mechanism of hysterics – their capacity for identification. Although Freud sees

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[19] Fundamental to Pound's prototypic Imagist poem "In a Station of the Metro," the compressed images result from the copulation of two depictable images in a visual metamorphosis that gives birth to a disembodied observer.

[20] I am borrowing the term from Peter Nicholls, *Modernism: A Literary Guide*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995,p. 3.

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this identification with the hysterics as their ability to "express in their symptoms not only their own experiences but those of a large number of other people,"[21] more crucially hysteric identification is suggested in *The Bed of Procrustes* in the hypnotism that hysterics exert over other hysterics, and it roughly translates into a hypnotism rooted in the fear of having the same kind of experiences. Memorably, in the novel Fred meets and befriends Ladima when the latter stands up to Fred for insulting Mrs. T. out of a jealous rage that overcomes him when she is in the company of other men to whom she appears to be attracted. Manifested as a tension between interior impulses and exterior control in a situation that places sexuality at its center, Fred's reaction partakes on an immediate level of the valences of the male hysteric. Later on, when Emilia gives Fred Ladima's letters, Fred's reading both elicits and dramatizes projection through permeability, the way "exterior facts are continually transformed into interior elements and psychic events are exteriorized."[22] In this way, the information conveyed from Ladima's letters is not only an accumulation of homosocial desire, but also appears to be continually transformed into Fred's own interiority, which is in turn exteriorized as his own psychic outcome.

Thus, Fred's hypnotic attraction to Ladima's letters is not only an expression of his hysteric capacity for "identification," but also reflects an unconscious tendency to inversion by which Fred fears, on an immediate level, that he too, not unlike Ladima, could be duped by a very stylish and much admired Mrs. T. By projecting his fears and hysteric identification with Ladima while in Emilia's room, Fred is overcome by a state of torpor. Passive and unable to move, he is disaggregated like Eliot's Prufrock, who has been alternately attracted to a montage of "arms, braceleted and white" and taken aback by a compulsive close-up of them "downed with light brown hair."[23] Staging Fred in a situation similar with Prufrock's, *The Bed of Procrustes* makes tangible once again the male hysteric's fear of identification with the female body. As Emilia attempts to smile and draw close to him, Fred takes pains to push her back and to create a desired distance from her:

> "I smile gratuitously and coldly. She comes near me deceived by my smile and I feel her warm as a meal, her breath too heavy, her face too shiny from perspiration, and when she presses against me her skin is stuck to mine, so that any movement is like skinning. Disgusted, I avoid her attempt to kiss me."(79)

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[21] Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," (1900), in T*he Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* 4, p.149.

[22] Lotte H Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves, London: Thames and Hudson, 1969, p.15.

[23] T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* 1909-1950, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958, p.19. (Hereafter cited as CPP)

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Spurred by the scapegoating of female sexuality, Fred's unconscious tendency to provoke unexpected identifications merges a fragmented Emilia into all women, as in *The Waste Land* in whose note about the "spectator" Tiresias Eliot claims as well that "all the women are one woman." Here is Fred, in Emilia's room, invoking corporeal mutilation and psychic shock caused not only by the woman thrown on the bed, but also by all women:

> "I feel like waking up from a chaotic slumber… It feels like the link connecting me to this woman was interrupted and I become amorphous once again. It's all over. The former thought was associated with others, at the same time enhanced with blurring, subconscious plunges which were all designed to get this woman to bed… But now everything gets connected, within me, with smelly leeks; black bruised withered skin. Just like Emilia managed to become unique a moment ago, all women, are now just like the woman downstairs." (206)

Although the invocation of women representing the male characters' anxiety over fleshiness in *The Bed of Procrustes* is limited to Emilia and Mrs. T., who cannot measure up to the female chorus of women in *The Waste Land*, from the Philomel to mad Ophelia, the pub room Lil, or the typist, they are etched into the narrative and, in their own way replicate Eliot's personages. The hyacinth-girl, who elicits and manifests the most sensualized response in *The Waste Land* ("Your arms are full, and your hair wet/ I could not speak") and who potentially encapsulates and supercedes her own gender, is, like Mrs. T., the only mediator of male desire present in the poem as in the novel. Precisely because he feels attracted to her, Fred acts out a refusal to acknowledge openly his love for her or to admit his anxiety and insecurity toward a woman like Mrs. T., whose sexual freedom and financial independence secured through her job place her outside the patriarchal realm and Fred's control. Reduced to silence and forbidden to speak to or about Fred, Mrs. T. is also a Philomel. With her tongue symbolically cut out, so that she is "beyond speech," Mrs. T. claims one of the novel's most powerful images that relate to male hysterics' response and reaction to female affection.

