KAREL ČAPEK (1890-1938): A WRITER FOR OUR TIMES

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Abstract
Karel Čapek is regarded by many literary historians as one of the most important authors of the interwar Czechoslovak Republic. Despite this designation, he continues to be controversial, particularly in the Anglophone world, as some critics believe that Čapek never actually comprehended the character of evil. On the occasion of the 120th anniversary of Čapek’s birth, this article re-examines some of the most important themes of Čapek’s writing from the vantage point of current events and well-known literary scholars. As one of the first European authors to experiment with multi-perspective approaches, Čapek echoes Lacan in some of his early work, while anticipating existentialism and postmodernism. These approaches will be investigated alongside Čapek’s own analyses of society and politics, particularly topical today.

Keywords: Czech Literature; Karel Čapek; Jacques Lacan

Čapek as a Controversial Writer

In his book Comedies of Defiance, my former colleague, Professor Robert Porter, wonders why it was that while Karel Čapek’s work was extremely popular in the UK in the interwar period, it was almost totally forgotten after WWII. Porter argues that perhaps Čapek was too gentlemanly and that this gentlemanly attitude no longer sufficed in the post-WWII milieu which had

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experienced the Nazi Holocaust, adding that “Čapek never really understood the nature of evil”. However in re-reading Karel Čapek’s work, the author does not appear overly “gentle”, as he was indeed fully aware of the dark aspects of the human personality. He himself feared catastrophe. Naturally, the experience of the First World War played an important role in his pessimism. The fact that a venerable European civilisation had suddenly collapsed into the mindless murdering of millions affected Čapek greatly.

Professor Robert Pynsent of London University assumes an extremely critical attitude towards Karel Čapek. Pynsent finds Čapek unoriginal and pedantic. According to Pynsent, he kept preaching to his readers, closed his eyes to evil and was a foolish optimist: a philistine out of touch with reality. In Pynsent’s view, Čapek condoned the brutality of the interwar Czech police, was an anti-semit and assumed a thoroughly anti-intellectual stance. Čapek’s play R.U.R. is dubbed “racist”. Allegedly a victim of nostalgia, Čapek infused his work with “unevenness” due to the fact that he would have liked to have lived in the 19th century. Many of these views have been summarised by Professor Pynsent in a review article printed in the Slavonic and East European Review in 2000, which has recently been re-published in the Czech language in Prague in a volume of Pynsent’s articles on Czech literature. The mechanism of Pynsent’s criticism is interesting: he seems to have been carried away by an idea that he has discovered, but fails to consider it in the overall cultural context, while ignoring other authors who may have dealt with this issue elsewhere and have often, quite convincingly, on the basis of evidence, come to a different conclusion. Nevertheless, criticism is always stimulating and points to unresolved literary or contextual issues; thus, it seems worthwhile to have a closer look at some of these assertions.

Dulling our Vigilance to Danger

In the above-mentioned review article, much of Pynsent’s criticism of Čapek is based on extensive quotations from a work by Helena Koželuhová, the daughter of Karel Čapek’s sister, Čapci očima rodiny (A Family View on the Čapeks, Praha, 1995) and on a memoir by Jarmila Čapková, the wife of Josef Čapek, Karel’s brother. Koželuhová makes sweeping statements which Pynsent at times quotes uncritically, condemning Karel Čapek by association, not necessarily via an analysis of his texts. “And so Karel wrote his articles and books and (Czechoslovak President) Masaryk his messages and they imagined they were helping to save the world. That surely brought them satisfaction, even happiness. But it brought no one else help of any lasting value; on the contrary, they dulled our vigilance concerning the dangers within us,” argues Koželuhová. It is interesting that the writer Ivan Klima also considers statements by Koželuhová regarding Masaryk’s allegedly “negative
influence” on Čapek, but he dismisses them as biased. A less biased study of Čapek’s literary texts does not confirm Koželuhová’s assertion about “dulled […] vigilance concerning the dangers within us”; rather, the opposite impression is made clear from the author’s own texts.

From the very beginning we find an awareness in Čapek’s texts that an irrational, instinctual propensity to evil is often associated with sexual drive, while greed and selfishness are an important, omnipresent part of the human personality. Still topical today, Ivan Klíma points out that this fear is primarily ecological: we are aware that man’s technological advances could destroy the planet.

Condescending, Petty Bourgeois Attitudes

Pynsent further argues that “Karel Čapek had assumed a condescending approach to his readers and subjects which rendered them petty bourgeois, and his own politics appeared to consist in equally petty bourgeois struthious [sic!] escapism.” Yet Professor Jiří Holý of Charles University in Prague counters this with “Pynsent merely repeats criticism of Čapek hurled at him by the Communists and the Catholics for whom Čapek, as a supporter of liberal democracy and President T.G. Masaryk, was an enemy”. Similarly, Čapek scholar František Všetička quotes the interwar catholic writer Timotheus Vodička who took Čapek to task for allegedly interpreting the concept of duty in a “purely external and disgracefully bourgeois sense”. Všetička points out that Vodička did not understand Čapek’s condemnation of that particular understanding of a sense of duty. Thus, Vodička’s misunderstanding of Čapek seems similar to Pynsent’s. Všetička draws the reader’s attention to the fact that in the 1930s, the criticism of Čapek hurled at him by orthodox Catholics and orthodox Marxists was very similar. Ivan Klíma recalls that Čapek was accused by some critics of the period as being weak, conservative and/or reactionary, even accused of idealising contemporary society.

