

KAREL ČAPEK AND THE GARDNER'S YEAR

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In 1929 the Czech author Karel Čapek (1890 – 1938) published a book called “The Gardner’s Year” in Prague. At the time the author was 39 years old and famous for his play R.U.R, which had introduced the word “robot” to the world. Čapek wrote about everything. Himself he regarded two of his mania to be “to understand” and “to express”. He was not occupied with expressing himself “but to express things”. Čapek was a very emotional man and many claim that he died as a result of his nation’s death when the München Pact the 30th of September 1938 allowed Nazi Germany to occupy Sudentland. He lived until Christmas the same year and was most likely killed as much of grief and depression as by inflammation of his lungs. His brother died a few years later in one of the death camps of Nazi Germany. He had made the illustrations to his brother’s book of gardening.

The Nazi occupation of his country banned all Karel’s works. Thus the Karel most likely have published the only gardening book ever to be banned by a political censorship. In order to understand the political aspects of his writing and his elegant and great variation in writing I have found it most helpful to read other works such as “Apocryphal Tales”, which is a collection of newspaper articles from *Lidové noviny* his principal newspaper.

Čapek’s book on gardening is one of a mountain of books about gardening, but most likely the only one of them devoted to the psychology of gardeners. Even if most students of Čapek most likely regard the book to be a minor work the author himself thought of life as a subset of gardening.

The Gardner’s Year can be read as a metaphor of life and the contemporary political situation of Europe and particularly of Nazi Germany. The comedy of the petty tyrant, the man or woman, who picks up his garden tools one morning, falls in love with gardening, and then assumes that the world and particularly the weather will organize itself in harmony with his new obsession. His prayers are carefully phrased words for all occasions. Nothing is left to God’s decisions; “that there may be plenty of dew and little wind, enough worms, no plant-lice and snails, no mildew and that once in the week thin liquid manure and guano may fall from heaven. Amen.”

For Čapek to understand what gardening means is to understand the complexity of human nature. “If we should say that secret swarming of the future within us, we should say that our melancholy and distrust is silly and absurd, and that the best things of all is to be a living man – that is a man who grows”. Michael Pollan, one of the most famous garden writers of USA, claim that Čapek will engage gardeners centuries ahead because he was able to communicate the power of plants to change us in mind and body, the gratuitous beauty of a flower, the moral lesson of a pest, the ancient language of landscape design, and the endlessly engrossing ways cultivating a garden attaches a body to the earth.

The gardeners described by Čapek are only rarely as good as they would like us to think that they are. Their body parts get in the way and their bottoms stick high up of the vegetable patch, they step on their cucumbers and strawberries, their spring begins in October and their fall in March with the fading of the first snowdrops. They have immodest and inexhaustible desires just by thinking about dirt and they are easily seduced by garden catalogues that lists the ingredients in a good garden soil such as dung, manure, guano, leafmold, sods, humus, ,

sand, straw, lime, kainit and beautiful flowering plants, seed for all desires and all kind of technical gadgets used in gardens.

The question of garden soil is a moral one for Čapek. Some soils are beautiful in richness and consistency while others are as ugly as the coldness, callousness and malice of human souls. The last phrase is a grim assessment of humanity and the fate of Europe in the war years to come and perhaps even of the future facing us today.

Literature

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