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KAREL ČAPEK IN 1984

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> Robot, n. (Czech *robota:* compulsory service, socage, work; akin to OSlav *rabota* . . .)
> 1. In Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots),* one of a large number of artificially manufactured persons, mechanically efficient, but devoid of sensibility. . . .
> *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*

There is a certain irony in Karel Čapek's place in the immortalizing pages of Webster-Merriam's *Dictionary of the English Language.* It was not Karel who coined the word "robot," but his brother and early literary collaborator Joseph Čapek. Moreover, the play *R.U.R.*, which instantaneously made the new word part of international currency, is more pertinent today for its philosophical and "prophetic" insights than for its technological foresight: the problematic features of modern civilization which Karel Čapek traced loom ever more closely for us all, while the faceless hordes of attacking robots he described still chill only the hearts of theater audiences.

The sudden recourse to an allegorical dénouement in the play's epilogue—the victorious machines, having stamped out all human life, fall in love and become "human" themselves—has often been criticized by those who would view the play as simply a reminder of the danger technological Frankensteins pose to modern society. This theme was certainly *au courant* just after the first World War; a 1920 movie remake of the Golem myth caught the public imagination in much the same way as the robot drama did when it premiered in 1921. A public discussion of the young Czech's first play was organized in London in 1923, and England's leading writers, George Bernard Shaw and G. K. Chesterton, although favorably impressed with *R.U.R.*, apparently failed to consider it as more than social satire warning against a future machine takeover of humankind.[1] It would appear to be from this stance that René Wellek forms his criticism of the play's epilogue: "There is no revolt of robots, but a revolt of oppressed men," writes Wellek, ". . . One race of men is simply dethroned by another and the whole story loses its point. It all comes to an attack on human ambition, and a recommendation of simple humanity. . . ."[2] It seems that Wellek himself has partly missed the point, as Čapek felt Shaw and Chesterton did when he took exception to their interpretation in a rebuttal which was published in The *Saturday* Review: ". . . their (Shaw's and Chesterton's) interest was centered upon the Robots. For myself, I confess that as author,

← B. Feuerstein's stage design for R.U.R. (1921)

I was much more interested in men than in Robots."[3] Čapek goes on in his rebuttal to emphasize that the play pits one ideal against another ideal no less valid, affecting a "comedy of Truth." Furthermore, there is the "comedy of Science," as ". . . Those who think to master the industry are themselves mastered by it."[4]

Clearly, in Čapek's view, it is not human ambition and scientific progress *per se* which is attacked; afterall, the one-sided characters representing these ideals in *R.U.R.* are no more or less sympathetic than those who represent God-fearing religion or the Tolstoyan work ethic. Nor should it come as a surprise that the robots are actually human, since the human in Act I are at first mistaken for robots.

The robots are conceived of as complex symbols from the very beginning of the play. They represent Man's creation. That the Čapeks' new word entered the world stage right on cue is testified by the fact that even the Japanese have adopted it—"robbot"—to describe the automated devices which have helped make Japan an industrial giant in the 1980's. The robots also represent the notion that whatever Man creates must ultimately be a reflection of himself. The machine reflects that part of Man that has become enslaved to a mode of work which he cannot put his soul into. Hence, the verb "robotize: to turn (a human being) into a robot; an efficient, insensitive, often brutalized person."[5]

Furthermore, the machine reflects that part of Man which has lost his soul. Čapek was a discerning prophet in his anticipation of advanced (even "fantastic") technological societies, tragic in their inability to solve the moral problems they inevitably face; yet often comic when subjected to Čapek's playful, satirical, multi-faceted literary scrutiny. In *R.U.R.*, for example, robots have replaced men in the work force, presumably leaving the latter with the time and means to spiritually perfect themselves. Instead, men buy and sell and make profits with the robots, and become so far removed from (craft)work and the traditions and culture that accompanied it, that they themselves are nearly indistinguishable from their robots. One of the funniest dialogs in the play exposes the central issue: Should Man attain technical supremacy (modern utopia) at the cost of losing his soul, and—the fantastic mirror image of this—what do you get when a robot acquires a soul?

Hallemeier:

". . . It's called Robot's cramp. They'll suddenly sling down everything they're holding, stand still, gnash their teeth—and then they have to go to the stamping-mill. It's evidently some breakdown in the mechanism."

Domin:

"A flaw in the works that has to be removed."

Helena:
"No, no! that's the soul."

