


From England to Austria and Croatia: Transfer of Technology and Strokes of Fate

Heimito Von Doderer's Novel *The Waterfalls Of Slunj*

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Abstract. In *The Waterfalls of Slunj* (1963), Heimito von Doderer constructs an exceptionally diverse and character-rich novel which takes place in the decades around the year 1900 in Vienna and various other locations in the Habsburg Monarchy, including Croatia. The plot is set in motion by an English industrialist who decides to set up a plant to produce agricultural machinery in Austria. However, it does not honor its initial promise of a long-winded portrayal of economic, social and political circumstances; Doderer's concern seems to demonstrate superordinate, fateful correlations pointing the characters' "cluelessness and diffidence" regarding "the fate of others" (Schmidt-Dengler). Even though the novel focuses on private, everyday occurrences, numerous references to contemporary developments in the history of mentalities, the judicial and economic systems, as well as in engineering and technology suggest that the coordinates of its narrative universe are construed in accordance with the historical reality. In this respect, it discusses not only the conditions specific to the so-called 'Austrian version of capitalism', but also its repercussions for the imperial periphery and, by extension, for Croatia. However, through an uncritical portrayal of relationships of dominance in line with those actually present in the Habsburg Monarchy, the author delineates the "Other" according to preconceived cultural stereotypes. Consequently, the novel can be read as a retrospectively oriented utopia, in which the positive representation of the Habsburg Empire and the omission of political history point to Doderer's discontent with his own and Austria's Nazi past.

Keywords: Heimito von Doderer's novel *The Waterfalls of Slunj* Austrian literature; Habsburg Monarchy; Croatia; entanglement of aesthetic, sociohistorical and economic issues

The Waterfalls of Slunj (*Die Wasserfälle von Slunj*, 1963) by the Austrian author Heimito von Doderer (1896–1966) portrays how the historically authentic transfer of technology from England to Austria and, further, to Croatia happened at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, and how the moving force behind this transfer, an English industrial family, confronts the unfathomable, seemingly fatalistic consequences of the decision. During his honeymoon,

taking him and his wife Harriet away from their home in Southern England to the Austrian capital, Robert Clayton, decides to launch a Viennese branch of his father's firm specializing in the production of agricultural machinery. Having arrived in Vienna, the newlyweds decide to travel on to "some exotic place, yet not too far away".¹ As it turns out, in 1877, the ideal place for a side-trip into the nearly exotic is the waterfalls near the small town of Slunj, situated in Central Croatia, in the "south of the Austro–Hungarian Empire";² a natural phenomenon of water vertically plunging into the abyss. Somewhat surprisingly, the site produces a terrifying effect upon the married couple. While Robert, an entrepreneurial spirit, quickly recovers from the experience and already the following year he starts developing the flourishing agricultural machinery business, Harriet, described from the very beginning as melancholic, never completely overcomes the traumatic memory. Harriet Clayton never feels quite at home in the Austrian capital, in the true center of the widespread plot, which leads to her untimely death. In the words of her coachman: "It was the consumption she died of, poor lady."³

The plot moves to Croatia several decades later, in 1910, when various storylines converge in the final scene of the novel against the backdrop of the sudden death of Donald Clayton, the son that the English couple conceived during their first visit to Slunj. Consequently, Donald becomes that character whose conception and death are in tune with Doderer's so-called 'fatological' procedure. Because conception and death occur at the same place, they provide an orderly framework to the widely branched narrative flow. The Englishman who chooses Austria-Hungary as his homeland is, therefore, bound to a space that he has no specific relationship to and which becomes fatal for him in a way transcending the realm of historic reality. The fates of Donald and Harriet Clayton point to Doderer's specific, bipolar character constellation: "observant" characters ("Apperzipierer"), such as Robert Clayton, who by means of their conscious and unlimited perception manage to cope with all the challenges of life are contrasted with "unobservant" characters ("Deperzipierer"), who avoid perception, i.e. are distinguished by their regressive attitude and retreat from reality.⁴

