

# 3.5. From Utopia to Dystopia, between Local and Global: Two Past South Slavic Futures

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## Abstract

While much scholarly attention has been given to nineteenth-century anglo-phone uchronias, two important Serbian uchronias of the same period have been neglected. The first, the anonymous *Beograd posle 200 godina* [*Belgrade in Two Hundred Years*] (1871), forecasts a bright future for the Serbian capital in descriptive prose, while the second, Dragutin Ilić's *Posle milion godina* [*In a Million Years*] (1889), offers a dystopian vision of the clash of humanity and an advanced, rational alien other in a post-apocalyptic setting. This paper highlights these early works' differences in regard to genre, aesthetics, and their hope for humankind, and offers insight into the significant differences between early literary utopias and emerging science fiction, as well as into the cultural specificity of both texts.

**Key words:** Serbian literature, science fiction, nineteenth century, literary evolution

The anonymous text, *Belgrade in Two Hundred Years*, published in the *Srpski omladenksi kalendar* in 1871, paints a vision of Belgrade's future might in broad strokes from a surveyor's perspective above the city. Belgrade has become one of the largest cities in Europe, joining the ranks of Odessa and Istanbul, its power reflected in the grand bridges spanning the rivers shaping it, the Sava and Danube, and in its urban sprawl that reaches into the surrounding hills. The decidedly metropolitan Serbian capital is the result of careful planning, its quarters connected by majestic boulevards and the city dotted with green parks and its citizens' gardens. The depiction of Belgrade's size and urban character is a vision of a more important role for Belgrade in the future that contrasts

with the author's present, when it was far from being one of the largest cities in Europe. Its population of twenty-six thousand was dwarfed by the million people living in Paris at the same time; it was more a town than a modern city.

Belgrade's future relevance is not just a matter of its size, but also the better way of life it offers, including a more pleasing climate. Apartments are fitted with modern central heating, electrical lighting, and clean water. In keeping with the nineteenth century's increased attention to hygiene, the city is so impeccably clean that the contemporary reader "cannot imagine it". All citizens enjoy healthy diets thanks to high quality, fresh, natural food that is "incomparably cheaper" than that of the present (Anonymous, 2017: 187).<sup>1</sup> These improvements no doubt lead citizens to follow the healthy natural rhythm of rising at the crack of dawn, full of energy and enthusiasm to work, and to go to bed at the first sign of dusk. Yet the frail are not forgotten. The few sick find numerous treatments of their ailments free of charge at specialized hospitals. As typical of utopias of the period, the ordering and categorizing of people rears its head, yet here equality is emphasized.

As if in implicit answer to the question of how this utopia is economically feasible, Belgrade is envisioned as a world trade centre second to none, filled with artisans and manufacturers of every kind who send their wares and services by a fleet of steam-powered vessels to all corners of the world. The creation of wealth is aided by the advent of new technologies. Machines take the burden of tedious labour from humankind's shoulders and run non-stop to make the city so rich that "there are more capitalists and millionaires than in many of Europe's largest cities" (190).

Having established the probability of such a bright future on the tenets of capitalism and listed various forms of factories, *Belgrade in Two Hundred Years* turns to education. Education is open to all, both male and female, free of charge, and tailored in respect to one's abilities, desires, and time schedule. Day, night, and continuing education classes offer citizens instruction in trades, as well as philosophy, literature, and natural sciences. Unlike today's abstract academics, instruction is always holistically tied to improving people morally and ethically. It is believed that the heavens are full of other intelligent beings and it is humankind's duty to always work at improving itself, the art of perfection a moral imperative. This early text thus combats the critique of utopian stasis by accenting process over condition. In this context, it is hardly surprising that teachers are the most highly regarded and well-paid civic servants.

Finally, Belgrade is cast as the centre of a new world, in which Christianity has overcome past schisms to become a unified belief. By following the principle of love, it becomes increasingly pure and touches all people. As a result, wars and soldiers have become a thing of the past. A humane justice system and government by the people, with few and only term-limited officials have become the norm.

Ivo Tartalja (2017: 20) correctly notes that *Belgrade in Two Hundred Years* reminds us of classic utopias in many ways, before drawing parallels with Tommaso Campanello's *City of the Sun* and Thomas More's *Utopia*. Certainly, the fictional description of a city as a blueprint for a better society is common to these as well as in Johannes Andreae's *Christianopolis* or Franje Petrić's *Happy Town*, but even more directly relevant is Louis-Sebastien Mercier's *Year 2440*.

Yet there are significant differences to be noted in content and literary form. In regard to the former, the Serbian text is firstly more closely tied to a specific city than all save Mercier's, a tendency to be followed in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. Unlike the latter, however, *Belgrade in Two Hundred Years* strives not only to portray the city as a shining beacon, but a beacon of the future that outshines famous cities of the author's present. This hope for a rise in Serbian cultural prestige in Europe is a profound one when one considers that, at the time, Serbia had not escaped the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Belgrade should become not only European but a better European metropolis.