Fabry:
"Do you really think the soul first shows itself by a gnashing of teeth?"[6]

As the play proceeds from this point, it is evident that the frightening ease with which the scientists have considered the soul (both their own and the robots') an inexpediency in the process of making the world more perfect and more profitable has resulted in the destruction of all of mankind: by Act II Reason has taken the place of Heart to such an extent that, as Čapek's imaginary society has no Zamiatinian provisions for 'rational sex,' human fertility ceases altogether. Soul-less mankind brings on his own annilation, and the "besouled" robots, who now represent that part of Man which gnashes its teeth in hatred, but is also capable of love and beauty . . . are the new masters of the world.

Thus, Čapek did not envision an Orwellian future of men-robots; rather, he extrapolated another cycle in an ominous spiral of history whose loops repeat themselves in form, but with an ever more loaded content. The cycle Čapek envisioned is one of creation, then misappropriation of the created material into forces of evil inherent in mankind ("too bad Man had to become part of mankind"[7]), with results which vary according to the material. As Man achieves more and more in the realms of cybernetics, nuclear physics, etc., he also avails himself of greater and greater potential for destruction.

Curiously, the Marxist critic A. Matushka recognizes (as René Wellek did not) the symbolic justification of having the play end with the robots starting another 'vicious circle' of human civilization, but he misses (or ignores) the note of optimism: Čapek ". . . understands problems from the point of view of humanity, and from the aspect of classes only incidently. This, then, is the reason why history for him is a vicious circle,"[8] Matushka mourns. While Čapek anticipated and unrelentingly condemned the power of the capitalist profit-motive to turn 20th century technology into a destructive force, he was by no means ready to accept that alternative creation of Reason–socialist utopia. The robots that unite under the "first international" banner in Act II are a horrifying, Orwellian horde. Primus and Helena, on the other hand, who are clearly meant to start a new cycle of civilization, have acquired by the epilogue all the human foibles of jealousy and possessiveness, aggression and prejudice. What is important, though, is that these foibles are uniquely human; they come together with love, laughter, and the ability to cultivate beauty.

The undeniable light of optimism which shines through the duality of the robot symbol may seem more naive in 1984 than it did in 1921, when

R.U.R. premiered in Prague. On the other hand, although the author of *R.U.R.* did not live to experience the second World War and its aftermath, his play anticipated many of the fundamental social and moral dilemmas the industrialized western world faces nearly half a century later.

II

A year after Čapek made his science fiction debut with the Robot, he wrote a second (anti-)utopian work starring Atomic Energy and Religious Mania. Chapter by weekly chapter, (in the Czech newspaper *Lidové Noviny*), the novel *Absolute at Large* took shape around the idea of a "karburator" which produces cheap, non-petroleum energy by splitting atoms, and releases the Absolute (God) as a by-product. In the final scene of this novel, the world is once again free of karburators, and the simple folk gather in a pub to appreciate good Czech beer and sausages. As Čapek dishes out his relativist moral—that tolerant faith in individual Man is more important than adherence to any one "Truth"—a bathetic flavor seeps into his analogy between preference for crisp, Bohemian-style sauerkraut and religious preference: to each his own. Still, if Čapek's conclusion seems as soggy today as Moravian-style sauerkraut is reputed to be, this should not prevent us from considering the topic brilliantly conceived at the novel's inception: the incompatibility, and urgent need to reconcile, science and religion in an atomic age.

This topic has lost its semi-fantastic, semi-humorous side sixty years later, as it appears as the main subject of Freeman Dyson's essay "Weapons and Hope" in the 1984 issue of the *New Yorker.*[9]

Dyson's essay attempts to explain—and thereby alleviate—the fundamental misunderstanding between the worlds of objective rationality and subjective imagination on the issue of nuclear arms control. While one side insists upon 'realistic' limitations and technicalities, and scoffs at 'naive' idealism; the other demands a categorical ban of nuclear weaponery (preferably of war in general), and attributes any other opinion to sheer cold-bloodedness. Čapek hoped that the doctrine of "relativism" might ". . . unite the most shameful skepticism with a naive and effective trust . . .;"[10] this was to be the point of *Absolute at Large.* The symbol he chose to make this point—an atomic machine which "at one end emits mechanical power, and at the other, the divine principle,"[11] is a strikingly apt metaphor for the modern conflict Mr. Dyson describes in his essay. While the discoveries of nuclear physicists (after Čapek's time) have revolutionized our potential to supply the world with energy, as well as to destroy the world altogether; side by side with this scientific marvel (or horror) there has sprung up an almost religious opposition to it.

