Karel Čapek (1890-1938)

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Novelist; Playwright / Dramatist.
Active 1910-1938 in Czech Republic

Karel Čapek was a prolific writer in nearly every genre and one of the most well known figures from inter-war Czechoslovakia. He is best known today for coining the word robot in his dystopian play R.U.R. and for his satirical novel War with the Newts. As both of these works contain elements of science fiction, Čapek is often assigned to this genre. However, despite his friendship with H. G. Wells, his influence on writers such as Isaac Asimov and Kurt Vonnegut, and the science fiction elements present in much of his satirical work, it would be inaccurate to categorize Čapek as a science fiction writer. As well as being a life-long journalist, he wrote plays, poetry, children’s stories, fairy tales, detective fiction, travel writing, essays, and even a humor book about gardening (his other passion in life). Čapek's life and literary oeuvre present a constant stream of questions about human existence and a continued search for a pragmatic morality. Despite his optimism and the constant acknowledgement of the relativity of all things, what emerges from his works is a clearly felt sense of tragedy, as well as a thirst for truth, but few answers, as, for Čapek, it is the questioning that matters.

Karel Čapek was born on January 9th, 1890, in the town of Malé Svatoňovice in Bohemia, where his father worked as a country doctor. His mother and grandmother filled his imagination with local folklore and his ears with the rhythms of the colloquial speech which would play such an important role in his works. He had an older sister and an older brother, Josef (b. 1887), whom he remained close to throughout his life and with whom he often collaborated on literary works. He studied philosophy at Charles University in Prague, as well as in Berlin and Paris. After completing his doctoral thesis on aesthetics in 1915, he avoided military enlistment due to a spinal condition which he suffered from his whole life. Karel and Josef began collaborating on short stories at a young age and in 1916 published their first collection, Zářivé hlubiny a jiné prózy (The Luminous Depths and other Prose; written c. 1910-12). While in Paris, both brothers became enthusiastic about cubism and worked at popularizing the movement back home as well as incorporating it into their own work. Josef was a painter and critic as well and continued to provide illuminations for Karel’s works after their official collaborations ended.

Karel’s first independent work was a collection of stories published in 1917 under the title Boží muka (Wayside Crosses). Whereas his earlier works, influenced by William James's pragmatism and Henri Bergson’s vitalism, had been optimistic expressions life, his work became more somber in the years preceding the War. William Harkins characterizes the shift in tone seen in Čapek’s writing at this time as “a nostalgic regret at the failure of the search for God”, and notes the author’s own remark of having had “a conversion not to faith but to sympathy” (51-52). His short stories from this period, published in various collections throughout his career, vary in quality and technique, though certain themes emerge to which the author would return again and again. The action and setting of these stories are generally that of everyday life, in which characters encounter some
mysterious occurrence or face a moral dilemma. It is in their efforts, often unsuccessful, to explain the uncanny, take an objective moral stance, or find justice, that the characters realize or reveal something of their humanity.

Čapek was at this time busy in other genres as well, writing and translating poetry. He published *Francouzská poezie nové doby* (French poetry of the new age) in 1920 (revised and reissued in 1936). The collection included translations of works by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Apollinaire, among others. Perhaps most significant was his translation of Apollinaire’s *Zone* (*Pásma* in Čapek’s version) in 1919, which became a benchmark in Czech literature, ushering in the influence of French avant-garde poetry and establishing Apollinaire, for Czech writers, as an icon of modernity. The quality of Čapek’s version of *Zone*, along with the fact that two stanzas of the poem are set in Prague (Apollinaire visited the city in 1902), made it the focus of much critical attention, and its influence disseminated across many Prague literary circles, reportedly impressing the young Franz Kafka as well.

