RESEARCH PAPER

Jelena S P R E I C E R (University of Zagreb)
jspreice@ffzg.hr

THE UTOPIAN POTENTIAL IN HANNES STEIN'S NOVEL *DER KOMET* (2014)[1]

In his essay entitled "Future City", Fredric Jameson challenges the assumption that it would be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, by asserting that writing can be utilized to construe "feeble signals of time, of otherness, of change, of Utopia" (Jameson 2003: 76). One such signal emanates from the parahistoric novel *Der Komet* (2014) by Hannes Stein, a rare case of utopia in contemporary German literature, in which Franz Ferdinand not only survives his 1914 visit to Sarajevo, but also saves the Habsburg Monarchy from collapse, thus divesting the twentieth century of war and genocide, as well as of the exponential growth of the capitalist economy after WWII. However, Stein's Habsburg uchronia is fatally undermined not only by the imminent danger of apocalypse in the form of a comet plummeting towards the pacifist population of the modern-day Danube Monarchy, but also by the novel's dual structure, which precludes any possibility of historical otherness. Given the chasm at the very heart of this structure, the article addresses the question of whether the novel shows any utopian potential at all.

Key words: utopia, uchronia, Habsburg Monarchy, Hannes Stein

361

In the history of Western thought, the notion of utopia has most commonly been associated with Thomas More, who coined the term in 1516. However, as Fátima Vieira points out, this lexical neologism has a specific history: rather than designating an entirely new concept, More gave a name to a long tradition of thought, which "at its core [had] the desire for a better life" (Vieira 2010: 6), and whose history could be traced to writings by Plato.

The novelty of his approach was in its careful combination of classic and Christian traditions, with a "tension between the affirmation of a possibility and the negation of its fulfillment" (Vieira 2010: 6). In other words, at the heart of More's utopia is an irresolvable paradox that simultaneously constitutes its most salient feature: an acknowledgment of the essential need for a better society, as well as the possibility of social change on one hand and the unattainability of its perfection on the other. As such, utopia has become a concept of radical alterity that scholars in the field of utopian studies mainly analyze within three discursive realms. In his article "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited", Lyman Tower Sargent lists these as: utopian literature, intentional societies and utopian social theory (Sargent 1994: 4). Within the notion of utopian literature, Sargent differentiates the following genres: eutopia or positive utopia, dystopia or negative utopia, utopian satire, anti-utopia and critical utopia (Sargent 1994: 9). The thesis that utopian discourse is a three-layered structure is also endorsed by more recent utopian scholars such as Peter Fitting, who refers to them as the literary, communitarian and utopian social theory (Fitting 2009: 125).

But when it comes to defining the literary genre of utopia and its boundaries there is far less agreement, which is particularly evident in the differentiation between utopia and science fiction. Where Sargent classifies SF as a subgenre of utopian fiction (the others being: utopias, Cockaigne, the utopia of the mind, imaginary/extraordinary voyages, uchronia, Robinsonades, Gulliveriana, fairy tales, romance and oriental tales), Darko Suvin does the opposite in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*: he includes utopia in his discussion of SF "not for directly ideological reasons, but for formal ones" (Suvin 1979: viii). According to Suvin, the features of SF are: first, a "locus or dramatis personae […] radically or at least significantly different from the empirical times, places and characters of 'mimetic' or 'naturalist' fiction", and second, the reader's perception of the narrated world "as not impossible within the cognitive […] norms of the author's epoch" (Suvin 1979: viii). In addition, Suvin succinctly defines SF as "literature of cognitive estrangement" (Suvin 1979: 4), heavily relying on a term coined by Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky in the essay "Art, as Device" (1917) and further developed by Bertolt Brecht within the framework of his *epic theatre* (e.g. in the text *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, 1948). For Suvin to define SF as such, it needs to depart from a hypothesis on a narrative world different from the one empirically experienced by the author and his/her readership, and then describe this "strange newness, a novum" comprehensibly and in great detail.

In the third chapter of the aforementioned study, Suvin defines utopia within the genre of SF as "the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community" (Suvin 1979: 49). Here, once again, the notion of estrangement comes into play: "Utopia […] endeavors to illuminate men's relationships to other men and their surroundings by the basic device of a radically different location for the postulated novel human relations of its fable" (Suvin 1979: 53), whereby the reference to this difference can be either implicitly or explicitly expressed by the literary text itself. Hence it is not by willingly suspending one's disbelief and placing one's trust in the narrator for the length of the narration, but by actively perceiving the impossibility of the narrated world and its difference from empirical experience that utopian reading can come into being.

