

Čapek's Modern Apocalypse

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In a span of less than seven years the bit of land that constitutes Bohemia witnessed the births of three writers who were to achieve worldwide renown. Jaroslav Hašek was born in April, 1883, Franz Kafka not quite three months later, and Karel Čapek on January 9, 1890. Although all three came from similar middle-class backgrounds and to a great extent shared a common personal and generational experience, one would be hard put to find three more distinct human and literary types. Kafka was a quiet, orderly, and introverted recluse who seldom ventured beyond his circle of Jewish friends; his terse, often unfinished but always imaginative stories related for the most part to the special reality of his inner world and were written in perfect Prague-style German. Hašek was an eccentric, irresponsible Bohemian anarchist and carouser surrounded by a bunch of equally irresponsible boon companions and drunkards; he cranked out hundreds of carelessly written humoresques that caricatured the contemporary world. Only in *The Good Soldier Schweik* did he step out of the shadows somewhat. Here his language, too, was transformed into brilliant renditions of the vulgar speech of the people. Finally, there was Karel Čapek. At a very early age – he was just 28 in 1918 when the Czechoslovak Republic came into being – he resolved to take partial responsibility for the intellectual and moral level of the new state and brought together the country's intellectual elite (even President of the Republic T. G. Masaryk attended the regular Friday gatherings held in Čapek's home). His works of fantasy and philosophical prose, like his regular newspaper columns, were written in a Czech that was simple and precise, yet so rich that it influenced a significant part of the next generation of writers and journalists.

When I look for something these three men had in common, I find only an unusual frailty, which kept them not only from living out a full lifetime but also from spending their adult years at the side of a woman or in the bosom of a family. It was this genuinely painful condition that inspired most of Kafka's great prose, drove Jaroslav Hašek to join his pals in the beer halls of Prague or to wander off for days, and probably accounted in part for Karel Čapek's consuming interest in public affairs and the fate of mankind.

At the turn of the century Bohemia, and Prague in particular, witnessed the development of a rich cultural life. Not long before, the prevailing atmosphere had been rather narrowly provincial. After a protracted period in which Czech culture and even the Czech language had barely remained alive, it took the better part of the

nineteenth century merely to ensure their right to exist. Everything – the Czech Museum, Czech theatre, Czech politics, the Academy, Czech publishers – was just getting established, often in a tenacious struggle with authorities. The patriotic public had to have been inspired by these active manifestations of national identity. But the days of this sort of uncritical patriotism were slowly drawing to an end. A new generation of the Czech intelligentsia vowed to judge its efforts not by domestic but by European standards. Czech-German Prague gradually became a cultural centre in which Czechs, too, could play an important role. A number of outstanding people came to the university; there was a tremendous rush of publishing activity (literary and artistic journals alone numbered several dozen); and presses vied in the release of new publications in both original and translated form. In those days there was not a single important foreign writer whose latest work could not soon be found in Czech translation.

This activity, however, was still viewed as extraordinary, as something fought for and earned, and thus inspiring. The stimulating atmosphere in which the two languages and cultures met – and, most often, contended – certainly contributed to the development of artists who, after a long hiatus, were once again ready to address the world.

Karel Čapek did not arrive in Prague until the end of his studies at the *gymnasium*. He had spent his childhood in Úpice, a small town in the hills of eastern Bohemia, where his father was a doctor. Čapek often remembered his country childhood in his feuilletons, tales, and other short prose. The world of his longer novels and plays seems to be altogether different. But alongside the philosopher and intellectual who sees all the way to civilization's tragic end, one readily senses in these works a man of the country who watches, in anguish and amazement, the collapse of age-old values and established ways of life, finding danger and portents of destruction in modern man's estrangement from the natural order.

At the age of nineteen, Čapek enrolled in the Philosophy Faculty at Charles University (in subsequent years he studied at the Philosophy Faculty in Berlin and pursued German and English philology at the Sorbonne). It was at this time that he began to publish his first short works of prose. Like his first plays, he wrote these together with his older brother Josef. The early prose certainly bespeaks a scintillating spirit and literary and linguistic gifts, but we do not find in it what was later to become so characteristic of Čapek's work. There is none of his philosophical reflection, none of his splendid storytelling, none of his fantastic and anxious vision. The most powerful experience for Karel Čapek and his generation, as well as their greatest shock, still lay ahead – the First World War.