This opposition is often aimed at the use of nuclear *weapons,* although it is sometimes most vehement in fighting the research and production of atomic energy in any context. What is invariably the case is each side's conviction in the "truth" of his or her stance, with no grounds for compromise, as one is speaking in the language of (roughly speaking) "science," and the other is speaking the language of "religion." When a researcher at the University of Michigan this year applied for a grant to continue a project which studies transmission of sounds underwater and may have "indirect application" to anti-submarine warfare, a member of a review committee rejected the proposal on the grounds that "submarines kill people."[12]

In this first of Čapek's two novels which foresee the development of atomic energy, there is no vision of nuclear warfare; but rather a broad and at times inconsistent metaphor for the dangerous gulf between logical, objective "truths" and emotional, religious "truths." The first twelve chapters of *Absolute at Large* are a sample of Čapek at his best, as he exploits all the hilarity, as well as the serious philosophical implications, of a device which infinitely generates both technical power and divine power.

With the invention and subsequent mass-production of atomic karburators, mankind's reliance on expensive, dwindling petroleum resourses is brought to an end, and the new, inexhaustable source of power floods the world with products. Simultaneously, almost everyone who comes into contact with the atomic energy also becomes "infected" with fanatical, ecstatic religious conviction. As these two themes intertwine, they give rise to a situation not of peace and plenty, but of utter chaos. Trade, commerce and distribution of goods ceases entirely, as everyone from the wealthiest banker to the lowliest textile worker simply gives away whatever he owns or produces in a fit of brotherly love.

There is some uneveness and contradiction in Čapek's handling of his two themes, as many critics have pointed out. For instance, the same people who give away their worldly possessions refuse to carry super-abundant products (now everything and anything) in their stores, since these things are no longer profitable. Čapek has illogically left the rules of capitalist marketing immune to the power of the Absolute. This loophole in the logical structure of the novel allows the Soviet critic O. Malevich to come to the gleeful conclusion that ". . . objectively, the novel shows the impossibility of thoroughly exploiting technology—prospectively the peaceful use of atomic energy—under the conditions of capitalist production anarchy. . . ."[13]

But as in *R.U.R.,* Čapek has actually attacked all sides at once, and employs the journalistic style of this *roman feuilleton* to display the underlying philosophy of relativism, which he very much believed in at the time. In one chapter Capitalism takes a beating, as greed and

short-sightedness determine a board-meeting decision to launch the business of karburators. In another episode, the Catholic Church is poked fun at for its hypocrisy: the Bishop is one of the few who is immune to "conversion" by the Absolute—"Perhaps he's had too long a training with God, or else he's a more hard-baked atheist than you. . . ."[14] In further chapters the ideals of communist "worker's paradise" are ridiculed, and Old Mother Russia is not overlooked: "If there's to be any faith, than it must be the Orthodox faith," insists General Buchtin at a conference of statesmen on the eve of world war. ". . . first, because it is orthodox, and secondly, because it is Russian, and thirdly, because the Czar so wills it, and fourthly, because we, my friend, have the biggest army."[15]

As each nation and each sect views its own version of "Truth" in absolute terms, a series of devastating wars breaks out, ending only when the thirteen soldiers left of the world's armies lay down their arms under a birch tree—whether this birch tree was on German or Slavic ancestrial territory is a matter Čapek leaves to the linguists and historians he has taken the opportunity to lampoon here.

III

Čapek's second novel, *Krakatit,* is uncharacteristically devoid of parodic comedy. The opening chapters bring to mind something out of Dostoevsky: a poverty-stricken ex-student, staggering through a chilly fog of paranoid, disjointed thoughts, bumps into a roguish acquaintance who takes him off the wet streets into his apartment. There the hero collapses into a feverish sleep and dreams of the idea which obsesses him; an idea curiously parallel to Raskolnikov's godless contemplation that ". . . a man holds the fate of the world in his two hands. . . ."[16] But Čapek's hero has at his disposal more than just an ax with which to commit his crime and punishment—"I . . . break up the atom," he explains in his delirium, ". . . I am aware that Rutherford has already . . . but that was only donkey work with radiation, you know, (I could) blow up the whole world."[17] Thus, Čapek, who reportedly met with Nobel Prize winner Patrick Blackett,[18] a co-worker of Rutherford's, made "krakatit," an atomic bomb, the central symbol of the novel he wrote in 1924.

His central concern continued to be not so much the technology itself, but the ability of man to control and integrate modern (and future) technology into his society. *Krakatit* was an effort to incorporate this theme into a stylistic hodgepodge of sci fi, "who-done-it," allegorical, and erotic elements. While this generally makes for racy reading, it falls short of defining and answering in a satisfactory way the philosophical questions raised along the way.