Nevertheless, readily embracing the impossibility of difference is not constitutive of all utopian discourse, especially not in the communitarian sense, in which Sargent defines utopia as an "intentional society": a small community with a set of deliberately explicit rules different from those of the mainstream social practice (Sargent 1994: 13). Worth mentioning in this respect are locally isolated utopian projects in smaller communities (e.g. the Oneida Community, Brook Farm or Nashoba in the US),[2] where groups of individuals try to put into practice alternative models of community. Finally, in the context of social theory, utopia is a discussion of the need for and development of the "idea of progress" (Fitting 2009: 125). Common to all three areas of utopian discourse is the notion of hope as formulated by Ernst Bloch, which revolves around the principle of "not yet" (Bloch 1996: 114–177): what is evoked is "an open system where nothing is static and where everything is in a constant process of formation" (Vieira 2010: 23), so that the very possibility of imagining radical alterity mitigates some of the negative effects of the social reality, and paves the way for possible change. This kind of optimism has often been reason enough for critics of utopian thought to dismiss it as a naïve project lacking political relevance. As Hrvoje Tutek points out in his article "Novel, Utopia, Nation: A History of Interdependence", "There is usually no place for its impossible demands in the rationalist pragmatism of liberal thought" (Tutek 2015: 424).

363

---

[2] For information about these utopian communities see Noyes Robertson 2014; Francis 1977; Sampson 2000.

As a "verbal construction", utopia has turned out to be a prolific literary genre whose productiveness has perhaps been surpassed only by its evil twin: dystopia. In analogy of the famous motto in Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*, we could say that happy societies are all alike, whereas every unhappy society is unhappy in its own way. This is particularly true in the case of post-WWII German novels, in which the utopian genre is rare at best. As Jameson argues in his study on utopia, in the 1960s and 70s one of the main reasons behind this was an ideological prejudice against utopia during the Cold War. In this situation of extreme polarization in public discourse, the vision of a perfect (or at least better) society was too readily equated with Stalinism, thus rendering utopia a "program which neglected human frailty and original sin, and betrayed a will to uniformity and the ideal purity of a perfect system that always had to be imposed by force on its imperfect and reluctant subjects" (Jameson 2005: xi). While Jameson's observation mainly addresses the reception and perception of utopia in political and theoretical discourse, a similar claim can be made about its production, especially in the context of German literature, which is additionally burdened by a historical responsibility to work through and partly atone for the Holocaust. In a climate of general skepticism about utopia, this article focuses on the specific conditions of German literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, especially after WWII, in order to examine whether the utopian promise is possible in such a context and, if so, to what extent. In so doing, the paper will focus primarily on German-American journalist Hannes Stein's novel *Der Komet* (2014), published in the year of the 100th anniversary of Franz Ferdinand's assassination in Sarajevo and the outbreak of the Great War.

But before turning our attention to Stein's novel, we should subject the utopian genre to closer scrutiny. If analyzed etymologically, the name of the genre yields a negation of spatiality, but not in concrete topographical terms. In the original Greek, utopia means "non-place" – a place secluded from the remainder of a civilization that has developed in a way so problematic that it inspires a phantasy of its radical counterpart. As Vieira shows, More ultimately decided against naming his island Nusquama (Latin for "in no place", "on no occasion"), because then "he would simply be denying the possibility of the existence of such a place" (Vieira 2010: 4). However, spatial seclusion aptly embodied in the form of an island also presupposes an exemption from history and its causalities, which would by virtue of preexisting conditions disable the implementation of social transformation. Notions of time and history are therefore as inexorable to the definition of

utopia as is its spatial indistinctiveness. Herbert Marcuse, among the thinkers from the German context who were affirmative towards the possibility of putting utopian concepts into practice, explains this as follows:

> The project of social transformation, however, can also be considered unfeasible because it contradicts certain scientifically established laws, biological laws, physical laws; for example, such projects as the age-old idea of eternal youth or the idea of a return to an alleged golden age. I believe that we can now speak of utopia only in this latter sense, namely when a project for social change contradicts real laws of nature. Only such a project is utopian in the strict sense, that is, beyond history – but even this "ahistoricity" has a *historical limit* (Marcuse 1967, emphasis mine).

In other words, Marcuse not only calls into question the presumption of the impossible realization of utopia, but also emphasizes that no utopia (not even one that defies the laws of nature) can unequivocally be designated as being "beyond history". The very act of defining one notion as the absolute opposition of another, i.e. the act of defining utopia as a history *ex negativo* – a state without the inherited "subjective and objective factors of a given social situation stand[ing] in the way of the transformation" (Marcuse 1967) – precludes the omission of history from the discussion of utopia.