Some commentators furthermore found his philosophical views feeble and unconvincing, even labelling them as “pussyfooting in the prettiest, most attractive and most comfortable ideological slippers, lined with idyllic cotton-wool”, according to the literary critic F.X. Šalda. According to Marxist critic Bedřich Václavek, Čapek was “a conservative, who wants peace, balance and happiness. He only appreciates meaningless, petty-minded, petty-bourgeois life”. Thus, when Pynsent and his colleagues accuse Karel Čapek of “pussyfooting mediocrity”, they seem to merely be copying statements made by Čapek’s ideological opponents during the interwar period. However Čapek’s texts do not present the author as a victim of “petty-bourgeois escapism”. Instead, his capacity to capture the authenticity of human experience in a given situation comes to the forefront, as well as his superb psycholo-
gical and analytical skills, depicting the archetypal human experience. Likewise the whole gamut of possible childhood experiences is evoked, similar to Proust’s madeleine.

When the subject of children comes to the forefront, the cognitive value of Čapek’s texts likewise continues to render them lively and attractive to the present day. Let us consider his description of a hide-out which was made in a pile of planks by the protagonist of Obyčejný život (An Ordinary Life, 1934) when he was a boy:

> Sometimes shorter planks are placed among the longer ones and so a miniscule cave comes into being. It has its own ceiling and walls, it smells of resin and warm timber; no one would fit in but there is enough space for a little boy and his mysterious world.18

Ivan Klíma argues that many of these observations are actually based on Karel Čapek’s own personal childhood experiences; indeed he believes that much of Čapek’s writing was influenced by the author’s own memories and traumas.19

**Condoning Police Brutality**

Professor Pynsent further points out that Čapek’s narrator in Povídky z jedné a druhé kapsy (Tales from Two Pockets, 1929) condones brutality, perpetrated by the allegedly “tolerant” police officers of inter-war democratic Czecho-slovakia. For instance in ‘Oplatkův konec’ (‘Oplatka’s End’):

> […] pale and worn out, notorious criminals on the rack of endless interrogations, but they were more afraid of the time when, after their interrogation, a few policemen would take them off to do them over; a dark, terrible fury was thundering inside all the police.20

The story of ‘Grófinka’ may also be quoted for this purpose:

> That got our goat; it’s always the same when something happens to one of us; and when we got this bloke, we gave him a bit of a beating up.

The quotes from Povídky are all very well, but the relationship between the story, the narrator and the author is surely complicated. Does it really mean that if the narrator seems to condone police brutality that the author holds the same conviction? Professor Pynsent adds that “police beating of arrested men was more or less normal in inter-war Czechoslovakia”.


Anti-Semitism

Professor Pynsent sees Karel Čapek’s expressionist play *R.U.R.* (1920) as anti-semitic. This view is based on the fact that some of the implicit characteristics of the financial director of Rossum’s Works in the play can be seen as Jewish. Yet Professor Jiří Holý objects:

This is one of many minor features of the play. If we could deduce on the basis of this that Čapek was an anti-semite, Bohumil Hrabal as well as the Czech Jewish writers Karel Poláček and Ota Pavel and many others would also have to be anti-semitic.

Even though Čapek often protested anti-Semitism, according to Pynsent, he was actually unable to overcome his own anti-Semitism. In Pynsent’s view, proof of this lies in *Válka s Mloky* (*The War of the Newts*, 1936):

It is, finally, Bondy’s greed that creates global chaos. [The Jew] represents the large-scale capitalism that Čapek loathed. The author chooses a Jew to represent what he loathed for a novel published three years after Hitler’s acquisition of the chancellorship. Čapek comes close to blaming the Great War on the Jews, to making the Jew a scapegoat. We shall never know whether or not that was intentional.

However, it is a question to what extent the character of the Jewish capitalist Bondy in *Válka s Mloky* is an expression of Čapek’s prejudice or simply the product of Čapek’s powers of observation. It seems to me that Čapek’s text simply records what was factual. Undoubtedly, there were many successful Jewish capitalists in interwar Czechoslovakia.