The suddenness and scope of the war had a searing effect on Europe's young generation. Artists whose works had often shone with admiration for the human spirit and its technical achievements suddenly stood face to face with rampant destruction. Like Franz Kafka, Karel Čapek never experienced combat firsthand. For once, his physical infirmity (rheumatism and a painful gout of the vertebrae which

plagued him all his life) brought him some good: he was excused from joining the ranks. However, unlike the totally self absorbed Kafka and the easy-going Hašek, Čapek experienced the catastrophe of the war with the greatest sense of urgency.

The conclusion of the war and its outcome appeared to make up for all the hardships that had been suffered. After three centuries of domination, the Czechs had once again gained their own independent state. For a while, euphoria overwhelmed all other emotions. Two completely different experiences strongly influenced Čapek's work, the tragedy of the war and the nation's restored independence. A comparison of his pre-war and postwar work shows that he now felt much more concern for "what is really happening to the world."¹ This concern, however, shifted between two distant poles. On the one hand, Čapek strove in his journalistic and shorter prose work to help form the spiritual climate of the new republic (there were practically no important events that failed to arouse his interest or impel him to state an opinion). On the other hand, in his novels and dramas he created apocalyptic images and moved his plots toward calamities that threatened mankind's existence.

Of course, there were numerous writers who addressed society prophetically and urged it to follow the "correct" path. Perhaps never had so many manifestoes been written, so many political banalities set to verse, so many topical, politicizing pamphlets published to assert claims of great and engaged activity as in those postwar years. Many of Čapek's literary friends adopted socialist slogans, at least for the time being, in the form in which they arrived from revolutionary Russia, slogans promising that the revolution would be followed by a new, more just and classless society which would put an end to violence and even to the state.

Čapek was too sensitive and responsible to accept the notion that, after all the recent violence, new violence, though now revolutionary, could resolve any human problems. He adopted Masaryk's conception of democracy, which stressed democracy's ethical and simultaneously activist content: "All political striving ..., derives from moral judgments; democracy is a striving against tyranny, against violence Democratism is founded on work Modern man acknowledges evolution; a democrat also believes in work, in fine work"

Čapek accepted as his share of this "fine work" his painstaking journalistic activity. "I consider it a matter of immense importance to a people how newspapers are produced," he wrote in 1934, "whether well and responsibly, or badly and using means that are culturally and morally debased" He continued working as a journalist until his death more than twenty years later. Thanks mainly to his efforts, *Lidové noviny* [*The People's Gazette*], the paper for which he worked, gained a unique place when it succeeded in combining the qualities of a serious daily paper and an exacting literary review.

¹ Later, just after the publication of *War with the Nents*, Čapek himself described his type of creative work in these terms: "... literature that does not care about reality or about what is really happening to the world, literature that is reluctant to react as strongly as word and thought allow, is not for me."

In January, 1921, the National Theatre in Prague, the foremost theatre in the country, performed a Karel Čapek play with the strange title R. U. R. The author was known to be a talented young writer who had already written several plays together with his brother and one on his own, a moderately successful if rather traditional piece. The theme of his new play, however, astounded first Czech and then foreign audiences, for it dealt with synthetic people – "robots" – and their revolt against the human race. The play was a hit around the globe and soon brought its thirty-one-year-old author international acclaim (its nonhuman heroes held such fascination for the contemporary world that the word "robot," coined by Čapek, has been assimilated by numerous languages). With his drama about the robots Čapek inaugurated a series of fantastic and utopian² works. He continued in this vein with a novel, *The Factory of the Absolute*, and a comedy, *The Makropulos Affair*, on the Shavian theme of longevity, both of which appeared in 1922, and the 1924 novel *Krakatite*. After a long hiatus he returned to utopian themes with the famous novel *War with the Nents* (1936) and, a year before his death, the drama *The White Plague* (1937).

Three of the works I have mentioned develop a fantastic motif in striking detail; even their denouements are almost identical. What impelled Karel Čapek to rework his apocalyptic vision so persistently? Many saw in his work instant utopias that presaged technological discoveries with potentially dangerous consequences; others saw a brilliant satire on contemporary political conditions both at home and abroad.

But Čapek's creative work in science fiction had a different purpose: it attempted to provide a philosophical explanation for the antagonisms that were repeatedly plunging the world into crisis.