Čapek’s career in the theatre began in 1920 with *Loupežník* (The Outlaw). From 1921-23 he held the post of director at the Královské Vinohrady theater. Also working there was actress Olga Scheinpflugová, whom he would marry in 1935. With Josef he wrote *Ze života hmyzu* (From the Life of the Insects; 1921), a satire in the tradition of the medieval morality play, in which human virtues are personified by insects. In 1922 came *Věc Makropulos* (The Makropulos Secret), which examines the nature and quality of human life when faced with the possibility of immortality. But it was *R.U.R.* (Rossum’s Universal Robots), which had its official premiere on January 25, 1921, that would prove to be his most enduring popular success. Within a few years, the play was showing in countries across Europe, and in the U.S. and Japan, achieving an international success unprecedented in Czech literature. The subsequent fate of the word *robot* and the various literary and technological creations it has come to refer to has somewhat skewed common perceptions of the play and of Čapek in general. This notwithstanding, *R.U.R.* has had an immeasurable influence on literature and popular culture worldwide.

Though written solely by Karel, Josef made one significant contribution to *R.U.R.* Karel, in a flash of inspiration, told his brother his idea for a play set in a world where artificial workers have relieved mankind of all manual labor, but he was not sure what to call these workers. Josef, busy on at work on a canvas, suggested *robot*, from the Czech *robota*, meaning “labor”, both in a neutral sense and in the sense of “drudgery” “servitude”, or “feudal labor”. Thus the workers acquired their name.

After Isaac Asimov and the later evolution of robots in science fiction, there is widespread misconception about the nature of the original robots. Čapek’s robots are not metal androids assembled from mechanical parts; they are flesh and bone: “everything just as it is in the human body, right down to the last gland. The appendix, the belly button – all the superfluities. Finally even – hm – even the sexual organs” (39). The idea of an artificial being, of course, had a long history before Čapek, from the Greek Classics, to Jewish folklore (in particular, the Prague golem may have influenced Čapek), to Goethe’s *homunculus* in *Faust II*, to Mary Shelly’s monster in *Frankenstein*, who, as a creature fashioned together from organic, human materials, may be the closest literary relative to Čapek’s robots.Čapek was horrified to find that his play had been misread, or had inspired the idea of mechanical beings replacing humans, calling the notion “either an overestimation of machines, or a grave offence against life”. He certainly could not have foreseen the new dimension that his robots, like Frankenstein’s monster, have taken on in light of recent developments in genetics and biotechnology. The artificial beings of *R.U.R.* are the creation of a classic mad scientist named Rossum (rozum in Czech means “reason” or “intellect”). Rossum was studying marine biology on a distant island where, during an attempt to reproduce “protoplasm”, he had discovered a new kind of living matter different in chemical composition from all known life forms. Being a staunch materialist, he sought to prove once and for all that no God was necessary by creating new beings identical to humans. After years of failed attempts, he finally succeeded. By this time his nephew, an engineer, had joined him on the island (a mistranslation has resulted in widespread belief that the engineer is Rossum’s son, rather than nephew). The young Rossum, far more opportunistic than his philosophically minded uncle, shut the old man away in his laboratory and took over the project, intent on
creating an ideal laborer which could be mass-produced and sold all over the world. He therefore re-engineered
the complex physiology of the human body, simplifying the structure in order to facilitate production and
removing such “superfluous” elements as emotion, desire, preference, creativity, etc.

The action of the play begins as Helena, the well-intentioned but naïve daughter of the president of “President
Glory”, arrives on the island. The director gives her an exclusive tour and explains the little-known history of the
company. She is unable to distinguish between the robots and the resident human staff, so lifelike are the
artificial workers. She announces that she has come not as the president’s daughter but as a representative for the
League of Humanity, who want to free the robots. Ten years separate the first and second acts, and, in the
interim, much has gone wrong. One of the scientists, at Helena’s urging, has gone through with an experiment to
give the new model robots more sentience. Various nations have been training and using them as soldiers, and
the robots are now in a world-wide revolt against the humans who, meanwhile, have stopped reproducing. A
manifesto arrives on the island, instructing all robots to unite and exterminate humankind.