Owing to Doderer's narrative technique, including the "fateful overlapping"⁵ of several storylines, the English couple meets Andreas Milohnić in their Viennese hotel. Milohnić, a porter of Croatian origins and an organizational genius, not only devises the itinerary of their journey to less known sights in the south of the Monarchy, but also acts as a consultant in establishing the Viennese subsidiary of

1 Doderer, *The Waterfalls of Slunj*, 3.

2 Doderer, *The Waterfalls of Slunj*, 4.

3 Doderer, *The Waterfalls of Slunj*, 150.

4 Löffler, *Doderer ABC*, 34–36.

5 Schmidt-Dengler, *Jederzeit besuchsfähig*, 46.

the Clayton & Powers firm. While the young couple is staying in Croatia, Robert's father and current manager of the firm makes a short trip to Vienna and immediately decides to invest in Austria:

“There Clayton Senior surprised them with the information that he had meanwhile been in Vienna to carry out some preliminary negotiations. He had now quite settled it in his own mind that they were going to open a factory there, to produce agriculture machinery on the spot. There could be no doubt of the enormous market to be exploited in the largely underdeveloped Southeastern provinces of the Austro–Hungarian Empire. For many reasons—the cost of the transport and custom duties being among the least of them—importing from England could never be as economical as manufacturing locally, that is, in Austria itself, all the implements and also the traction engines by which they were propelled.”⁶

As the story continues, it is revealed that Clayton Senior had already bought a suitable property for the construction of the plant in Vienna and also took into consideration that “[t]he technological aspects were now of primary importance, for the types of machine to be manufactured must be adapted to the particular needs of the country to be supplied.”⁷ Last but not least, according to Clayton Senior, his son was supposed to “[...] learn German, and I dare Croatian and some other of those languages [...]”⁸ and soon move to Vienna. While the factory in England was preparing technological plans, an office with suitable employees was supposed to be opened in Vienna. Doderer's ‘fatological’ procedure also includes Milohnić's recommendation to English entrepreneurs to hire Josef Chwostik as the manager of their Viennese firm. Through Chwostik, a petty bourgeois climbing the social ladder in Vienna, the reader encounters a series of other, multiply intertwined characters.

However, prior to the disentanglement of this dense character network, an expository prolepsis introduces the second narrative element related to Croatia: it is the quickly matured grammar-school pupil Zdenko von Chlamtatsch, an offspring of an upper-middle-class family of civil servants with rich Croatian relatives, whom the narrator introduces shortly after mentioning Donald Clayton's birth. This ‘observant’ youngster is contrasted with the ‘unobservant’ Englishman, just as the harmonic relationship between Milohnić and his father, a cosmopolitan boat captain, is opposed to the apparently destroyed father-son relationship in the Clayton family.

At the critical point of the plot, Doderer invokes the waterfalls of Slunj, a place bringing different destinies together, which hence becomes the “novel-specific

6 Doderer, *The Waterfalls of Slunj*, 16–17.

7 Doderer, *The Waterfalls of Slunj*, 17.

8 Doderer, *The Waterfalls of Slunj*, 17.

correlate of a work of art”.⁹ This mechanism, also a fundamental principle of Doderer’s novel poetics, is achieved by two features of the text: On the one hand, by “centering” his work in a “specific locality”, namely the relatively unknown Croatian natural sight that becomes the place of “unfathomable forces of fate” and, on the other hand, by the “multitude of equally relevant characters”¹⁰ (e.g. the English family in Austria is surrounded by a socially and ethnically heterogeneous network). The widespread network of motifs and references functions primarily as a “demonstration of superordinate connections”, a procedure indicating “a fateful overlapping”, especially an overlapping of social spheres, but also the “naivety and self-consciousness” of characters “suffering the fate of others”.¹¹

It would therefore be inappropriate to analyze Doderer’s narrative world exclusively according to the “principle of referentiality”¹², completely disregarding its textual and literary principles of construction.¹³ It is therefore easy to recognize Viennese topographical coordinates in the novel, which range from the petty bourgeois area surrounding the Danube Canal in the Landstrasse-District to Hietzing, an elegant area populated by the upper middle-class. While the same is partly true of the representation of the second Habsburg metropolis, Budapest, the authentic dimensions of the waterfalls of Slunj in no way correspond to their terrifying representation in Doderer’s novel. Although this and several other statements may lead us to question the narrator’s credibility, the reality status of the narrative can in principle be regarded as indisputable.