I am a writer myself. I know that a work of literature cannot be reduced to some message, argument, or philosophy which can be expressed both concisely and in universal concepts. If I am about to consider Čapek's philosophy in his fundamental works, I am risking this oversimplification only because Čapek himself sets out the same way – almost all his works are accompanied by some kind of theoretical commentary. Although he preferred to conceal the didactic and philosophical element in his work by employing rich and fantastic plots, a wealth of brilliantly observed technical and everyday detail, and a vital, even colloquial language, Čapek was certainly the type of artist who wrote *a la these*.

Čapek made a thorough study of philosophy. Among contemporary schools of thought, he was most strongly influenced by Anglo-American pragmatism. Opponents have charged the adherents of pragmatism with intellectual shallowness, inconsistency, and failure to mould a genuine philosophical system – although they could not very well have done so, given their resistance to conventional truths and "great" ideas. It was precisely the pragmatists' unwillingness to generalize (something

² I am using the term Čapek himself chose to describe his work, although in view of the content a more appropriate designation might be "anti-utopian" – which is equally applicable to the later works of Huxley, Zamyatin, Boye, Orwell, and Bradbury.

the political ideologies of the day did readily), their interest in everyday human activity, and the respect they showed every individual's truth that appealed to Čapek.

Čapek had already become familiar with the philosophy of James, Dewey, and Schiller during the war. In the same period he had also written a dedicated and sympathetic study on the subject. In the course of the next few years he published several additional detailed articles in which he attempted to define his philosophical views – especially in the area of noetics – as precisely as possible.

Like other pragmatists, Čapek was a relativist and took a skeptical view of the power of understanding, particularly the speculative understanding which attempts to establish universally valid systems. Even the most universal discoveries about reality will become personal to each individual mind and therefore partial and premature. Accordingly, Čapek considered the predilection for generalizations (especially in the area of social relations) to be one of the least propitious tendencies of human thought. “Please, for a moment, approach ‘socialism’ and other words now in world currency as moral and personal values, not as party or political values,” he wrote shortly after the war. “A great number of people who went into the war as the new generation have come out of it with a terrible, gnawing hyper-consciousness of these values, and with their former certainty about them shaken just as terribly. This uncertainty could not be called disillusionment or skepticism or indifference; rather, it is a dismay which finds good and evil on both sides and rejects viewpoints based on principle”

Čapek's skepticism was the basis for his humanistic demand that no prejudice, no conventional truth or its concerns, be placed above the value of human life. The function of this skepticism was to remove artificial idea – obstacles between people and to stimulate conciliation, tolerance, and active participation in life. “You don't see two bales of hay, but thousands of straws. Straw by straw you gather what is good and useful in the human world; straw by straw you discard the chaff and the weeds. You don't cry out because of the oppression of thousands but because of the oppression of any individual; you've had to destroy the one truth in order to find thousands of them Ultimately, for want of anything more perfect, you simply believe in people.”

In Čapek's works revolutionaries find themselves side by side with dreamers and explorers, demagogues with people's tribunes and redeemers. All these characters, no matter how different or apparently antagonistic their motives, contemplate changing or improving the world by some momentous act. With their absolute visions and judgments about the world, they run afoul of temperate and usually less interesting conservatives – simple folk or people of learning, but always tolerant, willing to help others, and ready to do anything, even to perform the most insignificant task. They know their own limits and the limits of the reality in which they live. They understand that everything has its season and its tempo and that the world cannot be changed for the better by upheaval, no matter how well intentioned. This is why they enjoy Čapek's sympathy.

Čapek doubted that anything posed a greater threat to mankind than uncontrolled Faustian desire. A man who feels equal to the creator labours under the delusion that he can and should make the world conform to his own idea. In reality, he simply ceases to perceive its complexity, disturbs one of its subtle, imperceptible structures, and triggers calamity.