Anti-Intellectualism

Pynsent also criticises what he sees as Čapek’s anti-intellectualism, but he does so by misinterpreting a passage from an essay published in the volume *Místo pro Jonathana!* (*A Place for Jonathan!*, 1934). The following quote is supposed to serve as evidence of Čapek’s intolerance towards others’ intolerant views and towards intellectualism in general:

Nothing devastates [culture] as much as the rule of pedants and bullies, men intellectually crippled by specialization, simpering pseudoparsons and cultural stuffed shirts, narrow-minded mentors and doctrinarians, learned asses, sourpuss evangelists, radical nit-pickers, neurasthenic aesthetes and egotists, the rule of that whole intolerant, cramped, puffed-up, sapless and horribly boring intellectual elite.
Subsequently, Jiří Holý explains Pynsent’s reaction to this:

Pynsent concludes from this that it is a manifestation of an exaggerated version of Masaryk’s populism and a proof of how anti-intellectual Čapek was. The problem is that this essay by Čapek is not an attack on intellectuals, but a criticism of the breeding ground of totalitarianism. (Consider for instance the corrupt Professor Sigelius, the head of the state clinic in Čapek’s play Bílá nemoc [The White Disease, 1937].) In this essay, Čapek criticises those intellectuals who have relinquished responsibility for public affairs in their own countries in favour of posturings to please authoritarian wielders of power or to hide away from public life in their specialised fields.25

Indeed, soon after the accession of Adolf Hitler to power in Germany in 1933, Karel Čapek published a number of essays dealing with what he called the “treason of the intellectuals”, which he saw as one of the greatest cultural failures in the history of mankind. Čapek could not understand why intellectuals had abandoned their moral values and enthusiastically begun to support German Nazism. In Čapek’s view, an intellectual should never betray his/her own personal spiritual discipline.

Čapek was not an anti-intellectual populist, but he vociferously criticised the conscious decision of many intellectuals to embrace totalitarian regimes, simply in the interest of their own personal material advancement.26 Čapek did make fun of scientists, university professors and pseudointellectuals in many of his literary texts, however, this humour often criticised egotists and other vain, pedantic snobs who had elevated their alleged intellectual status above genuine wisdom, knowledge and humanity. In Továrna na Absolutno (The Absolute at Large, 1922), Čapek mocks vain, self-obsessed scholars when he introduces us to the highly argumentative “youthful fifty-five-year old researcher” Blahouš and his theorising. Čapek’s texts make fun of the vanity and narrow-mindedness of scholars who glibly point to how wonderful they are and how masterfully they have defeated their opponents. Further developing themes from Továrna na Absolutno, the scientists in Válka s Mloky are real monsters. Čapek’s texts attack “pseudointellectuals” in other texts as well. In the play R.U.R., we find this caustic remark:

[Robots] have phenomenal memory. There’s nothing they can’t handle. Read them twenty volumes of Encyclopaedia Britannica and they’ll repeat it word for word. They never come up with anything new, of course – ideal for university teaching.27

But surely this is not anti-intellectualism. Rather these descriptions work as protests against the absence of genuine intellectual effort.
Čapek as a Victim of 19th-Century Nostalgia

Re-reading Čapek in the present context, we must admit that we are not reading a contemporary writer. The roots of Čapek’s writing, in fact, lie deep in the existence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It is likewise obvious from Čapek’s writing that his personality has been formed by the period before WWI and then subsequently by WWI itself. Even Freud’s influence on Čapek is still rooted in the Austro-Hungarian experience. Since the ethos of the post-war Czechoslovak Republic was really a continuation of the pre-war ethos of Austria-Hungary for Čapek, his work portrays very few changes in people’s lives with the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Čapek’s own life experience comprised the culmination of pre-WWI European imperialism.

Yet Robert Pynsent argues that the “unevenness” of Čapek’s work is due to his nostalgia for old times. In Pynsent’s view, Čapek is against modern technology,28 modern methods of state governance and modern globalised business methods, all because he yearns for the old, stable, conventional world of the 19th century and its traditional “ordinary man”. He also purports that Čapek “condemns all modern social organisations”,29 but his arguments do not take into consideration the findings of other commentators.

For instance, the Czech literary theorist Lubomír Doležel has shown that Čapek’s writing technique stands in direct contradiction to traditional 19th-century fiction as he was a major stylistic innovator. Doležel points out that while 19th-century fiction was characterised by homogeneity and the total opposition of speech levels (the 19th-century narrator used literary Czech, while spoken Czech in direct speech was used for the characterisation of the protagonists), Čapek uses a “modern prosaic writing style, characterised by mutual assimilation and mixing of the two verbal planes”.30 In Čapek’s writing, the verbal sign is “thrust into unusual contexts” and thus becomes “strange” or “actualised”.31

Czech literary theoretician Dobrava Moldanová has noticed that Čapek’s protagonists always “remember their youth with a certain amount of embarrassment”, thus possibly implying that Čapek’s texts indeed are not replete with nostalgia for the old times.32 The well-known translator of Čapek’s works into English, Norma Conrada, has remarked that Čapek admired modern scientists (see his 1934 tribute to Marie Curie) and his concern was not “our inability to quit tinkering, but our inability to cope with the consequences of our tinkering”.33

Yet another interesting argument is provided by the German Čapek scholar Dorothea Uhle, showing that Čapek was introducing new, 20th-century ideas into the Czech cultural context after 1910, an era wherein he once again collided with F.X. Šalda. For this literary critic, art was part and parcel of the transcendental sphere to which empirical reality was subordinate. For
Čapek, under the influence of American pragmatism, only one reality existed: the world of human experience. Artistic creation was just one of many human activities. Čapek, and the young generation grouped around the Almanach 1914, demanded the closest possible connection between art and life and the inclusion of technical civilisation, the phenomenon of the crowd and everyday existence in the artistic sphere.34