Particularly disappointing is, once again, the facile ending. The frantic intensity, passion, and suspense of plot and characters all fall out into a cozy folkloric scene after the bomb explodes. A kindly "Grandfather" (really the Divine Father) tells Prokop that having forgotten his deadly formula (for krakatit), he has learned something; that next time the invention must be used to bring light and warmth into the world, not war. This fairytale dénouement is largely ineffective because Čapek has already tied another knot in the previous episode—someone else has invented krakatit, too. Prokop may use his explosive for peaceful purposes now, but his rival will not. One is reminded of Robert Oppenheimer's retort to those who wanted him to "forget" the atomic secret he and his colleagues were unravelling: These are not Man's secrets, but Nature's; therefore, if we don't unravel them for ourselves, sooner or later someone else will. This has proved to be the case (even "third world" countries now have atom bombs), and leads to a situation which often does seem solvable only by divine intervention.

The hero of *Krakatit,* Prokop, unlike Čapek's other characters, does not content himself with one or the other of a smorgasbord of relativist "truths." He is a new phenomenon in Čapek's works—and in early science fiction in general—a complex, memorable personality who must make human choices in a world of super-human technology.

First he rejects the simple, humble life offered to him by the hard-working country doctor who nurses him out of delirium back to health, and by the doctor's chaste young daughter Anči. (Harkins' suggestion that the name Anči brings to mind the Czech word for angel *(andel)* would seem appropriate, were it accurate.)[19] Prokop leaves this country idyll to pursue his science: he is still a romantic genius in pursuit of pure knowledge for knowledge's sake.

However, in *Krakatit,* Čapek's hero for once rejects not only the simple life, but also the opposite temptation to sell out to big business (i.e. a military complex). Even his impassioned love for the Princess Wille (representing self-will and pride) cannot induce him to give up to the world the deadly formula he knows can destroy it. He has become less naive by this time, though; Čapek's "pure scientist" is now initiated into the world of money and politics.

Finally, he gives up even the offer of pure power for power's sake. The leader of a band of anarchists, Daimon (allusion obvious) and a wildly beautiful woman who is a member of his band, fail to seduce Prokop with the chance to turn the world into an Orwellian nightmare with himself still the sole possessor of krakatit—and of ultimate power.

IV

It is in *War with the Newts* that Čapek comes closest to an Orwellian vision of the future, in which irrational Love is no longer any match for rational Power. The allegorical denoument of *R.U.R.*, the naive sausage feast scene concluding *Absolute at Large,* and the facile ending of *Krakatit,* are replaced in *War with the Newts* by the final scene depicting hordes of child-sized newts (salamanders), uniform in their ugliness, busily exploiting and flooding the earth's land masses to create more littoral areas for their triumphant race to inhabit. The reader is left high and dry with no assurance of mankind's ability to save itself. In a brief epilogue the author states simply, ". . . And then I don't know what happens next."[20] The quiet understatement of this line is the closest Čapek could come, in 1936, to an optimistic ending.

The rise of the Nazi movement in Germany forced Čapek to abandon his relativist views, which had made it possible to tolerate many conflicting "truths," under the assumption that human love will always triumph in the end. Nazism, though, was an unbearable evil, and Čapek was horrified by Europe's inability to effectively oppose it. *War with the Newts* satirizes mercilessly every institution and every philosophical alibi responsible for letting the Nazi-like newts and their Hitleresque commander seize power.

However, the novel cannot be construed as a narrow allegory on Nazism, despite Čapek's assertion that it is ". . . a mirroring of that which exists and the surroundings in which we live. . . . There is no speculation about the future, (. . .) no matter of fantasy. . . ."[21] The newts, like the robots, are multi-faceted symbols, and the broader allegory of human behavior, particularly as manifested in the 20th century, has certainly endured into 1984 and the future. Čapek exploited the serial form of the novel (weekly chapters in *Lidové Noviny*) to its full potential, piling his sharpest wit, humor and satire upon fantasy more engaging and consistent than he was able to produce in any of his previous works. *War with the Newts* is at once his most hilarious and his most serious warning.