365

It is therefore appropriate to observe utopia in close correlation to the genre of uchronia – a neologism coined by French philosopher Charles Renouvier in 1876 and listed by Sargent as another subgenre of utopia. Even though the more recent term "uchronia" in the strict sense of the word designates "speculations about a history that never took place" (Dillinger 2015: 13), usually under the assumption that after a particular, authentic point in time history took an alternative course (hence the genre's other name: alternative history), the term is broad enough to encompass all forms of historic alterity, even those that postulate both spatial and temporal indistinctiveness. For the purposes of this article, utopia and uchronia will both be treated as subgenres of parahistorical literature, in which history can be either different from the one that actually took place or omitted altogether (and/or rendered spatially indistinct).

This is especially practical in cases where the fact that history might have developed differently is itself endowed with utopian potential. For example, an alternative to the present day neoliberal economy that defines not only forms of polity but also individual behavior exists only in discussions of the road not taken. In a frequently quoted passage from the article "Future City", Jameson challenges the assumption that it would be easier

to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Jameson 2003: 76), by asserting that writing can be utilized to construe "feeble signals of *time*, of otherness, of change, of Utopia" (Jameson 2003: 76, emphasis mine). In other words, utopia can be spatially indistinct, but since it aims to induce change – a process that can be perceived only by registering the binary opposition before/after – it requires the category of time. Two years after writing the essay in question, Jameson repeats this hypothesis in his extensive study on utopia in literature:

> Utopian form is itself a representational mediation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a *comet* (Jameson 2005: xii, emphasis mine).

The utopian vision is therefore, at least for Jameson, not just an intellectual exercise, but a necessary prerequisite of social and political change, even if it is initially "thrown off" and remains an unattainable ideal. Coincidentally, it is precisely the "many sparks from a comet" that threaten to eradicate the utopian vision in Stein's novel, which can be categorized both as uchronia and utopia.

366

In the novel, the point of divergence from the history of the twentieth century is the first assassination attempt made on Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914 in Sarajevo. The factual Archduke of Austria continues his visit with almost no modification to the planned route, thus providing assassin Gavrilo Princip with the opportunity to carry out the second, successful attempt on his life. However, Stein's fictional Franz Ferdinand exclaims, "I'm not *that* stupid, I'm going home!" (Stein 2014: 222, trans. mine) Having directly experienced the growing discontent in lands subject to the Austrian and Hungarian crowns, Franz Ferdinand abrogates the Austro-Hungarian Compromise from 1867 upon his ascension to the throne in 1916, after the death of Franz Joseph. This act grants all crown lands autonomy under Habsburg supervision, and transforms the Dual Monarchy into a loose confederation of sovereign states. It remains unclear how Franz Ferdinand, now Emperor Franz II of Austria, succeeds in curbing the centripetal tendencies surfacing on the economically underdeveloped periphery, and by what means the monarch continues to exert influence upon entities now only nominally subject to his crown. Be that as it may, Franz Ferdinand's astuteness alters the course of human history in the twentieth century, which is now divested of two world wars, the Holocaust, and the Cold War: in

short, almost all forms of international conflict. Accordingly, the existence of the European empires (Habsburg, Russian and German) is uninterrupted until the narrative present – the year 2001. The novel's last sentence records the date of its end: "According to the Islamic calendar, it was the 23rd Jumada Al-Akirah 1422; it was a beautiful day in the blue month of September" (Stein 2014: 239, trans. mine). On this date a comet substantial enough to annihilate all life is supposed to hit Earth. In the Georgian calendar, this date corresponds to September 11, 2001. Since Stein's is an alternative history devoid of catastrophe, this date becomes a day of salvation, and gratitude for the continuation of a prosperous Western civilization.

In economic terms, the German Empire makes the most successful transition from an agrarian society to a modern industrial one. In 1940, instead of spending vast amounts on war machinery, Germany begins its conquest of the final frontier. The first human spaceflight occurs on 3 October 1942, the same date on which, in historic reality, Joseph Goebbels announced the successful launching of Vergeltungswaffe 2 (Retribution Weapon 2), the first guided ballistic missile, used in retaliatory air strikes on Allied cities. In Stein's alternative history, Germany continues to develop its rocket technology uninterrupted, ultimately beating its rival, the United Kingdom, to the moon. A country that throughout history has never been a major colonial power now colonizes the moon entirely, and opens it to researchers and tourists. Although all empires achieve economic prosperity, one economy is left behind: "In everyday language, the expression 'Russian economy' was used as a synonym for sloppiness, for Russian engineers creativity meant finding new excuses why their inventions didn't work. […] Their new emperor was an idiot. […] It just wasn't chic to be Russian" (Stein 2014: 53, trans. mine).[3]