Čapek’s Pragmatism

Ivan Klíma is of the opinion that Čapek was attracted to pragmatism because he could use it as a weapon to counter small-minded ideological bigotry, which was the prevailing characteristic of “the great ideologies” of his time, as well as Marxism, nationalism and later, Nazism. Pragmatism, according to the American philosopher William James, examined the practical application of concepts. If there were no difference in practical applications, there would be no point in arguing which concept was better. Čapek used this philosophical approach as a shield against excessive academic theorising. The pragmatists’ belief that the world was being changed by our knowledge and our actions appealed to Čapek, since he was attracted by the pragmatists’ emphasis on the responsibility of each human being for his or her own actions.35

Philosophical Reflection, Multi-Perspectivism

Ultimately for Čapek, the examination of reality always led to philosophical reflection. Yet Ivan Klíma values him much more as a narrator than a philosopher, despite the latter’s attempts to give his texts a philosophical dimension which yielded to formal experimentation.36 Čapek’s frequent use of journalistic methodology moves from concrete phenomenon as a point of departure to eventual theoretical contemplation. In this sense, he stands fairly close to the beginning of the European multi-perspective novel, anticipating, among others, the Czech “relativist” author of the second half of the 20th century – Milan Kundera.

Yet in this respect the Czech literary scholar František Všetička argues that Karel Čapek was never a true “relativist” and was instead using the multi-perspective novel in order to achieve a better level of understanding.37 Čapek’s use of the multi-perspective techniques also seems to anticipate postmodernism, as he was one of the first writers who “undermined the reader’s faith in the narrator’s omniscience”, comments the Russian scholar I.A. Bernštejn. She also adds that he was one of the first European authors who “composed the image by confrontation of different views”, thus placing Čapek at the early development of this type of novel in the 20th century.38
The Polish Čapek expert Halina Janaszek-Ivaničková likewise argues convincingly that Čapek can truly be seen as a postmodernist writer, pointing out that both he and later postmodernist writers were influenced by the same sources, i.e. philosopher William James and American pragmatism. Thus, she views Čapek’s reality as “a jungle of untested truths”. Indeed, Čapek does not argue that truth does not exist, but that it needs to be “extracted from a heap of prejudice, a mountain of clichés and contradictory conventional assertions”. Language’s pernicious role in creating unassailable, absolute dogmas led Čapek to subvert this mechanism by making fun of this in language. Čapek’s postmodernism is also manifested in his use of conventional literary genres (such as detective stories, travelogues, westerns and adventure novels) which he enriches with new meaning, the same way as Eco, Robbe-Grillet or Kroetz did many decades later. Nevertheless, Petr Bubeníček of Masaryk University in Brno remains unconvinced by this argumentation. In his view, postmodernist writers use their writing as a game, while Karel Čapek used his multiperspective approaches as an instrument of cognition.

Stock Images

Certain stock images and turns of phrase appear in Čapek’s prose and keep recurring in his later writing. Klima and Králík feel that these motifs have been taken directly from Čapek’s own personal experience. Little boys tend to sit on their fathers’ shoulders, the fathers are like giants and have the necks of an ox (this image from the short story ‘Hora’ [‘Mountain’] in Boží muka [Wayside Crosses, 1917] recurs later in the novel Obyčejný život). When women touch their men with their shoulder, it is a sign of ultimate affection (for example, in ‘Lída II’ in Boží muka and in Hordubal, 1933), as is when a woman runs her fingers through a man’s hair. Dirty railway stations complemented with the image of unshaven, tired sleeping soldiers encapsulate the horrors of war. An intensive fixated concentration on scenes in nature occurs in the short story ‘Odrazy’ (‘Reflections’) in Boží muka, and then again in Obyčejný život when the protagonist recovers from TB at a small railway station in the mountains. Intensity of perception is underlined in both instances. Protagonists often settle beside a “důvěrně bzučící lampa”, an intimately buzzing lamp, which is a sign of cosiness and a home-like atmosphere. Concrete experiences, facts or events thereby serve as a point of departure for psychological or philosophical contemplation and an intelligent manner of predicting the future via deep insight into human nature and the subsequent anticipation of how people behave.
Evidence at Work

From Čapek’s vast output, I have selected two works which I believe speak particularly strongly to the contemporary reader: Boží muka for their raw, authentic and immediate engagement of the reader and Válka s Mloky for its caustic analysis of contemporary politics.

The volume of shorter texts Boží muka is Karel Čapek’s first literary work that he wrote himself without the collaboration of his brother. Both these short texts as well as the short stories contained in Čapek’s second volume, Trapně povídky (Awkward Tales), seem to be remarkably well-written: Boží muka feels raw, authentic and immediate.

