

The Oriental Illusion: Karel Čapek's Tales

Ludmila Volná,

University of Prague Czech Republic

This paper intends to study the ways in which Karel Čapek treats the representations of the Oriental in two of his tales, “Jasnovidec,” (1928/1929, “The Clairvoyant”) and “Velká kočičí pohádka” (1932, “A Long Cat Tale”). The author is a Czech writer, journalist and photographer of the first half of the 20th century (1890-1938) who, in Eva Strohsová words “in considerable and multiple ways contributed to the creation of the cultural space of the first Czechoslovak republic and whose work gained a wide acclaim not only at home but also on the international scale.” (586. Translation mine.)

Karel Čapek's writing testifies to his unconditional attachment to humanistic values. Among his best known plays can be cited *R. U. R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, (1920), a warning against the degradation of humankind where for the first time the word *robot*, invented by Čapek's brother Josef, painter, writer and journalist himself, is used, or explicitly anti-fascists pieces like Bílá nemoc (*The White Disease*), (1937), or *Matka (The Mother)*, (1938). The growing danger of Nazism and war, depicted also in other works, like the novel titled Válka s mloky (*War with the Newts*), (1936), preoccupied Karel Čapek enormously. On Christmas Eve of 1937 when the danger of Nazism became imminent he issued on the waves of Radio Prague a call in the name of Czechoslovak intellectuals towards all people of good will,

addressed to Rabindranath Tagore, where he expressed the former's disappointment of the Western European countries treachery on the account of the Munich treaty, countries bound by treatises of help and support, a call which became an appeal for equality and freedom for humankind. He got almost immediately Tagore's assurances of support, encouragement and compassion.

In "Jasnovidec" ("The Clairvoyant"), a tale included in the collection titled *Povídky z jedné kapsy, Povídky z druhé kapsy* (*Tales from Two Pockets*), Čapek makes us consider the period's stereotyped visions of the Oriental. Typically, the Oriental is perceived as the Other and there are basically two contrasting views of the Oriental in the tale presented in form of a dialogue.

Here is a short synopsis of the tale:

In a discussion Mr Janowitz tries to persuade Dr Klapka, the district attorney and chief public prosecutor, that a certain Prince Karadagh can tell the character of a person from just touching the person's handwriting. Reluctantly, in order to see for himself, Dr Klapka accepts to submit to Karadagh the handwriting of a person accused of murder to be presented by Klapka in the next court proceeding, obviously without revealing the person's identity to anyone present. To his surprise Klapka finds that what Karadagh says about the person from the handwriting fits perfectly the presumed murderer's character. Afterwards, to his even greater surprise, however, he discovers that the handwriting he submitted was, by mistake, his own. He reconsiders certain features suggested by Karadagh as 'not so bad,' and, on the other hand, when in court he uses the Prince's imaginatively rich rhetoric to obtain the death sentence for the accused, in which he succeeds in spite of a highly feeble evidence, which gains him admiration of his colleagues.

According to Strohsová

Čapek's *Tales from Two Pockets* is a newly created kind of a 'newspaper tale,' the theme of which is based on the modern detective story, whereas its language and style reflect speech. What is significant in Čapek's detective story is a typical confrontation of secret and mystery on the one hand and a civil and matter-of-factly positioned situation on the other. (599. Translation mine.)

Nevertheless, as we will see, in "The Clairvoyant" the *secret and mystery* acquire a more specific signification because a representation of the Orient in the West is brought on the scene: it is a question of Edward Said's 'Orient being almost a European invention,' being since antiquity "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." (1)

Already the very first sentence installs an environment of stereotyped visions:

"I'm not an easy person to fool; after all, I'm not a Jew for nothing, right?"¹ (220) argues Janowitz in the attempt to persuade Dr Klapka while emphasizing the pride of the group with which he identifies. The framework of the tale is set: there will be a question of stereotyped concepts: the Oriental as a kind of clairvoyant following 'scientific methods' (which, as pointed out below already appears a nonsense and contradiction in itself) as perceived and advocated for by Janowitz on the one hand, and the views on the

¹ All citations from Čapek's tales come from their respective English translations as indicated in the Work Cited section.