In *The Factory of the Absolute* everyone believes he has found the true god and that he will save others by bringing them his god and inculcating his own faith and concept of love. People are filled with messianic idealism, but their ideals are contradictory and lead to disputes; the disputes grow into wars. While professing lofty intentions, they overlook other people and justify their own intolerance. At the end of the book one of the heroes confesses, “A person might think that another belief is the wrong belief, but he mustn't think that the fellow who holds it is bad, or common, or stupid.” And later, “You know, the greater the thing somebody believes in, the more passionately he despises those who don't believe in it. But the greatest belief would be to believe in people. . . . Everybody's just great at thinking about mankind, but about one single person – no. I'll kill you, but I'll save mankind. . . . It'll be a bad world until people believe in people”

An equally messianic desire and undisciplined need to transform the world brings on the calamity that befalls mankind in the famous play about the robots. “Alquist, it wasn't a bad dream to want to end the slavery of work,” says Domin, the director of the robot factory, shortly before his death. “I didn't want a single soul to have to do idiotic work at someone else's machines, I didn't want any of this damn social mess! Oh, the humiliation, the pain are making me sick, the emptiness is horrible! We wanted a new generation!”

In the play Domin's dream of creation is opposed by the engineer Alquist: “I think it would be better to lay one brick than make too grandiose plans.” Elsewhere, he implores, “O God, shed your light on Domin and on all those who err; destroy their creation and help people return to their cares and their work; keep the human race from annihilation the whole world, entire continents, all humanity, everything is one crazy, brutish orgy. They won't even lift a hand for food; it's stuffed right into their mouths so they don't even have to get up”

In *R. U. R.* we see the first confrontation – at least on a spiritual level – between the “man of the coming times,” the revolutionary, the realizer of momentous plans, and the person who believes that man should, in the interest of preserving his own race, continue slowly on the path of his forebears, preferring what is perhaps a harder and poorer existence to the risk of unleashing demons no one will be able to control. The Domin's lead the world to ruin. The Alquist's warn against following them.

People need no saviours or redeemers, no robots, miracle drugs, or inexhaustible energy sources, and they need not look for grand designs or earth-shaking solutions. On the contrary, they should learn to live in harmony with the world into which they were born and take personal responsibility for it. This sense of responsibility is born

of service and participation in everyday human affairs. Only “straw by straw” can the world and human attitudes be improved.

The standards by which Čapek judged human action as positive or negative were so unusual that many readers missed the point of his works. Others were angered. Radical in their own thinking, they showered Čapek with reproach for idealizing the little man, the average person, and even outright provincialism. They claimed that in denying a person’s right to generalization and universal truth, Čapek was also stripping him of the right to action that would bring an end to social injustice. They offered their own, revolutionary solutions, which in that time of protracted economic and political crisis seemed to be the only promising alternatives.

This debate has raged to the present day, some believing that it is appropriate to rectify the state of human affairs by force if necessary, others contending that man must try to influence conditions by changing himself first. The events that have transpired in the very country in which Čapek lived and where I, too, live, a country where, in the half century since Čapek’s death, life has deteriorated into a succession of violent upheavals, support, in my opinion, the side of Čapek’s truth in this life-and-death controversy.

The skepticism with which Čapek contemplated mankind’s future reflected only one side of his personality. There was also something harmonious, even playful in him that managed to endure from the time of his childhood. He took a child’s pleasure in thinking up stories. He placed no limits on his imagination and delighted in the unexpected situations he was creating, the new territory he was entering, as well as in the spiteful scoffing that permeated even the works auguring catastrophe. There was also real wonder in his observation of objects and human craftsmanship. With a boy’s fascination he would watch a skilled labourer and then tell about his work in the same amusing way one might talk about an avocation or a hobby. (Čapek himself was a passionate gardener, raised dogs and cats, collected oriental carpets and folk music from around the world, took excellent photographs, and made skilful drawings for a number of his books.) He manages to reveal unexpected forms and qualities, the “soul” of objects that are encountered every day – a vacuum cleaner, a camera, a doorknob, a stove. Thus it was that alongside his apocalyptic visions and work in science fiction, perhaps as a counterbalance, he produced travel sketches, newspaper columns, and short prose fiction (his *Stories from One Pocket* and *Stories from the Other Pocket*, which appeared in 1929, enjoyed extraordinary popularity). In these works Čapek granted to people and things what he did not grant them in his longer science fiction that they might approach each other in the custom of past centuries rather than in the ways of the present.