Boží muka was written in 1913-1917, i.e. mainly during the First World War. The point of departure of these texts is noetic uncertainty. Truth remains a mystery; it is unattainable. Perhaps more than in any other of Čapek’s work, the reader feels here that all certainties have been shaken by the author’s experience of the First World War. And indeed, Čapek confirmed this in various letters. For instance in a letter to Stanislav Kostka Neumann from December 1917 he writes:

The deliverance of man into freedom in these texts, that is what was brought about by obsession, my personal crisis and, mainly the war atmosphere. The war threw Man back into one’s own soul: one discovered within oneself something that was unheroic, frightened and sad, yet something that was free and couldn’t be enslaved; one’s own soul.47

These texts are lyrical and strongly influenced by expressionism, a literary method of which we will find significant traces throughout Čapek’s literary career. Čapek’s version of expressionism, however, seems quite contrary to his later “gentlemanliness” and his attempts to smooth away conflicts and examine different points of view. Throughout his work, expressionism is for Čapek an instrument for conveying the horror of the uncontrollable, beastly aspects of Man.

In Boží muka, Čapek’s literary method is decidedly “intellectual”, in that it is original, stimulating and innovative. It does not seem that Čapek has ever relinquished the idea which he conveys in Boží muka, namely that truth in its entirety is unknowable. Later on, in Továrna na Absolutno, he points out that at best, a person can hold only a small piece of “God’s truth”.48 In Boží muka, Čapek still adheres to the idea that the world around us is irrational and unpredictable and we can never learn what is really happening.

The collection starts with the famous story ‘Šlépěj’ (‘Footprint’), where two men discover a single footprint of a boot in the middle of freshly fallen snow in a field. They examine the phenomenon, without finding any expla-
nation. Čapek returned to this theme twelve years later, placing it in an urban setting and developing the plot in a Chestertonian style for the subsequent short story ‘Šlépěje’ (‘Footprints’) in Povídky z jedné a z druhé kapsy. Here a policeman explains that it is not the task of the police to clear mysteries, but to keep law and order. This shift in setting, as well as meaning, between the two versions of the story proves significant: Čapek’s ‘Šlépěje’ has a kind of civilisational veneer and impact, since the text outlines a democratic society and how it functions. In the original ‘Šlépěj’, there is none of this “civilisational” matter. The candid message of the work (the world is unknowable) aims to demonstrate that we are stuck in the middle of it. Full stop. The link between the earlier and the later versions of this story may be, nonetheless, the assertion contained in both of them that miracles are unusable for man.

According to William Harkins, Boží muka can be seen as Čapek’s reaction to the author’s deep spiritual crisis brought about by a very pessimistic, yet as it turned out, incorrect, medical diagnosis of Čapek’s health. In his writings, Čapek searches for God, but ends in failure and instead, in due course, learns to further sympathise with Man. Miracles may happen in the real world, but what is their purpose? They are of no use to man, we cannot comprehend them. Life goes on, beyond miracles. Intuition, in actuality, may be the only way to approach God, since rationality and language are forms which limit thought.

Remarkably, it seems possible to find an anticipation of certain parts of Lacanian analysis of culture and society in Boží muka. Just like Jacques Lacan many decades later, Čapek seems to be pointing out in these texts the inadequacy and inauthenticity of what Lacan calls the “Symbolic Order”, which manifests itself primarily through language and is made up of societal norms and expectations. Čapek’s awareness of a mysterious reality, which exists in Boží muka beyond Man’s comprehension and his routine everyday experience may perhaps be related to Lacan’s concept of the Real, an “uninterpretable dimension of existence [...] which lies outside the world created by the ideologies society uses to explain existence. [...] The trauma of the Real gives us the realisation that the reality hidden beneath the ideologies society has created is a reality beyond our capacity to know and explain and therefore certainly beyond our capacity to control.”

Indeed, all the texts in Boží muka are marked by overall feelings of alienation, given that loneliness permeates Čapek’s work as a theme. These texts are both lyrical and grotesque, while information is provided in a very fragmented form. For example, the motivation of people’s actions remains hidden, despite their psychological characterisation, including occasional sexual motives. Freud is strongly present in Boží muka as exemplified in the second text of the volume, ‘Lída’, wherein a young girl goes missing; it transpires she has run off for three days with “an unworthy man”. After the escape, the girl returns full of feelings of guilt and humiliation. Such instinctual
sexual impulses clashed with the strict moral code prevalent in society at the beginning of the 20th century. The pressure of this moral code was almost unbearable, leaving many things unsaid.

Interestingly, in the characters’ complete anguish, it is the experiences from early childhood that have a deep, archetypal healing quality. Likewise, reminiscences from childhood become extremely important in several of these early texts. According to Jan Mukařovský, Čapek for the first time in Boží muka applied his frequently-used writing method of separating the narrative as a unit of meaning from the event seen as a fact. Thus, he extracted the event out of his narrative, leaving it in the form of an unsolved mystery. As a result, he was capable of creating strong narrative tension, even in descriptive passages.

