

## Introduction

Sixty years and more after his death, the arguments are forgotten, along with the polemics, the passions, the accusations, and the envy – but the work remains. More of Čapek's work has survived than has that of the majority of his Czech contemporaries. It is interesting that, even though Čapek became famous first and foremost for his plays, today he seems to speak to readers more with his novels and stories, and even his journalism: his perceptive essays on the spiritual problems of Europe, the role of the intelligentsia, and the dangerous trends leading to totalitarian thought, as well as his splendid columns about everyday things and ordinary people, about their interests, hobbies, and passions.

Finally, the results of his ability to perceive those tendencies in human behavior that threaten our civilization remain fascinating to this day; his *War with the Newts*, for instance, belongs for all time among those works that have lost nothing in their ability to urgently address readers.

Čapek was an author inspired more often by ideas than by individuals' fate, and yet, as I try to demonstrate, his work often reflects his own problems and traumas, his personal anxieties and hopes. His talent was many-sided, and he had everything that makes a writer a writer: the ability to see in things and events what ordinarily goes unnoticed, and to write about them with a vivid wit and with a freshness that can be appreciated to this day. He was skilled at describing even commonplace events in the most unexpected ways, and at giving a new sense to old stories. He had the gift of epic narrative as well as lyrical observation. He kept a close eye on the consequences of our actions and on the suicidal streaks of our civilization. He also had an extraordinary linguistic sense, and a close reading of his works still delights the reader with its richness, precision, and of course the language itself – as if it had not been touched by time.

Čapek died at a tragic moment in Czechoslovak and European history. That may be why, among those who study and write about his work, it has become the established view

that his fate, too, was tragic, and so they have placed him in the pantheon of those great Czech personages traditionally considered martyrs. I believe the truth is just the opposite. Even though Čapek surely, as we all do, had his difficult moments and times when he was dispirited by his illness, he lived a happy life. He was a man of work, and his work brought him abundant satisfaction and praise. He was one of the few Czech artists who could say, at the end of his life, that he had remained true to himself. Even in his personal life Čapek was not unhappy. He gained the friendship of any number of genuinely outstanding, distinguished individuals, he maintained an unsurpassed relationship with his brother, and in the end attained even what had previously seemed unattainable to him: marrying the woman he had truly loved and admired for many years, and who, in her own way, loved and respected him as well.

However often he might have complained about being insufficiently appreciated, he received such favor as few authors have ever known, and the love of readers throughout the entire world – and thanks to his journalism, he had more readers than any other modern Czech writer.

While speaking of the interests of readers, I must emphasize that, for several generations in Czechoslovakia, democracy was only a memory from the past. For many readers, therefore, Čapek was a representative and symbol of anti-ideological thought, of tolerance and democratic values, of art that was free and unfettered by any doctrine. Yet I believe that he can be understood anywhere in the world as a man who, in the midst of an insane, chaotic epoch preparing for the bloodiest conflict in history, stood up for the individual against any and all kinds of manipulation. He exhorted us to resist the impending barbarization, and he insisted that we can succeed only to the extent that we are cognizant of and honor those values which humankind has already formed. In order for us neither to forfeit those values nor abandon them, Čapek is as valuable and urgently needed today as he was in his own time.

### Note for English-Language Readers

When, after World War II, I first began to take an interest in Karel Čapek, he was still among the prohibited authors. At the time of my studies, only some of his works were allowed to be published, primarily those considered “antifascist.” Yet he never ceased to belong among those few Czech writers whom everyone in the country knew. Then, in the mid-1950s, his work began to be published once again, and the books disappeared from bookshops within a few hours’ time, even though they had been issued in editions of tens of thousands. When early in the 1960s I wrote a small book about Karel Čapek, I could assume that its readers would, or at least could, know most everything he wrote. Therefore it made sense to consider each of these works individually, including those written at the very beginning of his career, even though his early writing differed considerably from the later works that brought him world renown. I am not certain whether Czech readers today are still familiar with those first literary efforts, and since, understandably, English-language readers are unlikely to know them, there might seem little purpose in examining them. But even excluding all that he wrote before and during World War I (most of which were written with his older brother, Josef), a remarkable amount of work remains – all the more remarkable in that Čapek died at the relatively young age of forty-eight.

I am not among those who consider the object of literary study to be the interpretation of what authors are actually trying to communicate in their work. If I occasionally attempt to do so in this book, it will be purely to acknowledge Čapek’s own stated intent in the brief explanations that accompanied most of his significant works.

The greater part of Čapek’s writing was done for newspapers, and even many of his novels first appeared in serial form in the progressive, highly respected newspaper for which he worked. While taking away nothing from the quality of his writing, this nonetheless suggests that a considerable portion of it was of a topical nature, written in response to the political issues and societal problems of his time. This political portion of Čapek’s work is almost entirely unknown to English-language readers (for the most part, it has never been translated) and so, occasionally, I have quoted from it more extensively than is

usually the case, so that the reader can become acquainted with at least a few of Čapek's splendid stands on timeless issues as well as the issues of his time.

Since every great literary work is an authentic expression of its creator, one should seek to discover all that determines the creator's journey through life and defines the creator's values. In other words, to search for the primary sources of the author's inspiration. This I have tried to do, and I believe that this approach to Čapek's life and work will appeal equally to Czech- and English-language readers alike.