Oriental expressed by Klapka on the other. The ending of the tale, however, deconstructs Janowitz's initial assumption because it proves him gullible.

Mr Janowitz further on discloses certain features of Karadagh's otherwise enigmatic identity, though in rather vague terms: the Prince comes from an ancient family of the Baku region and has learned his art in Persia. So far Janowitz.

Baku is the centre of the area called Azerbaijan since about 1030, bounded by the Caspian Sea to the east, Russia to the north, Georgia to the northwest, Armenia to the west and Iran to the south. Azerbaijan as meaning in Persian *Guardians of Fire* refers to the place's original Zoroastrian religion (from around 4th century BC) which, together with other cults and Christianity, was gradually supplanted by Islam starting with the Muslim conquest of Persia (637-651 AD). The first shah of the Safavid Dynasty, one of the most significant ruling dynasties of Persia, Ismail I (ruled between 1486-1524) established Shia Islam as the state religion of the area even though a part of the population remained Sunni. At the time Karel Čapek wrote his tale and today Azerbaijan has been a Muslim-majority country, nowadays the country is secular and the overall majority of population considers Islam rather a way of life without strictly observing religious rules.

The word *clairvoyant* is not mentioned anywhere in the tale but as its title. On the one hand it clearly points to the Western world's stereotyped concept of the Orient as mystery, "the strange," (*Orientalism* 43) and the Oriental as *fakir* or *clairvoyant*, a person endowed with qualities not easily understood by the West, while, at the same time, the author's voice deconstructs this

perception by precisely omitting the word and what it signifies within the text of the tale. As any (by the West) incomprehensible faculties of the Oriental are considered as in sharp contrast with the allegedly scientific methods of the West, Janowitz, while constructing the Oriental in a stereotyped way, attempts to formulate Karadagh's performances "suitably in modern terms, to put ideas about the Orient in very close touch with modern realities" (*Orientalism* 43) [:] "' [Karadagh] explains it all scientifically; no magic tricks, no mysterious powers, I'm telling you, strictly scientific method.' - 'Then he's an even bigger phony,' the DA admonished him." (220)

Janowitz and Klapka's dialogue represent their respective views the perspective of which reflect Edward Said's assumption that "[o]ne could speak in Europe of Oriental personality, an Oriental atmosphere, an Oriental tale, Oriental despotism, or an Oriental mode of production, and be understood." (*Orientalism* 31) Nevertheless, Klapka's attitude towards Karadagh, the 'Oriental Other,' is conceived differently than that of Janowitz. Their dialogue can be described, in Said's words, as an interaction of "too positivistic a localized focus," Janowitz's point of view, and "the dogmatic general," represented by Klapka. (Qtd by Williams and Chrisman 134, 135) The latter does not hide his xenophobic views: his perception echoes what Said further on calls "a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between *the familiar* (Europe, the West, 'us') and *the strange* (the Orient, the East, 'them')." (*Orientalism* 43)

Dr Klapka thus expresses his xenophobia towards foreigners and indeed his "dogmatic views of 'the Oriental'" (Said in Williams and Chrisman 135) as follows:

“Listen, Mr. Janowitz,” the DA said, “this is all very nice, but I only believe fifty per cent of what foreigners say, especially when I don’t know how they make their living; I believe Russians even less, and fakirs less than that; but when on top of everything else the man’s a prince, then I don’t believe one word of it. Where did you say he learned this? Ah yes, in Persia. Forget it, Mr. Janowitz; the whole Orient’s a fraud.” (220)