‘Hora’ is a dark, fragmentary text, typical of this volume. A dead body is found by the police in the countryside, along with a suspect fugitive. The police hunt him, chasing him up a hill, shoot at him and eventually find him dead. Several critics point out that this pseudo-detective form anticipates Povídky z jedné a z druhé kapsy, but Czech Čapek specialist Oldřich Králík suggests that this text, although usually interpreted as a “detective story”, is in fact a military tale, influenced by Čapek’s own experience of WWI. ‘Hora’ records military action, mobilisation and exertion of the members of a combat unit. It evokes the confused fog of war and the concept of “ignorant armies clashing by night”. Your life is in danger, but you have no idea of what is going on, thus the ignorance of Man develops as the default position: the world is unknowable. In Harkins’s view, ‘Hora’ can be read as yet another unsuccessful attempt by the characters in the story to attain nearness to God, only to be “tormented in the search for God”. Chasing the fugitive up the mountain, the protagonists “are haunted by the dread that he may be God”. Ironically, the story’s murderer reminds man of God, since both the murderer and God share the element of irrational mystery. Harkins analyses that “crime is an attempt by the individual to pass outside the bonds of human society”, yet similar to Dostoevskij, the murderer does not find God and must kill himself instead.

As though an admission that there was no point in talking or in rational, intellectual effort, the main character Boura in ‘Elegie’ (‘Elegy’) gives a lecture at a meeting of a philosophical society and feels reluctant to engage in discussion – what he had said in the lecture seems evident to himself (language is self-limiting). After the lecture held in a wine cellar, he runs into his long lost brother. They talk about his life and reminisce about early childhood experiences, only for the brother to mysteriously disappear – although he leaves the wine cellar, no one sees him coming out. Once again Boží muka presents a world where irrational, illogical events occur as a matter of course. The last line of the text reminds us, “Should things happen the way it is natural for our souls, miracles would take place.”
This emphasis on the natural is reinforced by the frequent number of short, intensely lyrical texts in Boží muka which, in a very contemporary way, reinforce the importance of a subjective perception of reality as well as the subject’s total concentration on it. For instance, in ‘Nápis’ (‘An Inscription’), a sick person lying in bed confides to a visitor (who is meanwhile disgusted by the seediness of the sick room) that he is staring in anguish at a scribble on the wall by his bedside, which says “Reverse!” The inscription was made by the patient himself, but he does not remember when he did so or what was the reason for the extreme urgency of the message. Anticipating Graham Greene, ‘Ztracená cesta’ (‘The Lost Way’) argues that it is important to lose both your way and your security, since there is an ultimate benefit in the effort to regain your bearings. The expressionist features of these early texts link them with Čapek’s novel Krakatit (1924).

Čapek’s well-constructed short narratives continue in the style of traditional 19th-century critical realism with Trapné povídky (1921), primarily written after the First World War. According to Harkins, these stories are “Chekhovian”, depicting characters caught in a life dilemma which they cannot resolve. However, these same stories remind Pynsent of the Czech writer Karel Václav Rais (1859-1926) and are thus evidence of Čapek’s lack of originality and of his nostalgia for the 19th century. According to Mukafovský, there is always a conflict in these texts between an “external”, superficial evaluation of facts and an internal one.

Thus, ‘Otcové’ (‘Fathers’), for instance, is a merciless description of a village funeral of a six-year-old girl, whose loving “father” took affectionate care of her while it was obvious to everyone that the girl was in fact the child of another man in the village, a cynical womaniser, who allowed everyone to read the love letters belonging to the girl’s mother as addressed to him. Eventually, he is present at the girl’s funeral and is highly amused by the situation. ‘Tři’ (‘Three’) is another horrifying account of greed, marital relations and infidelity: A wife is openly conducting an extra-marital affair; the only thing that her husband is interested in is the lover’s money. In ‘Helena’, an unattractive young girl cannot stand life without sex, so she writes a passionate erotic love letter to her male companion, thereby breaking all the social taboos of the beginning of the 20th century; she is rejected and humiliated.

In terms of a narrative, the best structured short story in Trapné povídky is most likely ‘Na zámku’ (‘At the Castle’). Here a young girl, a tutor to children in an aristocratic family, suffers from the arrogant and snobbish behaviour of her employers, but when considering defection, she discovers that she cannot do so – she is trapped by the sudden less-than-fortuitous circumstances of her family. Quite surprisingly, cynics might say, even amusingly, she “solves” her desperate situation by yielding to the sexual advances of a
spoiled, self-obsessed English dandy with a muscular body who also works at the castle as a tutor.

In ‘Peníze’ (‘Money’), Čapek tries out the technique of subverting one statement by another, which he would later often employ. A woman runs away from her husband, depicting him as a monster to her brother and asks him for financial assistance. However, a second sister then turns up in the story, foul-mouthing the first sister saying she is an adulterer and parasite and begging the brother to give money to her husband to support his failing business. The brother is disgusted and withdraws into himself. In ‘Košile’ (‘Shirts’), an elderly bachelor finds out that his housemaid was stealing from him for years; when he discovers this and confronts her with it, she is offended and threatens to leave. He is consternated. Thus, critical realism becomes significantly intertwined with gentle psychologising features.

‘Válka s Mloky’

In Válka s Mloky (The War with the Newts), the motifs of Továrna na Absolutno (The Absolute at Large, 1922) are developed to a much greater extent. Extremely topical, Válka s Mloky uses the methodology of the French post-structuralist Jean Baudrillard, while Czech literary scholar Vladimír Papoušek confirms it as startlingly contemporary. It includes a number of as yet undiscovered meanings and is an open structure in terms of movement. According to Papoušek, Válka s Mloky deals with life processes of transformation. Events in Válka s Mloky are not actual events, but commercial “news-items” whose role is to be consumed, not to create links between reality and the person who is observing. These news-items are signifiers without the signified; they have a completely emancipated, commercial existence, without any connection to the real world. Válka s Mloky shows the incomprehensibility and barrenness of the whole of the human culture where words lose their meaning and become empty emblems. Thus the text anticipates postmodernist approaches.