Čapek himself tells about the origin of his novel *War with the Newts* (1936): “It was last spring, when the world was looking rather bleak economically, and even worse politically – Apropos of I don’t know what, I had written the sentence, ‘You mustn’t think that the evolution that gave rise to us was the only evolutionary possibility on this planet.’ And that was it. That sentence was the reason I wrote *War with the*

Newts.” “It is quite thinkable,” Čapek reasons, “that cultural development could be shaped through the mediation of another animal species. If the biological conditions were favourable, some civilization not inferior to our own could arise in the depths of the sea If some species other than man were to attain that level we call civilization, what do you think – would it do the same stupid things mankind has done? Would it fight the same wars? Would it invite the same historical calamities? What would we say if some animal other than man declared that its education and its numbers gave it the sole right to occupy the entire world and hold sway over all of creation? It was this confrontation with human history, and with the most pressing topical history, that forced me to sit down and write *War with the Newts*.”

A multitude of political allusions (the figure of the Chief Salamander, whose name was “actually Andreas Schultze” and who “had served someplace during the World War as a line soldier” certainly calls to mind the leader of the Nazi Reich, Adolf Hitler, and the chapter on the book of the royal philosopher paraphrases the Nazi theories of the time) led some contemporary critics to conclude that Čapek had abandoned his relativism to write an anti-Fascist pamphlet. This view, incidentally, has been supported to the present day by official Czech and Soviet literary historiography.

The thinking of many of Čapek’s contemporaries was rooted in uncompromising and aggressive ideologies which sought to reduce even the most complex problems and conflicts to the simplistic language of slogans: The world was witnessing increasing confrontations between classes, nations, and systems – communism and capitalism, bourgeoisie and proletariat, democracy and dictatorship (the black-and-white ideological thinking which continues to dominate the world). Ostensibly, everything could be grasped and explained in such language. Its chief effect, however, was to obscure the human side of every problem; conflicts and issues were elevated to an impersonal level governed by power, strength, and abstract interests, where man was not responsible for his behaviour or actions, and even less for the fate of society.

A writer can make no more fatal mistake than to adopt the simplistic view and language of ideology. Čapek was undoubtedly among the most resolute opponents of Fascism, Nazism, and communism, but now, as before, he sought the causes of modern crises in areas that could be defined by the experience and capabilities of the individual. He found that his contemporaries were becoming estranged from the values that had guided them for centuries and were adopting false values foisted upon them by technology and a consumerist pseudoculture. They were making gods of achievement, success, and quantity.³

³ As early as 1926, Čapek criticized these false values of “the American way of life” in a letter to the *New York Sunday Times*. He contrasted them to the values of old Europe: “Do you recall how Homer depicts Achilles’ shield? It took one song of the *Iliad* for the blind poet to describe how that shield was made; in America you would have made a casting and produced tens of thousands per day; granted, shields might be made cheaply and successfully this way,

Isn't our admiration for machines, that is, for mechanical civilization, such that it suppresses our awareness of man's truly creative abilities? We all believe in human progress; but we seem predisposed to imagine this progress in the form of gasoline engines, electricity, and other technical contrivances We have made machines, not people, our standard for the human order There is no conflict between man and machine But it's another matter entirely when we ask ourselves whether the organization and perfection of human beings is proceeding as surely as the organization and perfection of machines If we wish to talk about progress, let's not rave about the number of cars or telephones but point instead to the value that we and our civilization attach to human life.

– from the article “Rule by Machines”

By forcing individuality into the background, technological civilization makes room for mediocrity and a stifling collectivism.

In a critical commentary on Ortega y Gasset's essay *Revolt of the Masses*, Čapek observes: “Our age is distinguished by the fact that the ordinary spirit, aware of its own ordinariness, is bold enough to defend its right to ordinariness, and asserts it everywhere The mass . . . imposes on the world its own standards and its own taste and strives to give its barroom opinions the force of law

The masses . . . have been imbued with the power and glory of their modern surroundings, but not with spirit.” Čapek, however, differs with the Spanish philosopher by stressing that the fortunes of mankind are threatened not so much by the mediocrity of the masses as by wholesale failure among individuals, particularly those responsible for maintaining our cultural values and the level of thought – i.e., the intellectuals.

Culture means “above all, continuity with every human endeavour that has gone before”; its significance lies in the fact that it supports the awareness of values already established by mankind and thus helps us “not to lose them and not to sink below them.”