Despite its apocalyptic nature, the play is a comedy. The complexity of the work is proven by the variety of
different, yet similarly valid, interpretations that have resulted. This was perhaps one intended outcome of
Čapek’s quasi-expressionistic play of ideas. One of Čapek’s favorite techniques is to create a cast of simplified
characters, each representing a different philosophical approach to life or to a particular issue. As the human
inhabitants of the island are under siege, various intellectual and moral reactions to the crisis play off each other
in the dialogue, encompassing myriad themes. It is a comedy of truth or, rather, truths, for as Čapek wrote, “a
human truth is opposed to another truth no less human”. Nearly all of his writings reveal his complicated
approach to moral philosophy and formulate questions about humanity, whose complexity may or may not be a
good thing. Egon Hostovský notes that “all his utopias end in the apotheosis of intimate joys, of simple,
unimpassioned idylls and honest, earthly labors, the detailed and unostentatious work of everyday life” (91).

R.U.R. was the first of several dystopian works that Čapek would write. In 1922 he turned from the stage to the
novel and wrote Továrná na absolutno (The Absolute at Large), which was originally serialized in the newspaper Lidové noviny. In the novel, an engineer develops a means of utilizing atomic energy which, however, produces a
mysterious byproduct – the release of “the Absolute”, the spiritual energy which permeates all matter. Once
released, the essence has profound effects on humans. The effects vary in different populations, but always tend
toward some form of “absolutism” (religion, nationalism, etc.) which Čapek deftly satirizes. Krakatit (1924)
deals with the invention of an atomic weapon and the struggle over who will possess it.

In addition to his prolific literary output, Čapek had a life-long career as a journalist and author of feuilletons.
He devoted most of his time in the mid 1920s to this aspect of his career, motivated by an unabashedly pedantic
goal of “educating the nation”. He followed political developments carefully and occasionally actively engaged in
these, as when he ran unsuccessfully for parliament on behalf of the short-lived National Labor Party. In 1924 he
published a famous essay titled “Why I am not a Communist”, in which he describes the movement’s
shortcomings as he saw them, arguing that communist intellectuals cared much more about inciting violence than
helping the poor. His closest ties to politics were through his close friendship with T. G. Masaryk, the
philosopher, statesman, and founding president of the first Czechoslovak Republic. Between 1928–1935 Čapek
published Hovory s T. G. Masarykem (Talks with T. G. Masaryk), a biography in three volumes in which he
recounts extended conversations with the president.

Whereas R.U.R. and Válka s Mloky (War with the Newts) have remained Čapek’s most well known works, there
is some critical consensus that his crowning achievement came in the mid 1930s with his so-called “noetic
trilogy” – three independent novels related by common themes of individual identity and the construction of
personal narrative, and by an ongoing philosophical inquiry into human nature. Hordubal (1933) tells the story of
a Juraj Hordubal, a Slovak farmer who goes away to work in America for several years. Meanwhile the love and
devotion of his wife and daughter are transferred to Štěpán, the man hired to work around the house while the
husband is away. Some time after Hordubal returns, he is murdered, and though his wife and her lover are convicted, mystery remains about the details of the case and the puzzling fidelity of Hordubal, as seen from the point of view of the police investigators. In *Povětron* (*Meteor*; 1936) an unidentified traveler lies unconscious in a hospital following an airplane crash. As virtually nothing about the stranger is known, the doctors, a nun who is nursing the man, and two patients – one a writer, the other a clairvoyant – all try to guess who the man might be, constructing narratives which, naturally, tell more about themselves than the stranger. In the end, the man dies and his identity, still unknown, with him.

*Obyčejný život* (*An Ordinary Life*; 1934), the third and final novel, deals with the problem of knowing oneself. A retired railway official, feeling he is near death, sets out to write his autobiography. He does this both out of bureaucratic “mania for order” and as an experiment in defiance of tradition – autobiographies are always of famous people; why not a biography of an ordinary person? The first half of the book is the man’s biography as he expected – a linear sequence of causes and effects, one episode leading into the next. As he begins to narrate the final stage of his career, however, there is a break in the text – he experiences a heart attack. Three weeks later he returns to his book, but now there is a second voice asking questions, rereading and reinterpreting earlier parts of the text. The autobiography turns into a dialogue and a sustained process of analysis and re-analysis. More and more voices emerge: the ordinary man, the hypochondriac, the opportunist, the poet, the romantic, the lecher. He is unable to reconcile the many lives he has lived, much less define the self, and overwhelmed not only by the numerous lives he seems to have lived but especially by the thousands of potential lives he did not. “Admit that a man is something like a crowd of people”, he writes. “In that crowd he wanders… One of them is always in front and leads for part of the way; and to make it clear that he is in charge let us imagine that he carries a standard on which is written myself.”