The fact that the fictional world is construed in close approximation to the historic reality is connected with the author’s specific narrative strategy of representing exclusively private occurrences from ‘everyday history’. On the one hand, political history is excluded from the long period between 1877 and 1910 narrated in *The Waterfalls of Slunj*. On the other hand, the narrator’s numerous hints pointing to contemporary developments and processes in the history of mentalities, in the legal system as well as in the economy and technology unambiguously show that the coordinates of the narrated world are in accordance with historical reality. Describing the then contemporary Austrian politics of investment and transfer of technology, Doderer’s narrator goes into much detail. He shows a keen interest in the development of modern transport technology and mobility, which consequently

9 Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien*, 86.

10 Weber, *Doderer-Miniaturen*, 58.

11 Schmidt-Dengler, *Jederzeit besuchsfähig*, 46.

12 Schmid, *Doderer lesen*, 78.

13 Georg Schmid recommends reading Doderer “guided by a form of *transrealism* which in its *specific literariness* does not depict a world, but construes a textual one” (Schmid, *Doderer lesen*, 78).

occupies an important role in the novel. In addition, the narrator also pays attention to questions of housing tenure and prostitution, and repeatedly refers to the indispensability of learning foreign languages as a necessary precondition to a successful communication in the multilingual Danube Monarchy and beyond.

The investment of the Clayton family is met with the Habsburg civil servants' courtesy; the narrator informs us that the referent of the tax revenue office "was one of those officials who [knew how to connect his] thorough training in fiscal matters" with "considerations of a more general, not to say, patriotic, nature": "In this case it produced the view that an influx of English capital into Austria was in itself a positive advantage".¹⁴ The reference to the pro-investment climate discernible in the background of the successful English business venture in the Danube Monarchy that expands to the Balkans and the Middle East also completely corresponds to historic reality.

State consolidation after the 1867 Austrian–Hungarian Compromise liberated for the first time "the economy of the Habsburg state [...] from the burden of paying the costs of the great power politics led by an old European feudal state".¹⁵ In an economic sense, the Double Monarchy was marked by an "Austrian version of capitalism", which, as studies in economic history have shown, was successful in developing strategies "producing significant results in a society still influenced by political feudalism".¹⁶ The initially tremendous economic growth, born out of the optimism of a peaceful historical period and inspired by ideas of liberalism, ended abruptly with the 1873 Vienna stock market crash and plunged the Monarchy into a long-lasting economic crisis with grave political and social consequences.

A change in the economic sphere did not occur until 1877, the year when the Claytons travel to Slunj and establish their firm's Viennese subsidiary. In the years up to the outbreak of World War I, most economic sectors developed at a steady pace in a process that introduced modernization to all crown lands, nevertheless could not eliminate enormous regional structural differences. It is therefore revealing that the 1873 stock market crash was not blamed on daring speculators, but on proponents of political and economic liberalism, a circumstance Doderer fails to mention. In the political sphere, relevant consequences of the revolt against liberalism were the foundation of modern mass parties (from nationalist and anti-Semitic to social-democratic), while in the economic sphere there were loud demands for state interventionism. The state responded to this political and economic radicalism "partly with intensified repression, but partly also by concessions, which were in accord with Austrian politics".¹⁷ Even though it does not surprise that the state of

14 Doderer, *The Waterfalls of Slunj*, 36.

15 Rumpler, *Österreichische Geschichte 1804–1914*, 456.

16 Rumpler, *Österreichische Geschichte 1804–1914*, 457.

17 Rumpler, *Österreichische Geschichte 1804–1914*, 466.

permanent crisis in the Double Monarchy was often described with the pejorative term *Fortwursteln* ('muddling along'), this negativity may be questioned for several reasons. Despite the economic problems and constant political conflicts, the last decades of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century in Austria–Hungary was clearly marked by modernization and emancipation. Particularly visible was its small, but nevertheless constant economic growth.