Betrayal by the intellectuals was the worst betrayal Čapek could imagine, for its consequences were immeasurable. “A culturally levelled intelligentsia ceases to fulfil certain obligations on which most higher values depend If culture breaks down, the ‘average’ person – the simple, ordinary man, the farmer, the factory worker, the

but Iliads could not In Europe, to this very day things come about slowly; perhaps an American tailor could make three coats in the time one of our people could make one, and it's equally possible the American tailor could produce three times as many as ours; but one may well ask whether the American will also spend three times as much of his life in the process To my knowledge, American efficiency concerns itself with multiplying output, not life. It's true that man works in order to live; but it is evident that he lives also while he is working. One could say that European Man is a very poor industrial machine; but this is because he is not a machine at all.”

tradesman, with his normal thoughts and moral code will not be heard, and will go off in search of something that is far beneath him, a barbaric and violent element Destroy the hierarchical supremacy of the spirit, and you pave the way for the return of savagery. The abdication of the intelligentsia will make barbarians of us all.”

Culture which drops below its own level and loses what it had attained breaks down. Since this is what had just taken place throughout much of Europe, Čapek was convinced that we were witnessing “one of the greatest cultural debacles in world history What happened was nothing less than a colossal betrayal by the intelligentsia”

Where ideologues spoke of the crisis of the system, Čapek was more consistent, more sceptical, more personal; he found a crisis in man, his values, his sense of responsibility. The fall of the intelligentsia marked the beginning of the fall of the entire civilization, the beginning of tremendous calamities.

As he always did when he resolved to pursue a great theme, Čapek turned to the sphere of science fiction. Not only did it suit his storytelling preferences, but a fictional world in fictional time gave him more room for movement and enabled him to shape that world and order the action with maximum focus on the factors which, in his view, were leading to ruin.

At the same time, Čapek wanted to evoke a sense of verisimilitude and topicality. He therefore patterned his narrative on the events of the time, the catchwords, the diplomatic maneuvers, and the advertising slogans, and he made allusions to living people and their work. He also reinforced the feeling of real life by including exact imitations of the most diverse genres of nonfiction, from reminiscences and news stories to interviews and statements by famous personalities.

Such efforts to make his science fiction more lifelike and closer to a documentary record of actual events were characteristic of Čapek's “anti-utopias” and set them off sharply from the majority of works in that genre. Zamyatin, Boye, Orwell, and Bradbury thought through to their absurd end the destructive (generally totalitarian) tendencies they saw in contemporary society. They created worlds that were terrifying in their alienation or totalitarian violence, but at the same time so artificial as to be remote from everyday human experience. Čapek depicted those same disastrous social tendencies in more realistic (and usually ironic) terms. He did not invent new world empires – the United State, Oceania, or the World State, the Bureau of Guardians or the Ministry of Love; he did not describe television eyes that would follow a person's every movement, or Kallocain and other drugs that would deprive him of his will. Čapek's Vaduz conference resembles any diplomatic meeting of the time, just as the board meeting of the Pacific Export Company resembles a board meeting of any contemporary enterprise. His people experience the joys and worries of life in the age of the newts much as they did in Čapek's own day. The fantastical newts appear to exist in everyday life. But this everyday life is moving toward disaster, precisely because its everyday quality has taken it in that direction. Čapek's fiction is less horrifying (at the beginning, it is even humorous), but all too

reminiscent of the world we all live in; and this lends urgency to its admonitions about where that world may be headed.

However lifelike Čapek's utopia may appear, it remains a fiction, an artistic image that cannot be reduced (as some critics have tried to do) to a mere allegory in which the newts are substituted for one of the forces in the contemporary world conflict. No poetic symbol or allegory can be neatly translated back into reality.

The newts have emerged on the scene, and thus entered history, as an independent factor. Of course, they are not loaded down with prejudices or their own history and culture, and in this they resemble children. Eager learners, they strive to emulate everything they perceive to be more developed or more advanced. Like a mirror, they reflect the image of human values and the contemporary state of culture.