Conspicuously absent from the new history of the twentieth century are some hallmarks of the post-WWII economy: the emergence of a consumer society, with its coveted status symbols best epitomized by the notion of the brand; and the economic crisis, emerging as a result of financialization. From 1914 to 2001 there are no Joneses with whom to keep up, due to the fact that inner-class competition is supplanted by shared communal experiences,

367

---

[3] In the original: "Aber die Wendung 'russische Wirtschaft' stand im allgemeinen Sprachgebrauch immer noch als Synonym für Schlamperei; böse Zungen meinten, Kreativität bewiesen russische Ingenieure nur bei der Erfindung von Ausreden, wenn wieder einmal etwas nicht funktionierte. […] Der neue Zar galt als Dummkopf. […] Schlicht und einfach: Es war nicht chic, Russe zu sein […]."

such as consuming the globally popular Austrian soft drink Almdudler, which takes the place of Coca Cola. The notion of luxury is reserved exclusively for royalty, so the current emperor Franz Joseph II is one of the few people in possession of a computer – a golden laptop with a double-headed eagle engraved on the lid. Without the deregulatory financial policies introduced in the 80s, the world economy maintains a small but steady growth, and is consequently divested of political and economic crises.

In his 2013 essay "The End of Capitalism", Michael Mann predicts two alternative future developments of capitalism. The first is a continuation of the collapse of the US and EU hegemonies, two increasingly volatile systems suffering from major structural weaknesses. Mann suggests that in the case of the US, this is the failure of its giant military apparatus to successfully pursue its goals of national interest abroad, while the greatest danger to the EU is posed by its unstable currency, the Euro. In this scenario, the balance of power will shift from the West to the fast-developing countries in the Far East (Mann 2013: 944), where it will presumably collapse one last time. Stein's uchronia with a utopian face is an excellent example of the second scenario, which predicts a gradual retardation in global economic growth brought about by a more even distribution of power on a global scale. The commonality with Stein is even more striking if we consider what Mann predicts as the main threat to the system of evenly distributed power and capital: nuclear wars and natural disasters, such as climate change (Mann 2013: 944–945). The natural disaster looming over "felix Austria" is reminiscent of the Hollywood blockbuster *Armageddon* (1998): a fast-moving comet plummets towards Earth, threatening to eradicate the Habsburg Monarchy at the pinnacle of its prosperous golden age.

From the vantage point of present-day neoliberal capitalism, the economic crisis that hit financial markets in 2008, and the long-term consequences of the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy on its successor states – culminating in the post-Yugoslav wars of the 1990s – the peaceful alternative history narrated in *Der Komet* appears to contain elements of utopia. However, the Habsburg Monarchy in Stein's novel is much closer to Fredric Jameson's "utopian wish" (Jameson 2005: 1). Following two different developments of utopian literature springing from Thomas More, Jameson proposes two analytic categories: 1) a "Utopian form", which is "intent on the realization of the utopian program" (Jameson 2005: 3); and 2) a "Utopian wish" – "an obscure but omnipresent Utopian impulse finding its way to the surface in a variety of covert expressions and practices" (Jameson 2005: 3). Where the first model pursues a totality best reflected by spatial seclusion

and universal didactic potential, the second implies "an allegoric process in which various Utopian figures steep into daily life" (Jameson 2005: 5). With its numerous symbolic figures weaving the fabric of everyday life, Stein's Danube Monarchy falls into the second category.

There is almost no cultural realm in which utopia has failed as impressively as in German-speaking countries, where it has often been projected into the past instead of the future. This does not mean that utopia has been absent from German literature.[4] In his chronological overview, Götz Müller (1989) lists utopian literary works in German, from German theologian Johann Valentin Andreae (1586–1654) to author Arno Schmidt (1914–1979). The list encompasses many names from the German literary canon, such as Christoph Martin Wieland (1733–1813), Frank Wedekind (1854–1918), Gerhart Hauptmann (1862–1946) and Alfred Döblin (1878–1957). However, none of these authors made utopia the primary topic of their literary works. The only comprehensive utopia on Müller's list that truly assumes a central place in the author's oeuvre is Hermann Hesse's novel *The Glass Bead Game*, completed in 1942 but published in Switzerland in 1943, after initially being rejected for publication. After WWII, utopia is mostly dormant, for reasons that have already been explained. This shows that great utopian projects in the sense of Jameson's "utopian form" are rare in German literature. More frequently encountered is the sporadic use of different traits of utopian traditions: utopian elements embedded in a poetics that need not itself be utopian.