It has been pointed out that the social and political background, including the disintegration of old liberalism and the emergence of nationalism and mass parties, are mainly left out of Doderer's representation of Vienna. This statement also applies to the representation of other Habsburg lands, including Croatia: During their honeymoon in 1877, the Claytons do not hear anything about the Croatian struggle to maintain the country's autonomy, granted in the previous decade by the Croatian–Hungarian Compromise, a treaty signed after the Austrian–Hungarian Compromise. They are also unaware of the tension along the Croatian–Bosnian, i.e. the Habsburg–Ottoman border, which was temporarily relieved in the following year, in 1878, when Austrian–Hungarian troops occupied Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Slunj, the Claytons do not learn anything about the desperate attempts by Croatian politicians to reintroduce the obsolete Military Frontier, still governed by Vienna, into the so-called Civil Croatia. Not even does the great journey across several countries of South-Eastern Europe, which leads to their son Donald's death more than three decades later, reveal anything about the consequences of such significant social and political phenomena as the Annexation Crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina or the ever-stronger nationalist movements in different Habsburg provinces.

In the tension between references to empirical reality, on the one hand, and textual and literary principles of construction, on the other, immense importance is attached to the dichotomy between central and peripheral, modern and archaic, 'familiar' and 'exotic' spaces. One of the movements from central to peripheral scenes is the Claytons' honeymoon: As the narrator comments on the characters' impressions, the train ride from Oostende to Linz "was certainly not exotic".¹⁸ However, upon arriving in Vienna, the couple are eavesdropping on their balcony and encounter Croatians, who are visible strangers for them: "from the street below they heard singing, strange and lovely. It came from two young women [...]. They",¹⁹ as the narrator reports, "were Croatian women from Burgenland, with dried lavender for sale; and that was the meaning of their song".²⁰ This experience is enough to

18 Doderer, *The Waterfalls of Slunj*, 4.

19 Doderer, *The Waterfalls of Slunj*, 4.

20 Doderer, *The Waterfalls of Slunj*, 4.

meet the English couple's expectations: they find the Croatian lavender sellers from Burgenland "exotic" and "somehow Italian".²¹

After introducing them to Croatian women and the Croatian hotel porter representative of the hybrid atmosphere in Vienna, Doderer takes the Claytons on a trip to the South-Slav periphery of the Habsburg Empire. Having arrived in Zagreb, the couple is reminded of Vienna in many ways, especially by the physiognomic similarity of waiters and coffee house guests in Zagreb, to the extent that Harriet even feels surrounded by "Austrian faces".²² Apart from the frequent claims about similarities in the physiognomy and mentality of Austrian–Hungarian peoples, measured against the yardstick of metropolitan Vienna, a statement by the English passengers contains another observation that points to the dependence of the imperial periphery upon the center of the Monarchy. The provincial capital at the southern edge of the area governed by the Habsburgs is perceived exclusively in its peripheral role, i.e. as an offshoot of the actual center of the entire state. While Zagreb is portrayed in various registers of modernity (coffee houses, hotels, and railway stations), Slunj, the final destination of the couple's trip into the near-exotic, is characterized by intact and wild nature.

Special attention is given to the ambivalently structured location of the waterfalls, described as exerting a horrifying influence on the spectator not only by their enormous force of nature, but also by the brittleness of the local cabins, roads, and wind mills. The contrast of "civilization under existential threat and the surrounding, uncontrollably violent and chaotic nature"²³ conjoins the fates of all the Vienna-based characters, of which some such as Harriet and Donald, will fail and others, such as Robert and Zdenko will succeed in passing the trial. In addition, and in accordance with Doderer's dichotomist construction of space, the area on the periphery of the periphery is portrayed in stark contrast to Vienna, from where the characters set out on their journeys. What comes to the fore is the normative role model of the imperial center, a site of dynamic, urban modernity, which is contrasted to the natural countryside of the backward Croatian province in need of development.