The word in the Czech original translated as *fraud* in this quotation is *humbuk*, literally *humbug* in English. This word is used by Klapka at two more instances in the tale: he concludes his dialogue with Janowitz with a promise ‘to prove [*humbuk*] to Karadagh’ and again after that as condemning Karadagh’s labelling the author of the handwriting as *buffoon* (*komediant* in Czech), an identification he would not like for himself (as he already finds out the handwriting is by mistake his own). The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* defines *humbug* as “(a) dishonest behaviour or talk that is intended to deceive people and win their support or sympathy, (b) dishonest and deceitful person.” (608) Klapka’s attitude is further confirmed by his behaviour and thoughts: “The district attorney cast probing eyes on this exotic creature; he was a young and slender man with eyeglasses, the face of a Tibetan monk and delicate, thievish hands. Fancy-pants quack, the district attorney decided.” (220, 221)

In fact, Karadagh, an ‘Oriental’ outside his home environment, as Čapek portrays him, is a smart person with a highly polished gift of rhetoric. The murder case in question must have been a fairly known affaire in general and thus it is not

difficult for him to guess in whose character the chief prosecutor of the case, Dr Klapka, is most interested just before the trial; especially when there is almost no evidence against the accused.

In the end it surprisingly appears that some of the character features mentioned by Karadagh coincide in fact precisely with those of Klapka: he nevertheless appropriates them as positive qualities and behaves accordingly, which will help him to win the trial. On the other hand he defines the same features as deplorable in his accusation speech while using them to describe the accused and his motivation, which also contributes to his 'victory.' For his personal profit and with ruthless disinterest towards the accused, Klapka shamelessly steals 'the Oriental's' rhetorical mastery to read his final speech at the court, under the impression of which Hugo Müller is sentenced to death for murder with almost no evidence. Who is the victim and who the murderer? the question arises. In the end things may not be what they appear to be, in the same way as people may not be who they appear to be. This is true for whoever may be referred to as an 'Oriental,' for Persians, Indians, Central-Europeans, Muslims, Jews, and many others, and it is true for the 'I' and for 'the Other.'

The world of Karel Čapek and also of his brother Josef, as the two often worked together, is constructed of freedom, independence and equality as essential values. A search for mysteries of life, invention and the desire to discover - often in a playful way - are attributes of their approach towards reality and all beings and things of life, first of all towards those dear to them. Writer Ivan Klíma says about Karel Čapek:

He imagined an ideal world [...] [a world] with no enmity, a world of good and kind relations. [...] A world where everybody would have their small or greater tasks but first of all a space of their own with which nobody else would never interfere. [...] There sounds [in the tales] Čapek's ancient faith in the humanity of all: policemen, commissars, marriage scammers, thieves, safe-breakers, and even those who murder (301, 303. Translation mine.),

a faith devoid of stereotyped vision.

This is reflected in "**Velká kočičí pohádka**," ("A Long Cat Tale," 1931) a part of *Devatero pohádek a ještě jedna od Josefa Čapka jako přívěšek*, (*Nine Fairy Tales and One More Thrown in for Good Measure*, 1932) a fairy-tale collection for children.

While some motives and figures [of these tales] are those used in the traditional fairy-tale (fairies, magicians, elves, water gnomes, the animals that can speak), these are joined by characters typically found within the contemporary reality (detectives, postmen, drivers, etc.). Through different representations of their interaction the traditional fairy-tale world intertwines with the realistic present and the *miraculous and magic acquire an unusually civil character*." (Strohsová 599. Translation mine.)

Further on, (both) Čapek's/works for children - and first of all those where animals are the main characters in some way or other - can be considered an example of writing, both in theme and form, resisting stereotyped views.