Čapek returned to social satire and science fiction themes in 1936 with *Válka s Mloky* (*War with the Newts*), in which a giant, super-intelligent species of newt is discovered, educated, and molded into a cheap, ideal source of labor. The newts, however, become conscious of the degree to which humans are exploiting them, and, having spread all over the world, and having acquired weapons, begin to revolt, intent on breaking up all of the continents on Earth to create more coastline (their preferred environment) to support the expanding population. As in the noetic trilogy, Čapek continued to experiment with modernist forms of the novel, this time using a pastiche technique. The novel is narrated by a historian examining various documents: memoirs, scholarly essays, scientific articles, newspaper articles, manifestos, etc.

As always, different factions of readers have offered up various, though predictable, interpretations of *War with the Newts*. Many in contemporary Germany saw it as an attack on Nazism and totalitarianism; in later Czechoslovakia and the USSR, it was seen as a clear indictment of capitalism. Čapek’s skill for satire, however, was more subtle and more penetrating than this, aimed not only at particular political and economic systems, but at human folly in general.

Still, the book did contain obvious derision of Hitler’s Germany, confirming a place for the Čapeks on the Gestapo’s list of public enemies. The Nazi threat was a primary concern for Čapek in his final years. He campaigned at home and abroad for support for the Czechoslovak Republic, but few seemed willing or concerned. To rally his countrymen, he wrote *První parta* (*The First Rescue Party*; 1937), a novel about a group of trapped miners and the men who come to rescue them, extolling the virtues of solidarity and heroism.

He followed this with two plays – *Bíla nemoc* (*The White Plague*; 1937) and *Matka* (*The Mother*; 1938). In *The White Plague*, a political tyrant uses public fear of a deadly epidemic to consolidate power and fuel his war machine. A pacifist doctor discovers the cure but refuses to treat anyone (aside from those living in poverty) until peace is established and maintained. After the dictator himself contracts the disease, he capitulates, but on his way to treat him the doctor is killed by a pro-war mob.
The Mother (1938) takes place during the Spanish Civil war, though with clear implications about contemporary Czechoslovakia and the Nazi threat. A mother converses with her deceased husband and four dead sons, all of whom gave their lives for a cause they believed in, and struggles to reconcile her perspective on life and death with their heroic ideals. Meanwhile, there is a war on, and she cannot bring herself even to consider letting her youngest and only living son to go to battle. Finally news that a foreign country has invaded comes over the radio, and the mother, realizing the necessity of the sacrifice, sends her boy off with his father’s rifle to defend his country from the invaders.

Čapek’s hopes were dashed with the signing of the Munich Agreement in September of 1938. Distressed and ill, he died of pneumonia on Christmas day at the age of 48. In March 1939 German troops made a full invasion of Bohemia and Moravia. After the war, the communist Czechoslovak government instituted a ban on most of Čapek’s work throughout the 1950s. The USSR lifted their ban on Čapek in the 1960s; Czechoslovakia followed, but continued censoring his works and often required the addition of an ideological preface.

Western scholars paid little attention to Čapek until the 1960s, save a few who, like those in the Eastern Bloc, analyzed him in socio-ideological terms – “bourgeois intellectual”, “anti-fascist”, “liberal idealist”, “defender of democracy”. Since William E. Harkins began publishing articles and a monograph on the author in the 1960s, Čapek has seen a gradual but steady increase in academe. His popular comeback has been more significant, as new generations of readers continue to find his social satire as urgent and relevant in the early twenty-first century as it was in the early twentieth century.

Works Cited:


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