One such instance of the "utopian wish" can be found in romanticism, where an idealized image of the Middle Ages is a source of poetic inspiration. Here we can observe the peculiarity of the German utopia: it has mainly been oriented towards the past, rather than the future. The first large-scale instance of this phenomenon is the retrospectively idealized image of the Habsburg Monarchy in the literature of the interwar period, which Italian scholar Claudio Magris refers to as the "Habsburg myth in Austrian literature" in his 1966 study of the same title. Magris analyzes in great detail the literary attempts of authors who survive the collapse of the Dual

---

[4] Utopia has been absent from hardly any European national literature. In his article "The Ends of Utopia", Krishan Kunar states that Thomas More's *Utopia* was an incentive for the production of literary utopias all over Europe. He also states that the sole exception was Portuguese literature: "One might speculate that the reason that the Portuguese did not get into the game in the early days at least was that they were too busy discovering new lands – 'utopias' – of their own, during their golden age of exploration, lands that they had already imagined or mythologized" (Kumar 2010: 565).

Monarchy to address their feelings of nostalgia, loss and displacement. The authors and novels in question are primarily: Joseph Roth's *Radetzkymarsch* (*Radetzky March*, 1932), in which three generations of the Trotta family must confront the decline of the symbolic capital that is the foundation of their identity politics; and Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Qualities*, 1930–1943). Ulrich, the anti-hero of Musil's *opus magnum*, makes three unsuccessful attempts to become a significant person, but all are doomed to fail, since, as Kurt Rothmann suggests, "his narrow way of thinking leads to an image of a world full of disparities, instead of a unified world view" (Rothmann 2001: 270, trans. mine).[5] What the monarchy Musil portrayed has lost is a joint frame of reference, a state of innocence that cannot be restored, only mourned. What needs to be emphasized in this respect is that the Monarchy described by Roth and Musil was idyllic and utopian only in the act of remembering it. For this reason, Magris brings to the fore that the term "the Habsburg myth" applies more to the atmosphere conveyed by the novels in question than their organic representation of a lost homeland (see Magris 1966: 9). In such a context, the word "myth" is used as a "reference to the change and distortion of reality [that] can be brought in connection with a wish to peel out the hypothetical or metahistorical essence of existence or its true meaning" (Magris 1966: 9, trans. mine).[6]

370

Hence elements of utopia are realized through a distortion of historic reality, in order to replace a specific historical and social reality with a fictional one that claims authenticity. In other words, the "Habsburg myth", as portrayed by its authors and closely examined by Magris, is an idealization of a society and form of polity that never possessed the ideal qualities it retrospectively claimed. The undiminished literary success of both Roth and Musil, especially in successor states of the Habsburg Monarchy,[7] testifies to the continuing need to transform a history full of glaring contradictions into a safe haven of nostalgia, holding the debilitating realization of losing

---

[5] In the original: "Sein perspektivisches Denken […], das zu einem Weltbild voller Disparatheiten, nicht aber zu einer ganzheitlichen Weltanschauung führt, […]".

[6] In the original: "Hinweis auf die Veränderung und Entstellung der Wirklichkeit [die,] auf den Wunsch zurückzuführen ist, einen hypothetischen oder metahistorischen Wesensgehalt, dessen eigentlichste Bedeutung beinhaltenden Kern herauszuschälen".

[7] This is also true of Croatia and its literary market, since the aforementioned novels by Joseph Roth and Robert Musil have recently been published in new Croatian translations (see Roth 2014; Musil 2008; Musil 2013), reinforcing the accuracy of Magris' 52-year-old diagnosis of the need for an idealized past in the process of inter- and transcultural identity formation.

one's identity and political relevance at bay. Bearing this in mind, Hannes Stein's novel is one of the best indications that the "Habsburg myth" has not yet been exhausted. This is despite the fact that numerous scholarly works[8] have shown that the Habsburg legacy is not as unproblematic as it is often portrayed to be in Austrian popular culture.

Since the 1980s and the revelation that the presidential candidate and subsequent president of Austria, Kurt Waldheim, omitted from his biography that he had been an officer in the Wehrmacht, Austrian public discourse has been laden with skepticism about the ways in which the country worked (or failed to work) through its Nazi legacy. In this context, pride in the Habsburg tradition with its overemphasized multicultural traits, an omnipresent feature of Austrian cultural and tourist policies, has been rightly criticized as a means of repressing the past and eschewing the confrontation with individual and collective guilt. It is also noteworthy that the aesthetics of the Nazi project of world domination were inspired by German mythology (e.g. *The Song of the Nibelungs* from the thirteenth century) and visions of national grandeur from the age of romanticism (e.g. in the operas of Richard Wagner) on one hand, and a vision of Arian racial dominance, rendered utopian by Nazi theoreticians and propaganda, on the other. These factors have contributed to the highly suspect status of utopian and positively connoted uchronian fiction in German literature since WWII.