Working off of the myriad of Čapek’s insights into international politics, economics, media and scholarship, the Russian specialist I.A. Bernštejn reminds the reader that “Čapek’s aesthetics is characterised by a remarkable link between factual authenticity and elements of fantasy.” Čapek used the genre of a “social utopia” because this enabled him to create a parable which had a general meaning, the Czech literary theoretician Marie Mravcová points out. She adds that the kaleidoscope of newspaper clippings and other fictitious “documentary” material in Válka s Mloky serves as an acknowledgement that twentieth-century man derives most of his information about the world from the media, not from first-hand experience. Válka s Mloky
therefore warns the reader that it is dangerous to accept this type of information uncritically.\textsuperscript{65}

\textit{Válka s Mloky} analyses the blind selfishness of business and governments. The work uses bitter irony throughout. Remarkably, for a work written in 1936, this is a globalised novel, with pluralism and multi-perspectivism seeming to anticipate post-modernist attitudes and to mock intolerance and mass bigotry. In this sense, \textit{Válka s Mloky} is not yet fully post-modern. The work is not a game: it is a serious warning against the ways of the world which, from Čapek’s vantage point of Europe in the second half of the 1930s, may lead to its destruction.

The story of \textit{Válka s Mloky} is, in fact, a variation on previous utopian narratives by Čapek, especially on \textit{R.U.R.} A sea-faring captain, Vantoch, originally from the Czech Lands, discovers man-sized Salamanders in the Far Eastern Isles.\textsuperscript{66} The newts pick up pearls from the sea-bed, have near-human intelligence and are very quick on the uptake. Although they are not very imaginative, they do learn by imitation. Newt Andreas Scheuchzeri, who is kept in the London Zoo, gains his education from reading the British tabloid press. That seems to suit him perfectly. His language, a mixture of stereotypes, clichés and advertising, is a deeply ironic comment on the value system of popular newspapers. The newt population becomes a metaphor of the unthinking, mediocre mentality of the crowd. The newts can possibly also be seen as a metaphor for the Nazis, since their commander is the Great Salamander, “a human being, a former corporal in the Great War”\textsuperscript{67} – i.e. Čapek’s reference to Hitler.

As is usual in Čapek’s works of this type, any eccentric discovery is tamed by business and soon there is enormous demand for cheap newt labour. Market forces deploy the newts throughout the world by the millions. Čapek gradually creates a comprehensive panorama of life, as the novel acquires journalistic, even encyclopaedic features, and yet recording the reactions of individuals and institutions from many walks of life, parodying them bitterly in the process. The inevitable happens: the newts conquer the world and because they can only live in shallow waters, they destroy continents and human civilisation. The author asks himself in the final chapter why he is ending the novel on such a pessimistic note. No, there is hope, he counters: maybe, like people, the newts will start fighting each other and eventually kill one another. That would enable mankind to re-populate the world. However, even the very author’s argument is somewhat unconvincing. Unlike \textit{R.U.R.}, \textit{Válka s Mloky} is thoroughly pessimistic.

Nonetheless, similar to the robots in \textit{R.U.R.}, the newts “are men, dehumanised by the pressures of modern civilisation [...] by the false ideal of equality”.\textsuperscript{68} By creating the image of the newts, Čapek protests against the debased mass culture and “shows he was always an individualist: for him, culture is an individual creation”.\textsuperscript{69} Throughout his life, he remained horrified
that profit, success and material gain grew to only goals of human civilisation.70

In Válka s Mloky, Čapek parodies capitalism, the affluent upper classes, tabloid newspapers, nationalism and nationalist prejudices in science, the cruelty of states and scholars (armies do not hesitate to shoot into crowds, scientists carry out vivisection on newts which are still alive), the idiocy of senior managers (the director of the London Zoo criticises one of its employees for insubordination, because he had taught a newt how to speak; the director is so self-obsessed that he does not even realise that it is a miracle that the newt speaks), Nazism and communism.

In reality, people enjoy reading about the global demise of mankind. They debate for the sake of debating, but little action ever ensues. Insightfully, Čapek raised the issue of each society’s value system, pointing to the fact that each local canon of values is either arbitrary or is based on national prejudices and misconceptions. This becomes clear whenever a society’s value system is compared with the value system of another society. Čapek thus uses irony as an effective instrument of analysis. The author’s brilliant play with language parodies the misuse of it in journalism, science and diplomacy, warning that the abuse of language is the first step towards the abuse of power.71

The end of the novel, when states are under direct military attack from the newts and are still selling them their weapons and technology, is reminiscent of the failed talks about global warming which took place in Copenhagen in December 2009. Indeed, Ivan Klíma remarks that while Čapek’s warning of the possible end of world civilisation is as current as it was in the 1930s, possibly the main danger today is ecological destruction rather than global war:72

I preached: don’t give the Newts weapons or high explosives, stop that hideous trade in salamanders. Everybody always had a thousand perfectly sound economic and political arguments why this wasn’t possible.73

Čapek was considered for the Nobel Prize for Literature in the 1930s, but was passed over because Válka s Mloky was deemed to be too political and too anti-Nazi. It was recommended to him to write something anodyne. “Thank you, I have already written my doctoral dissertation,” Čapek responded.74
In Conclusion

120 years after his birth, when all things are considered, it seems that Čapek is still a writer for our times. Although his formative experience is deeply anchored in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he was a keen observer and as such, he has been able to describe a number of mechanisms of human behaviour which may be relevant at any time and, perhaps especially pressingly relevant for the contemporary era.