As in *R.U.R.*, it is Man who creates and propogates the humanoid sub-race which eventually destroys civilization. Once the giant, docile newts—and their capacity to work for Man—have been discovered in a small cove "a bit west of Sumatra," they become the object of capitalist profit-making, scientific formalism, and media sensationalism. A multi-million dollar "Salamander Syndicate" does brisk trade in newt slaves, while the *Federal Geographic Magazine* haggles over the question of biological classification—and decides on the genus and species designation *Andrias Scheuchzeri.* Hollywood meets the newts—and the public—with the headline "A Film Star Assaulted by Sea Monster! Fossil Reptiles Prefer Blonds!" As Darko Suvin aptly points out, underneath the series of lampoons which make up Book One of the novel, the salamanders are ". . . entering the

life of mankind on the wrong foot—under a cloud of delusions and misperceptions."[22]

Book Two is entitled "Along the Steps of Civilization," and the parody continues, with no "ism," including communism, racism, nationalism, etc., left unscathed. Still, Book Two ends with millions of semi-educated, thoroughly "civilized" newts working for Man to expand the dry land mass of the continents (filling in littoral areas, building dams), and with international peace and prosperity just around the corner. Book Three brings the inevitable—war with the newts.

The newts are ultimately the product of the forces which brought them into the world; like the robots, they are a caricature of Man without a soul. An early scientific investigation soothingly ascertains: "There is no need to overrate its (the newts') intelligence, for in no respect does it exceed the intelligence of an average man of the present time."[23] This conclusion seems consistent with the mutual appeal—to both men and newts—of basic, simplified "Salamander English," of Comrade Molokov's manifesto "Suppressed and revolutionary Newts of the whole world unite!"; and of newt appearances at scientific conferences—albeit the distinguished amphibian speaker must be supplied with a water tub instead of a lectern.

Were the newts less amusing, they would certainly be the most frightening of Čapek's symbols for that which threatens mankind. There is no naivité in the picture *War with the Newts* shows of recent history—and of the future. The newts are not technological wonders which take on a life of their own. They represent from the outset the Average, and they are in every way encouraged by Man "along the steps of civilization" to become what Orwell warned Man himself could become in *1984*; an efficient, homogeneous, conscience-less mass willing to fight for whatever "ideal"—nationalism, communism, religion, etc.—is propaganda by those in power.

But Čapek does not present a grim *fait accompli* vision as Orwell does. He describes a process, a world in which there is still laughter, because there is still choice. One could have stopped producing robots; one could have not allowed atomic karburators to go wholesale; one could have stopped the newts. One perhaps could have—but one did not—stop the Nazis in time. Čapek died at age 48 on Christmas Day, 1938, shortly after the Munich Settlement (allowing Hitler to take part of Czechoslovakia) had been agreed to. Biographers write he died "of a broken heart."[24] Three months later, Gestapo agents came to arrest him.

Had Čapek lived to see the world emerge from the holocaust, he might have felt some comfort in knowing that his "naive" hope that the human soul and civilization survive has been somewhat justified. He would not have expected that we would not still be facing the dangers of scientific "progress" and utopian "happiness" which he wrote about. Therefore, in the best of 20th century Czech literary tradition, he granted us the privilege of laughing—and of assuming the individual responsibility of choice and freedom.

NOTES

[1]William Harkins, *Karel Čapek* (New York and London, 1962), p. 90.

[2]René Wellek, *Essays on Czech Literature* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1963), p. 51.

[3]Karel Čapek, "The Meaning of R.U.R." *Saturday Review*, 136 (July 21, 1923), p. 79.

[4]*Ibid.*

[5]*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass., 1974).

[6]*R.U.R.* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1969), pp. 24-5.

[7]See *War with the Newts* (Berkley Medallion Edition, 1971), p. 198.

[8]Alexander Matushka, *Karel Čapek: Man Against Destruction* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1964), p. 245.

[9]Freeman Dyson, "Reflections–Part I: Weapons and Hope" *New Yorker* (Feb. 6, 1984), pp. 52-73.

[10]Harkins, p. 102.

[11]Karel Čapek, *Absolute at Large* (London, 1944), p. 23.

[12]*The Michigan Daily* (Ann Arbor, Feb. 16, 1984), p. 1.

[13]O. Malevich, *Karel Čapek* (Moscow, 1968), p. 83.

[14]*Absolute at Large*, p. 30.

[15]*Ibid.*, p. 118.

[16]Feodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (The Coulson Translation: New York, 1975), p. 1.

[17]Karel Čapek, *Krakatit* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1925), p. 14.

[18]Harkins, p. 104.

[19]See *ibid.*, p. 107.

[20]*War with the Newts*, last sentence.

[21]Harkins, p. 96.

[22]Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 276.

[23]*War with the Newts*, p. 79.

[24]See Introduction by Lewis Gannett, *War with the Newts* (Berkley Medallion Edition).