Unlike American literature, for example, in which authors such as Robert Harris (*Fatherland*, 1992), Philip K. Dick (*The Man in the High Castle*, 1962), Vladimir Nabokov (*Ada or Ardour: A Family Chronicle*, 1969), Isaac Asimov (*The End of Eternity*, 1955), Philip Roth (*The Plot against America*, 2004) and others readily and successfully embraced the narrative potential of alternative history, German literature was, and to some extent still is, burdened with notions of collective guilt. It is committed to a culture of memory and atonement for the crimes of the Nazi regime, especially since this topic was eschewed and repressed for some time after the war. Within the paradigm of memorial literature (*Erinnerungsliteratur*), much attention has been paid to notions of authenticity, historiographic accuracy and the metadiscursive discussion on the possibility of testimony and memory. Apart from *Der Komet* few German-language novels have ventured to portray history in a parahistoric way: P.M.'s *bolo'bolo* (1983), Thomas Ziegler's *Stimmen der Nacht* (1984), Christoph Ransmayr's *Morbus Kitahara* (*The Dog King*, 1995)

371

---

[8] Notably those within the research paradigm "Kakanien revisited", available online.

and Dirk C. Fleck's *Das Tahiti-Projekt* (2007) are among the rare examples. However, of those listed, two novels (Ziegler's and Ransmayr's) channel their parahistories into the discursive realm of the dystopic, and it can be argued that Stein implicitly does the same.

Notwithstanding the danger posed by the comet, the unsustainability inherent in the novel's structure severely undermines both its uchronian and utopian potential in two significant ways. First, the novel is divided into two sections: in the text itself numerous names, events and dates are provided with an asterisk pointing the reader to the appendix, in which the parahistoric facts of the plot are contrasted with the actual course of history. This intervention ranges from reminders to forgotten historical facts, dates and people (such as the date the V-2 rocket was launched, or Jewish comedians who would have been able to build distinguished and long-lasting careers had they survived the Holocaust) to completely superfluous pieces of information, e.g. that Auschwitz, which in the novel is just a marginal railway junction in Galicia, was once the site of mass murder on an industrial scale. As a result, the reader's gaze is permanently unsettled, constantly shifting from the parahistoric to the historic progression of time. The estrangement effect exerted on the reader in this case surpasses the estrangement described by Suvin as necessary for the definition of SF and, by extension also, utopia. Here the contrast between the utopian world of the Habsburg Monarchy and the actual course of history is more than just explicitly stated or implied in the text; it is rendered in such a way that the reader cannot avoid actively contrasting it with his/her experience of the post-WWII world, The reader is therefore prevented from continuously reading and, thus, also from enjoying the alternative history of the world, which is a narrative equivalent of Brecht's intended effect of *epic theatre*: purposefully preventing the audience from identifying with the fictional characters portrayed in the play. When describing the behavior of the actor necessary to facilitate this effect, Brecht says: "At no moment must he [the actor] go so far as to be wholly transformed into the character played. The verdict: 'He didn't act Lear, he was Lear' would be an annihilating blow to him" (Brecht 1948). The heterodiegetic narrator of *Der Komet* behaves in a similar manner: by resorting to metanarrative comments and repeatedly interfering with the usual practice of reading fiction, he confines the reader to a space of unresolvable tension between fiction and faction, and counteracts his own narrative efforts to mitigate the devastating impact of history by narrating an alternative one.

372

But even if we were to remove the appendix that repeatedly reminds us of a history we could not forget even if we wanted to, embedded in the text itself is the second factor preventing historiographic oblivion: Dr. Anton Wohlleben, a Viennese psychoanalyst, and his Georgian colleague, Gabriel Leviaschwili. Both are treating patients suffering from inexplicable psycho-pathological symptoms that anyone even slightly familiar with Freud's theories can immediately identify as traumatic neurosis. The peculiarity in this case is that the originary trauma is the actual twentieth-century history. Patients are plagued by flashbacks and nightmares about people and events that never took place in their narrative universe, but occur in their dreams and sudden flashbacks: Hitler, the world wars, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Stalin and his gulags. Since in our actual history it was not until 1920 that Freud realized the symptoms of soldiers who fought in the Great War did not correspond to his notion of the pleasure principle, in the alternative course of history he can neither discover the death drive nor write *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the text that marked a crucial turning point in psychoanalytic theory. Even though psychoanalyst Wohlleben develops a theory of Thanatos that corresponds to Freud's observations in an article acclaimed by the psychoanalytic community in the novel, he is still at a loss as to how to help the two patients.