NOTES

1  This article is based on a lecture given to the British-Czechoslovak Association at the Czech Embassy in London on 21st January 2010 to mark the 120th anniversary of Karel Čapek’s birth on 9 January 1890.
8  Ivan Klíma, Velký věk chce mít též velké mordy: Život a dílo Karla Čapka, Praha, 2001, p. 123. (This monograph on Karel Čapek by Ivan Klíma was also published in English, as The Life and Work of Karel Čapek, North Haven, CT, 2002.)
9  Ivan Klíma, Velký věk chce mít též velké mordy, p. 175.
13 See František Všetička, ‘Sloupek Karla Čapka’, Podoby prózy, Olomouc, 1997, p. 119. The Catholic writer Jaroslav Durych was a vociferous critic of Karel Čapek from the mid-1920s and Durych’s accusations that Čapek was a “shallow writer” were copied by a number of other critics.
14 Ivan Klíma, Velký věk chce mít též velké mordy, p. 132.
15 Šaldův zápisník II, p. 196.
18
Jan Čulík


[17] See Robert Pynsent, David Short and Karel Brusák in their Letter to *The Times*, published on 20 October 1984, in which they protested against the fact that Czech poet Jaroslav Seifert had been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, see [http://blisty.cz/art/40367.html](http://blisty.cz/art/40367.html).


[26] Ivan Klima discusses Čapek’s attitude to the “betrayal of the intelligentsia” in *Veliký věk chce mít těž velké mordy*, pp. 164-167.


[28] In an article for the *Daily Express*, Čapek pointed out that people wrongly see technological advances as a sign of progress, “Our machines are ingenious, but our social and humanist effort is more or less feeble” (Karel Čapek, *Od člověka k člověku*, II, Praha, 1991, p. 318).


Ibid., p. 50.

Ibid., pp. 47-52.

In a personal conversation.


Ibid., p. 50, Hordubal, Praha, 1975, p. 17.

Ibid., p. 86, Obyčejný život, Praha, 1975, pp. 256-258.

Ibid., p. 137.

Quoted in Oldřich Králík, První řada v díle Karla Čapka, Ostrava, 1972, p. 58.

Karel Čapek, Továrná na absolutno, Praha, 1975, p. 140.


This was a part of the gentlemanly image of pre-war Czechoslovakia that Čapek had tried to create in some of his works, possibly hoping that it might work by example.

See the short story ‘Ztracená cesta’ (‘The Lost Way’).

William E. Harkins, Karel Čapek, pp. 51-55.


Critics usually point out that Čapek mocked Freud’s methods (see his parody ‘Josef Egyptský, čili o freudovském vykládání snů’, O fantasii aneb k jednomu čtenáři, Praha, 1947, pp. 26-35), nevertheless we do find Freud’s influence in Čapek’s fiction.

There are also early hints of Čapek’s belief that the human personality consists of many different, often contradictory aspects, which he later developed in Obyčejný život (see ‘Lída II.’), Králík, První řada v díle Karla Čapka, p. 60.


Harkins, Karel Čapek, pp. 56-58.

Karel Čapek, Boží muka, Trapné povídky, p. 65.

The expressionist features of these early texts link them with Čapek’s novel Krakatt (1924). See also Dorothea Uhle, Avantgarde, Zivilisationskritik und Pragmatismus in Karel Čapek’s “Boži muka”, Frankfurt am Main, 2006.


See I.A. Bernštejnová, ‘Čapkovy estetické názory a problem realismu’, p. 28.
66 Daniela Hodrová has shown that the exotic features of Válka s Mloky parody the popular commercial novels set in exotic environments, written by Jan Havlasa (Souostroví krásy, 1925 and Propasti rozkoše, 1929). See Hodrová, ‘Exotická kulisa v Čapkově Povětroni’, in: Devětkrát o Karlu Čapkově, Ed. by Jiří Holý, s.l., p. 295.
67 Válka s Mloky, Praha, 1976, p. 231.
68 Harkins, Karel Čapek, p. 97.
69 Ibid., pp. 97-98.
70 Ivan Klíma, Velký věk chce mít též velké mordy, p. 173.
71 In the passage about a newt living in the Pacific Ocean who learns how to speak Czech and who uses sentimental nationalist clichés used by the activists of the 19th-century Czech National Revival, Čapek parodies Czech provincialism and nationalism.
72 Ivan Klíma, Velký věk chce mít též velké mordy, p. 175.