Secondly, the text does not question the tenets of the industrial revolution as a pathway to wealth nor reference the utopian social movements of the nineteenth century. This is hardly surprising when one considers that the industrial revolution and commerce would come to Belgrade only after emancipation from the Ottoman Empire, after the text was written. The differences in form are yet more striking. Unlike the aforementioned literary utopias, the anonymous text is singularly descriptive, lacking fictional characters, plot, or the dialogism of More's *Utopia*. Much like the Russian Sumarokov's "Dream of a Happy Society", *Belgrade in Two Hundred Years* does not engage contemporary readers with literary questions or interactions to contrast their status quo with a postulated better future, even though these had become well-established in other literatures at the time of its writing. *Belgrade in Two Hundred Years* relies singularly on the description of a better, more ordered city to inspire hope.

The contrast with Dragutin Ilić's *In a Million Years* could hardly be greater. Although Ilić's drama was first published in the journal *Kolo* in 1889 and received little mention during the author's lifetime, nor was it staged until 1995 (Nedeljković, 2007: 51), it has since been called the first original sci-fi drama in world literature, and an early example of dystopian or anti-utopian literature (Nedeljković, 2007: 51; Jović, 2008: 141–2). It has been argued that the drama demonstrates Serbian literature's contribution to sci-fi well before the first "notable" sci-fi dramas of the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties (Clute & Nicholls, 1993: 1216). Aleksandar Nedeljković thus deemed the drama's translation a necessity for completing the picture of world science fiction's development (Nedeljković, 2007, 53). Although he considered an English translation unlikely, it became a reality in an MA students' workshop in Novi Sad in 2014 (see

Ilić, 2016), as discussed by Zorica Đergović-Joksimović elsewhere in this volume. Although the play may not have achieved Ilić's ambition to show "how contemporary Man will look in a million years in comparison to a living Man that will then exist" (Smela, 2008), there is much about *In a Million Years* that anticipates later utopian and sci-fi texts. It reveals the shift from eutopia to dystopia, and the movement toward science fiction in Serbian literature.

The play's prologue opens on the last two surviving humans on Earth in a million years: a father, Nathan, and his son, Danijel. The characters' biblical names foreshadow the play's message. In the rubble of the "once proud city of Paris", Nathan condemns Darwin, Spinoza, and Kant for leading humanity astray, blaming its demise on its arrogance and reliance on rationality: "They were all masters! All great minds! Worms have overthrown the wisdom of Man and sucked the juice of life from him" (Ilić, 2008: Prologue, Scene 1). In support of the dichotomy of divinity/feeling on the one hand and rationalism on the other, the divine beauty ("Božanstvena iskra krasa") and spirit are praised in the prologue over intelligence. The text quickly shifts to lyrical declamation. The change to poetry over prose in the dialogues in itself expresses how Ilić values emotional over dispassionate, rational prose.

The turn to emotionally laden lyricism parallels the play's praise of feeling, both joyful and painful. When Nathan answers Danijel's request to tell of the "golden age" of humanity, admirers of idyllic pastorals and nineteenth-century socialist dreamers recoil in horror. For rather than a land of peace and plenty, Nathan defines the lost paradise as a time of toil, suffering, and violent emotions such as love, hate, and suffering, passions that made humans human and differentiated them from simple beasts. While not entirely disavowing reason, *In a Million Years* pleads that a human being is a creature of both passion and reason. Not heeding this truth will lead to humanity's demise.

This theory turns to action when Danijel, who doubts his father, encounters their progeny of the future. Danijel's "dreams" of people in the next valley turn out to be real, when a group of *ducho-svet* ["spirit-people"], immortals who travel the planets of the solar system, capture the last remaining specimens of humanity. The spirit-people see inferior animals in Nathan and Danijel, scorning their primitivism, while the zoologist Zoran urges them to see father and son, not as mere animals and apes, but rather as their own ancestors, thus referencing nineteenth-century evolutionary theory and colonialism. Unconvinced, the modern people place their ancestors in chains and cages, awaiting their female leader's return from Mars and Jupiter, thus estranging Nathaniel's positive view of the human animal.

In the second act, Danijel recognizes the woman from his dreams on Earth in the spirit-people's leader Svetlana, vowing to win her heart, even as Svetlana makes her own plans to "tame" these animals, as she has so many other animals

before. Nathaniel's warning of pure rational beings has taken corporal form in the spirit-people. Danijel discovers that those of the spirit-world do not have emotions as he does when he questions the woman Zora:

DANIJEL Do you feel love in your heart?

ZORA What? I don't understand.

DANIJEL Love, love! Or does one say that differently in your world? Look, for example, you are Biljan's [her husband]. What passion led you to this? Did you feel something unusual in your heart, in your soul?

ZORA I don't know what I could feel.