373

The only one able to understand and share their position is the reader him-/herself, who is now, as Dori Laub puts it, "the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" (Felman/Laub 1992: 69). Just as in Laub's account of what it means to bear witness to the trauma of another, the traumatic events of the twentieth century are confined to a space outside the parameters of "normal" reality – in this case, the appendix of the novel, which is disclosed only to the reader. Given one of the essential features of traumatic experience – its unspeakability, or resistance to narrative representation – the fact that the parahistoric plot of the novel is at a permanent standstill is highly symptomatic of historical trauma. While narrative efforts are exhausted in an extensive ethnographic description of the modern-day Habsburg Monarchy, traces of a plot appear only sporadically. At the beginning of the novel, the Austrian court astronomer is summoned to the moon to help avert the apocalypse. During his absence, a Russian student of literature falls in love with his wife and they have an affair. So that the separation of the characters' conscious experience from the traumatic history that haunts them remains in place, it is essential that the two storylines – historic and parahistoric – never converge. For this to happen, and for the violent trespassing of the tragic twentieth-century

history into the Habsburg "utopia" to be averted, the comet cannot reach Earth. Just as in the fourteenth episode of the sixth season of *The Simpsons*, entitled *Bart's Comet*, in which Bart accidentally discovers a comet heading directly towards Springfield, the comet burns up in the atmosphere and does not reach the Earth's surface. The novel's two epistemological domains must remain forever separated; the historical trauma of the psychoanalysts' patients remains unresolved, just as the twentieth century's historic trauma continuously haunts the parahistoric narrative.

But is Stein's mock utopia, whose carelessness and harmony are fatally undermined by the structure of the novel itself, capable of emanating any "feeble signals of time, of otherness, of change"? (Jameson 2003: 76) Surprisingly, the answer is a resounding yes, due to an indicative correspondence between the novel's open skepticism of the nation state as a type of polity, and its future, which is a counternarrative to the idea of the nation state hinging upon the rise and continuation of capitalism. On one hand, as Andrea Komlosy argues, single market formation in the Habsburg Empire was a process that started in the enlightened absolutism of the eighteenth century. Maria Theresia and Joseph II introduced tax systems and border controls between crown lands, thus consolidating territories that until the end of the nineteenth century yielded nations that reinforced the centripetal push factors in the Monarchy (see Komlosy 2004: 135–136). On the other hand, in his 2016 study *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*, one of the newest approaches to the political and cultural history of the Habsburg Empire, Pieter Judson shows that the economic inequality between subjects to the crown was not enough in itself to bring down the Empire, because it had been there throughout the centuries of the empire's existence: "Nations mattered most to people when it appeared that their fundamental cultural rights were under threat (usually by another nation)" (Judson 2016: 10). In other words, it is not until the cultural capital of the newly formed nation is exposed to inner hierarchical hegemony that centripetal forces begin to pull it apart. In order to corroborate this claim, we need not look further than Croatia's most famous female author and ardent advocate of revolution against Austrian and Hungarian rule, Marija Jurić Zagorka, whose entire literary oeuvre until 1918 stemmed from a revolt against the hegemonic influence of primarily Hungarian, but also German, language and culture in Croatia.

As Ellen Meiksins Wood argues in the study *The Origins of Capitalism*, "the modern nation-state emerged out of a particular pre-capitalist formation: a unity of political and economic power that took the form of a fragmented state power, the 'parcellized sovereignity' of Western feudalism,

and its distinctive kind of 'extra-economic' power, feudal lordship" (Meiksins Wood 2017: 167). Differently put, it was enlightened absolutism that ultimately brought feudalism to its end, and that set the foundations both for industrial development and the rise of the nation-state. The impetus for the emergence of capitalism was imperial, and as the development of capitalism in the twentieth century has shown, it cannot be contained by the borders of the nation-state. Supranational epiphenomena, such as those described in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's study *Empire* (2000) are necessary for capitalism. The future of the nation state is perhaps unclear, but capitalism's development seems to favor entities that transcend the polity it initially helped to establish. In any case, recent economic and historiographic research points to the fact that the binary opposition between empire and nation-state might be dissolving, just as Stein's characters in the novel hope that the only aberration in the alternative European history – the French nation-state, founded in 1789 – will in the near future revert to its imperial roots.

How is it possible that in *Der Komet* the empire, a type of polity so heavily and justly criticized as a generator of inequality and social unrest, becomes part of a troubled, but nevertheless functional utopian vision? To answer this, we must return to our initial question about the essence of utopia. If utopia is understood not as a politically and philosophically irrelevant concept without practical application, but as a possibility, promise and hope of radical alterity, then the utopian potential of alternative history can be read as a productive critique of present conditions, as well as of our relationship with the past. On one hand, the genealogy of these conditions reaches further into history than the Sarajevo assassination. On the other, a consequence of the European empires' demise at the end of the Great War was the emergence and establishment of post-imperial nation-states. Their subsequent conflicts led to unprecedented violence and cruelty, and to a large number of small democracies, whose influence on the epiphenomena of world politics is almost insignificant. Although the Habsburg Empire portrayed in the novel is overtly idyllic, the common denominator of its peoples is a sense of community, whose cohesion is based in difference rather than similarity. These "united forces", as in the personal motto of Franz Joseph, are the only efficient defense strategy against the chaos, violence and destruction that have overcome the world in the face of threats far less intimidating than that of a giant comet.