Even though Doderer's portrayal of Croatia also contains indications of radical social and economic chance, it is nevertheless construed as a 'literary landscape', a place of a "conservative utopia of a Golden Age".²⁴ Both the narrator and the characters consider it natural that Vienna provides this still premodern society with an

21 Doderer, *The Waterfalls of Slunj*, 6.

22 Doderer, *The Waterfalls of Slunj*, 12.

23 Dronske, "Erzählgewalt und Naturgewalt," 176.

24 Zelewitz, "Reiben von Zeiten und Räumen," 226.

incentive for modernization. The Claytons, who have in the meanwhile settled in Vienna, and their main manager Chwostik are supposed to supply the technological infrastructure, Zdenko von Chlamtatsch, who feels at home on the country estate owned by his Croatian aunt in the vicinity of Slunj, is supposed to see that the ownership of large estates is modernized and Chwostik's former neighbor Münsterer, the head of the post office in Slunj, is supposed to ensure a higher level of quality in public services. Both the authorial and the character perspectives reveal a positive attitude towards the success of this venture, especially as all around them they encounter moral purity, hospitality, and readiness to help, which are characteristic of premodern societies.

However, it would be false to read Doderer's literary projection as an indication of the Habsburg centers' historically authentic, systematic efforts to contribute to the development of peripheral areas in the Empire. As the historian Konrad Clewig argues, even "with increasing modernization" the Habsburg Monarchy did not "become a community of solidarity"; primarily the political leadership was to blame, who "neither developed nor enforced any concept of promoting regional development in areas which were poor in resources". The center's concepts of development "were forged in accordance with economically successful central areas"; "there was no orientation towards" evening out developmental differences, there were "no devices to turn the periphery into a non-periphery".²⁵

The fact that Doderer evokes an 'ideal' Habsburg world, a world unscathed by culturally and economically motivated ethnic and confessional conflicts of the 'great history', but branded by solidarity and the peaceful coexistence of diverse nations and religions must therefore be read in the context of a retrospectively oriented utopia. Endowing the Monarchy with positive connotations, a frequent segment of Austrian literature in the post-imperial era, reveals some similarities between Doderer's novels written in the two decades after World War II and the Habsburg-nostalgic trend in the 1930s, especially as seen in works by Joseph Roth and Stefan Zweig. In this context, Claudio Magris regards Doderer's novels significant examples of the 'Habsburg myth' in contemporary Austrian literature.²⁶

As it has been pointed out, the transfiguration of the allegedly cheerful coexistence of Habsburg peoples, which firstly came to the fore in different cultural formats and in different intensities in the inter-war period and then again, after World War II, does not match the historic reality of the Habsburg Monarchy. Although the Monarchy was not a 'prison of nations,' neither was it a state which realized the

25 Clewig, "Der begrenzte strategische Wert," 232–33.

26 In his influential study, the Italian scholar does not take into consideration the novel *The Waterfalls of Slunj*, because Doderer's last novel was published in 1963, the same year as the Italian original of the *Habsburg Myth*.

officially proclaimed ‘unity in multitude’, especially given that the imperial center had been long dominated by German–Austrians and, after the Austrian–Hungarian Compromise also by Magyars. The asymmetry in favor of Vienna and Budapest is best exemplified by the 1867 Compromise, which recent researchers consider the most important reason behind the permanent state of crisis in the last decades of the Habsburg Empire and, ultimately, also the reason for its falling apart. The fact that after 1918, the Danube Monarchy was often seen in a positive light is not related to historical facts as much as it is to the social and political shortcomings and authoritarian ideologies that marked the reality of successor states for shorter or longer periods in the twentieth century. Hence, it is not surprising that Austria–Hungary, i.e., Central Europe as well as its cultural heritage was in the focus of a retrospective, mostly positively connoted utopia, not least also as a counter-project to nationalist and communist-dogmatic political discourses.