In “A Long Cat Tale,” where the best of detectives, a famous American Sidney Hall is hired to find the alleged thief of the Princess’s beloved pet of a cat, a magician, ‘the Other,’ be it a human or an animal, is treated with respect, concern, kindness and attention. Those negligent of these qualities are either instructed, which is mostly the case, or have to suffer some kind of justice. For example, the cat is described as an “animal with emerald eyes that no one can steal, and with long whiskers, though it is not a man; and a sparkling coat, which does not burn; and silken feet, that never wear out; and sixteen knives in as many pockets, though she does not use them to cut meat.” (5)

The alleged thief proves to be a magician and impossible to be caught by the detectives of the Kingdom. With kind humour the writer takes the children around the world together with Sidney Hall as he is chasing the magician. In fact, it is Sidney who tells the story of the world and of its different countries and cultures after he is back and thus whatever he says is his observations. The first Oriental culture to comment on is Egypt: “As I was in Alexandria, I took a boat down the sacred Nile all the way to Cairo. It is such a huge city, that it would get lost in itself had the people not built there high mosques and minarets. They are visible from such a great distance, that even the farthest houses can tell just where they are by them.” (37)

Here we can notice what can be perceived as gentle humour and a kind of elevated reality of a fairy-tale. All is told in a simple language to make it easily comprehensible for children. The detective renders what is immediately accessible to sight: the mosques and minarets of the huge city prevent those who live there from being lost. Apart from this being blatantly true in the literal

sense, this description can be read as a metaphor: the mosques and minarets can serve people as a spiritual *orientation*, not to get lost in the huge stream of life, the two being valid for visitors too. Moreover, mosques and minarets mediate to the visitor a sense of Orient, *Orient-ation*. Orient becomes immediately and straightforwardly accessible to the visitor's mind and senses, and stereotypes - if there are any - can be deconstructed.

It is also in Cairo at the Nile river that Sidney Hall is helped by a clever and kind "black Arab" (38) to get back his clothes, money and watch, all eaten by a crocodile. Again, the reference to the person is a simple one, a juxtaposition of the generally known - Arab - and the visible - black. This man is one of those numerous people to help Sidney Hall in one way or other along his journey, all these being each as if an avatar of one person, thus becoming a metaphor for a human who can acquire different appearances but still remains always that same, i. e. human being. What marvels Sidney Hall, among other things, for example, in India is that "[t]he forests are so dense there, that there is no room in them even for trees, and that is what they call jungle," (40) or the immense width of the river Ganges, while in Japan he finds a people "cheerful and industrious" whose every gesture results in an artistic creation. On the other hand, by introducing all these representations as through Sidney Hall's perception, Čapek points to the generally stereotyped perception of the Oriental Other in his period, the "marvelous." The humorous tone can also be read as a deconstructive technique to those stereotypes.

In the end the marvelous is followed by magic and illusion: the magician is apparently caught by the detective but in reality lets himself be caught out of kindness, which he showed all

along the way while taking on different appearances of animals and people, including the ‘black Arab,’ to help Sidney Hall so that the latter’s quest would not be spoilt but accomplished in time. It is also revealed that he, first considered a thief, in fact kindly dressed the cat’s wounded leg and let her (it is a female cat) go just afterwards. Here again nothing is as it first appears, which is further emphasized by what follows. When a bureaucratic and stereotype-minded judge sentences the magician to three days of prison, the latter performs his most impressive illusion: the prison turns into a lovely garden full of flowers and the criminals, a thief, an arsonist, a murderer and others, are invited to a splendid dinner table when an even greater miracle happens: the criminals repent and humbly serve their victims who are brought towards them, and make up for the evil deeds committed upon them. Three days pass and the warden finally succeeds in waking up the criminals who have slept this whole period while the magician stood there and “his eyes shone like stars.” (55) Since then “every night the sleep of peace without remorse and suffering spread over the jail.” (56)

The fact that along the way the magician takes on appearances of people belonging to different cultures including the ‘Oriental’ ones points clearly to the equality of all, none should be considered superior to the other. As to his perception of the magician identity Sidney Hall finally admits his having been subject to illusion. All this understanding was made possible because of love and attention shown to a cat. The very end of the tale finds the Princess again in the company of her beloved cat Jůra who eventually brings the boy Vašek to the castle to become the Kingdom’s future king.

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