(Act 2, Scene 9)

Zora's misunderstanding of passion and monogamy is further demonstrated by her actions. The married woman allows Daniel to kiss her without a second thought.

Despite this lesson and his own comparison of Svetlana to a perfect, classical statue of beauty, full of rational perfection and cold to the lips, Daniel believes he can kindle the fires of his desired "stone-like perfect goddess" Svetlana. To him, he succeeds. Svetlana does not resist his amorous advances, allows him to kiss her, embraces him and willingly spends long nights with him in love-making until dawn. The corporeal pleasures cause him to sing Svetlana's praise as a shining star that outshines all others and to proclaim in the afterglow of love-making that he shall live forever at her side. However, his lust satiated, Danijel realizes that this is not love as he desires. It is not love at all, but rather the product of rationalism, for all these physical acts mean, as Svetlana says, no unnecessary work of consequence for her in order to alleviate his sadness. Danijel screams in outrage at this pragmatic attitude in a paraphrase of all attacks on utilitarianism and utopian rationalism. Finally, he even rejects her physical touch, which he still craves, his hubris destroyed.

For her part, the rational Svetlana can only understand Danijel's passions and lack of contentment as diseases which she has unsuccessfully tried to treat:

SVETLANA Man is the kind of beast you cannot satisfy with anything. If you satisfy all his desires as he wishes, he will again be dissatisfied and he himself will not even know why. One thing I have now realized is that "dissatisfaction" is as strong a disease as "love," "sadness," and "hate," all of which hasten Man's death. So, as you see, our ancestors were strange animals.

(Act 3, Scene 4)

Realizing she cannot tame the human animal — and having been criticized by the others for attempting it — she decides to put Danijel back in chains. Her hubris has also been crushed.

If *Belgrade in Two Hundred Years* is a monologic description of a blueprint for a utopian city, *In a Million Years* is an impassioned plea for emotion in soliloquies and dialogues. In comparison to the lifeless utopian cityscape of *Belgrade in Two Hundred Years*, Ilić's romantic ploys and subplots of kidnapping and laying claim to human specimens create a lively suspense and awaken readers' own emotional responses. In effect, form matches content. *In a Million Years* stages perfection as inhuman, indeed unbearable, despite the achievement of harmony, longevity, and an apparent lack of suffering. Ilić presents the emotions of love, suffering, and even hate — while animal-like, from the viewpoint of the future — as what make existence full of life, making the rationally constructed alternative, *Belgrade in Two Hundred Years*, seem as beautiful and lifeless as a classical Greek statue.

The shift in utopian content is no less striking. Rather than a totalizing blueprint, attempting an overview of the key institutions of an ideal future Belgrade and Serbia, the drama focuses on one theme. Apart from the theme of love and marriage, the alternative society receives very little attention save for an examination of its rationality. Is this a result of the drama marking the arrival of science fiction?

Science fiction, as a rule, does not attempt the same totalizing view of society as utopia, thus, although *In a Million Years* is regarded as sci-fi, there is cause to question its science-fictionality. Its cognitive effect and plausibility are weaker than contemporaneous sci-fi texts. These attempt to create the illusion of a plausible story, anticipating critics' hesitations at accepting life on the Moon by offering seemingly scientific explanations of space travel, gravity, and time. However, Ilić resorts to a simpler ploy of placing the setting so far in the future that anything should seem possible. Indeed, there is no scientific explanation of earlier humankind's devastation nor how it came to pass that there should be two human survivors identical to Ilić's contemporary humans on Earth in the distant future. Science and its gadgetry, though not required by sci-fi, are nevertheless often part of the image of science and are noticeably lacking. Ilić's text grapples with the rationality and non-spiritualism behind scientific positivism. Science itself is absent, his sci-fi limited to its setting in space.

In regard to utopia, *In a Million Years* challenges the rationalist fundamentalism of early utopias, positing that more is necessary for human happiness, more than *Belgrade in Two Hundred Years* and most utopias of the Enlightenment promise. Rather than rejecting utopia per se, it rejects simplification of the human in utopia.

Both texts navigate between cultural specificity and universality. While *Belgrade in Two Hundred Years* places Serbia at a better world's centre, moving it from the provincial periphery to the cultural centre, and addresses perfecting

rather than the perfect, *In a Million Years* showcases the stereotype of the noble, passionate savage in opposition to the rational, unfeeling modern human, foreshadowing Huxley's John the Savage in *A Brave New World*. But it also points to its own tradition, seen in the character of Wolf in the Bosnian writer, Veselin Gatalo's *Ghetto* (2008). Unlike John, both Danijel and Wolf are portrayed as unequivocally positive. Wolf is a South Slavic new noble savage who usurps the hierarchy of the technologically superior, but morally corrupt "other" Western Europeans precisely through his human feelings. As such, these early texts belong in both the national and transnational tradition of utopian literature and early sci-fi.

## Note

1. All translations from *In a Million Years* and *Belgrade in Two Hundred Years* are by the author. References are to the Serbian editions.

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