Stein's retrospective Habsburg utopia is not only fraught with the same pitfalls as the "Habsburg myth", it is also acutely aware of them; however,

this does not undermine its utopian value. As Krishan Kumar argues, utopian works prior to WWII "were works that, though mostly concerned with socialism and science, went beyond the immediate questions of social and political organization to reflect on wider aspects of modernity" (2010: 554). In analogy, we could say that contemporary utopias like Stein's reflect wider aspects of postmodernity: the crisis of the nation-state and nationalism, the devastating impacts of consumer society on the sense of identity and community, and neoliberal capitalism as an epiphenomenon increasingly escaping state control. Although the golden age of the Habsburg Empire cannot and should not be projected into the future as a desirable state for European and world politics, this does not threaten the force of the utopian project as a generator of alterity, which in the current political situation can only be designated as indispensable. To conclude with Jameson (2005: xiv): "There are good reasons for thinking that all these questions are undecidable: which is not necessarily a bad thing provided that we continue to try to decide them."

376 WORKS CITED

Bloch, Ernst. 1996. *The Principle of Hope*. Vol 1. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Brecht, Bertolt. 1964 [1948]. "A Short Organon for Theatre". In: *Brecht on Theatre*. Ed. John Willet. New York: Hill and Wang.

Dilliger, Johannes. 2015. *Uchronie. Ungeschehene Geschichte von der Antike bis zum Steampunk*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh.

Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. 1992. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. New York: Routledge.

Fitting, Peter. 2009. "A Short History of Utopian Studies". In: *Science Fiction Studies* 36, 1: 121–131.

Francis, Richard. 1977. "The Ideology of Brook Farm". In: *Studies in the American Renaissance*: 1–48.

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge, Massachusetts/London: Harvard University Press.

Jameson, Fredric. 2003. "Future City". In: *New Left Review* 21: 65–79.

Jameson, Fredric. 2005. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. New York/London: Verso.

Judson, Pieter. 2016. *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Kakanien revisited. Web page. 10. Dec 2018.

Komlosy, Andrea. 2004. "State, Regions and Borders: Single Market Formation and Labor Migration in the Habsburg Monarchy 1750–1918". In: *Review* 28, 2: 135–177.

Kumar, Krishan. 2010. "The Ends of Utopia". In: *New Literary History* 41, 3: 549–569.

Magris, Claudio. 1966. *Der habsburgische Mythos in der österreichischen Literatur*. Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag.

Mann, Michael. 2013. "The End of Capitalism". In: *Análise Social* 209.48, 4: 927–945.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1967. "The End of Utopia". Trans. Jeremy Shapiro, Sherry M. Weber. In: *Marxists.org*. Web. 22. Dec 2018.

Meiksins Wood, Ellen. 2017. *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View*. London: Verso.

Müller, Götz. 1989. *Gegenwelten: Die Utopie in der deutschen Literatur*. Stuttgart: Metzler.

Musil, Robert. 2008. *Čovjek bez osobina*. Trans. by Andy Jelčić. Zaprešić: Fraktura.

Musil, Robert. 2013. *Čovjek bez osobina II*. Trans. by Andy Jelčić. Zaprešić: Fraktura.

Noyes Robertson, Constance. 1949. "The Oneida Community". In: *New York History* 30, 2: 131–150.

Roth, Joseph. 2014. *Radetzky marš*. Trans. by Milan Soklić. Zaprešić: Fraktura.

Rothmann, Kurt. 2011. *Kleine Geschichte der deutschen Literatur*. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam.

Sampson, Sheree. 2000. "Reclaiming a Historical Landscape: Frances Wright's Nashoba Plantation in Germantown, Tennessee". In: *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 59, 4: 290–303.

Sargent, Lyman Tower. 1994. "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited". In: *Utopian Studies* 5, 1: 1–37.

Shklovsky, Viktor. 2015 [1917]. "Art, as Device". Trans. Alexandra Berlina. In: *Poetics Today* 36, 3: 151–174.

Stein, Hannes. 2014. *Der Komet*. Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch.

Suvin, Darko. 1979. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.

Tutek, Hrvoje. 2015. "Novel, Utopia, Nation: A History of Interdependence". In: *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 42, 4: 424–438.

Vieira, Fátima. 2010. "The Concept of Utopia". In: *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. Ed. Gregory Claeys. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 3–27.

377