Although *The Bed of Procrustes* does not foreground the apocalyptic vision of a female chorus featured in *The Waste Land*, the novel details like the poem wide-angle views of Emilia's bed, body, undergarments, and toiletries – "on her dressing table in front of the mirror …, next to the mascara brush, the tweezers, the shaving machine, the little blush box, a bottle of "Origan Coty" and the toilet water, all lined up" (87). Even her behavior is reflective of several of the female characters in Eliot's poem. During the afternoon spent with Fred, Emilia echoes both the hyacinth girl and Maria in *The Waste Land* as "she waves her hand in front of [his] eyes, like chasing a bee, as if she wanted to shred, physically, the canvass of [his] thoughts [before asking the absent

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minded Fred] 'What are you thinking about?''' (79). Her bed, where she receives her lovers, echo the typist's "divan…(at night her bed) [piled with] stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays" (CPP 45) catalogued in Eliot's poem. And, from Emilia's own stories, we may infer that her existence and mechanical sexual dalliances are patterned after the typist's modern, single life, which allows for the sex-scene that will unfold with the arrival of her "young man carbuncular" who "assaults" and "encounter(s) no defense." But although Emilia's body canvasses the novel engaged in assaults and surrenders that involve occasional lovers, there is definite suppression of corporeality in her encounters with Ladima. With his shabby clothes and genteel inclinations resistant to the rabble and rubble of the mundane scene, Ladima's passivity evokes a sexual anesthesia reminiscent of the sexual wounding of the Fisher-King, glaring from the narrative in spite of Fred's skillful sexual plot built on Emilia's discredited body. Simultaneously hidden and omnipresent, much like the Fisher-King, Ladima is etched and constructed into the narrative as a castrated and vulnerable phantom. His only flickers of heroism appear consumed in futile encounters with the cultural establishment that lead to further isolation and "hysterical" enervation reverberating with a dissociation or disintegration between Ladima's body and mind.

Fred's desire to enter and configure Ladima's past from the letters addressed to Emilia not only binds him over to the dead poet, but it also recommends him as the primary authority in digging up and interpreting Ladima's life. In the process of this psychic excavation, Fred opens up and embarks upon identifying with Ladima. As if hypnotized by Ladima's ghost while reading the letters, Fred responds hysterically by beginning to inhabit a hybrid consciousness, which blurs the boundary between his own living body and the apparition that is Ladima's ghostly presence: "I smoke, deep in thought. My own life stirs in me, summoned like you summon a spirit, and I suppress it with difficulty and sadness. When Emilia tries to kiss me on the lips even though I never allowed her to do that, I start reading again" (100). Specifically, in the narrative context, as Fred and Ladima meet on shared grounds (Emilia's room) but never identically occupy it (their reactions to her are diametrically opposed), they merge into a familiar version of the modernist double, articulated between the hypnotized body (Fred) and that of the projected and repressed (Ladima).

Sacrificing and then sublimating his own person, Fred's undergoing process of depersonalization takes away the feeling of Fred's own existence. Submitting to this temporary depersonalization and denuded of energy, Fred's body becomes "the body etherized on a table," a condition that, akin to Eliot's "patient" in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,* produces his sexual anesthesia and promotes not only his resolute distancing from Mrs. T., but also

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engenders the in-between zone of his and Ladima's ghost-like bodies. Fred's continued inability to distance himself from identification with Ladima culminates in his radical separation from Mrs. T. and his subsequent suicide, which further enacts, as in Ladima's case, Fred's unsuccessful attempts to control the involuntary reflexes, dissociated bodies, and conditioned corporeality of male hysterics. The undepictable embodiment of both Ladima and Fred as modernism's male hysterics seems to belong to an uninhabitable landscape, a narrative Procrustes's bed that, like Tiresias's domain in *The Waste Land*, cuts into myths of cohesive embodiment and stable gender structures.

While both men's thoughts and emotions are made visible and tactile and their sex lives are deconstructed beyond the scope of male homosocial desire, their "hysterical" masculinity draws us toward the characters as tropes of our own psychological haziness and sexual uncertainties. As the novel's characters urge the reactions of its readers for clues about ourselves, our curiosity about the characters' private lives and sexual crises is really symptomatic of a Procustean anxiety about the authenticity of our own experiences.

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