Very revealing in this context is the fact that it will not be until after World War II that Doderer joins the Habsburg myth, a fact which is not entirely without irony,²⁷ especially when we take into consideration that at the beginning of the 1930s, when Roth and Zweig excelled in their literary reminiscences of the Habsburg era, Doderer became a devout Nazi, standing up for the Pan-German idea. Even though at the end of the 1930s he began dissociating himself from National Socialism, professing the Catholic-conservative character of his Austrian nationality, Doderer never summoned enough strength to confront either his own Nazi past or the age of Nazi rule in general. His discontent over the immediate past, which is often expressed both in his fictional and non-fictional works, reflects the attitude of many contemporaries and closely corresponds to Austrian memorial culture in the 1950s and 1960s: Repressing the memory of the Third Reich and the Holocaust, one resorted to the nostalgic memory of the old Monarchy and in the early phase of the Second Republic promoted a specific kind of collective memory, according to which Austria was the first victim of Hitler’s regime.

Keeping in mind Doderer’s peculiar “aesthetics of repression,”²⁸ it is telling that not only does he omit the memory of the immediate past, but consistently refrains from all portrayals of political history. His appreciation of Austrian ethnic diversity is present not only in his fiction. It also appears in the first two decades after the war, e.g. in his 1964 talk,²⁹ in which he underscores the importance of multicultur-

27 Barker, “Tiefe der Zeit,” 268.

28 Wolff, *Heimito von Doderer*, 84.

29 The talk, entitled *Athener Rede. Von der Wiederkehr Österreichs* was held by Doderer in Athens in 1964, for the purposes of Austrian cultural policy. 1964 he also visited Croatia for the first (and the last) time and read from his work in the Austrian Library in Zagreb. Cf. Lack, ed., *60 Jahre Kulturdialog*, 47.

ality for the Second Republic: “Nowadays, an Austrian aware of his situation [...] has to be deeply grateful for every Croatian or Magyar farmer in Burgenland, for every Slovene in Southern Carinthia.”³⁰ It is obvious that the argument of ethnic heterogeneity, which is directly connected to the Habsburg multinational empire, can be convincingly utilized in order to substantiate the claim of the continuity of the ‘Austrian idea’. However, it should not be overlooked that *The Waterfalls of Slunj* and Doderer’s other novels are inhabited with characters reflecting the diversity of the Monarchy’s nationalities and confessions. This seemingly unbroken continuity, stripped of the troublesome facts of the immediate past, is supposed to evoke the ‘magic’ of that ‘happy and harmonic time’, of that ‘settled and magical Central Europe’, an aspect which is, as already mentioned, constitutive of the ‘Habsburg myth’. Be that as it may, the allocation of roles in the multicultural Habsburg Empire is marked by a pronounced cultural asymmetry characterized by binary oppositions such as central vs. peripheral, hegemonic vs. subordinated, modern vs. archaic, or familiar vs. exotic.³¹

German–Austrians (and also Magyars) are coded as dominant, whereas Croats and other Slavs in the Monarchy as subordinate. The fact that power relationships in *The Waterfalls of Slunj* are presented in line with those that are actually present in the Danube Monarchy and uncritically portrayed as natural, suggest that the position Doderer attributes to the ‘Other’ is in accord with pre-existing cultural stereotypes. Consequently, a closer look at the positive image of Croatia and Croats reveals inconsistencies: landscapes are defined by a high level of aesthetization, even mythologization, whereas people are determined by their dependence of the dominant culture. The ‘conservative utopia’ is also inconsistent suggesting harmony in the staged Habsburg universe, while also revealing its ethnic-hierarchical structure.

Yet, repeatedly questioning the superiority of Vienna-based characters by portraying them in their extreme existential lack of personal relationships unveils their deficiency in comparison to other people on the periphery. The dominant discourse, which can thus be easily derived from the novel’s character constellation, is therefore relativized: Multi-perspective narration and the ‘fatological’ framework refer to the author’s highly inconsistent procedure, which on the one hand raises hegemonic claims and on the other hand suggests the impossibility of their realization. It is a procedure characteristic of Doderer’s narrative works that secured both his lasting reception and his status of the modern classic.

30 Doderer, *Die Wiederkehr des Drachen*, 242.

31 Cf. Reber, “Pista und Puszta,” 181–84.

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