What kind of world is encountered by these creatures whose main strength lies in their being average and in their "successful, even triumphal inferiority"? What does modern civilization offer the huge masses of creatures untouched by culture? As Čapek develops his story of the newts and their history, he also refines his answer, and it is a depressing one. Human civilization is racing blindly in pursuit of profits, success, and material progress. Wealth, amusement, and pleasure have become its ideals, and it deifies everything that helps realize those ideals – industry, technology, science, entrepreneurism. En route to its goals, it has not even noticed the loss of what gave it life: human personality, culture, spirit, soul. Inquiry and reflection have been replaced with journalistic jabber, personal involvement in social affairs with a passive craving for sensation, ideas with slogans and empty phrases. "Your work is your success. He who doesn't work doesn't eat! . . ." All this has led to the world's becoming inundated with masses of people dangerous in their mediocrity and their readiness to accept any belief and adopt any goal. Yes, the masses resemble the newts; and the newts have become assimilated by the masses. "Of course, they don't have their own music or literature, but they'll get along without them just fine; and people are beginning to find that this is terribly modern of those Salamanders They've learned to use machines and numbers, and that's turned out to be enough to make them masters of their world. They left out of human civilization everything that was inexpedient, playful, imaginative, or old-fashioned, and so they eliminated from it all that had been human"

Everything that happens to the human race in this "Age of Newts" looks like a natural disaster, not because the newts are a natural phenomenon but because no one anywhere in the world can be found who feels personal responsibility for his creations, his actions, his behaviour, and the social enterprise that is civilization. Or, more accurately, there is just one person, a doorkeeper, who meets his responsibility; he is that insignificant "little man." Among the powerful, the chosen, no thought has been given to the long-term consequences of the terrid civilization is following. Culture has been levelled, art has been displaced by kitsch, philosophy has declined and

taken to celebrating destruction, everything has been overcome by petty, local, and mainly nationalistic considerations.

Human civilization has indeed spread throughout the planet, but people show no evidence of being able to treat anything other than particularized concerns; thus, they have no means of *considering*, let alone *controlling* the consequences of their own actions. Modern civilization is so destructive that no being could come into contact with it and escape unscathed. Even the newts are marked by their encounter with people and their "culture." This is why, with no precautions, they begin to destroy dry land as soon as they find it to be in their interests to do so. People committed to "higher" and "suprapersonal" concerns, people who have long since given up the right to share actively in determining their own future, even when threatened with the extinction of not just one people or state but of mankind, work together with the newts to bring about their own destruction. "All the factories" cooperate, "All the banks. All nations."

In the face of this predicament, what people undertake for their salvation could only be viewed as half hearted and panoptical. The human race has nothing left with which to fight for its existence. These are people who are about to destroy their own planet.⁴

Čapek was a writer of great metaphors, brilliant fantasies, and apocalyptic visions. He was an author who appeared to focus on the events of the external world, on competing ideas, conflicts between nations, the shortcomings of civilization – in sum, conflicts of an entirely impersonal nature. But can real literature develop from impersonal motives, solely from an intellectual need to address a problem, even a very important one? I doubt it.

An argument between Čapek's typical heroes was not merely an argument intended to shed light on a philosophical problem. It was first and foremost Čapek's personal argument. He had an innate, almost prophetic consciousness of sharing responsibility for the fate of human society. He, too, needed to dream of mankind's happiness, of a more peaceful, more secure world. His need was to think up plans, to bring people a good message. At the same time, he realized that all dreams of lofty spirits, all prophetic visions, change into their opposites, and it is precisely these that lead people into fatal conflicts. So he set himself limits. He was Domin in *The Factory of the Absolute*, Prokop in *Krakatite*, Captain van Toch and the entrepreneurial genius Bondy in *War with the Newts*. In these figures he wanted to "smash [himself] with [his]

⁴ Relatively little attention has been given to Čapek's contribution to the Soviet anthology *Den mira* [*Day of Peace*], edited by Maxim Gorky and published in Moscow in 1937. People from around the globe described how they had spent the day on September 27, 1935. In the section "The Winter's Day" Čapek wrote, among other things, "Today I completed the last chapter of my utopian novel. The main character of this chapter is nationalism. The content is quite simple: the destruction of the world and its people. It's a loathsome chapter based solely on logic. Yes, it has to end this way: what destroys us will not be a cosmic catastrophe but mere reasons of state, economics, prestige, and so on."

very power,” the transgression of which Prokop stands accused in *Krakatite*. But time and again he offered repentance, calling himself to order in the words of Alquist or the unknown X. He was punishing himself for the damage he could have done.

Čapek’s entire work testifies to the contradiction faced by a seeing, knowing creative spirit, a spirit that longs to purify and enlighten the world but fears its own imperfection and limitations, fears what people will do with its visions. This dilemma will undoubtedly haunt mankind forever. Čapek’s work illuminates it with the power of personal experience.

Translated by Robert Streit