

*Šolić, Mirna: In Search of a Shared Expression. Karel Čapek's Travel Writing and Imaginative Geography of Europe.*

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Karel Čapek's five travelogues from interwar Europe form an interesting, if somewhat overlooked part of the prolific author's oeuvre. In Mirna Šolić, they have found a knowledgeable and sympathising interpreter who approaches her subject with contagious enthusiasm. As neatly summed up in the subtitle, Šolić's monograph pursues two interwoven agendas: to analyse the poetics of Čapek's travel writing, and to present the image of Europe evoked in his travelogues. Throughout the book, Šolić

contextualises her argument with relevant references to domestic and international trends in literature, painting, film, etc.

After a general introduction to the theme and the topic, Šolić presents her analysis in five chapters. Chapter 1 examines Čapek's influential 1919 translation of Guillaume Apollinaire's *Zone* and functions as a prologue to the ensuing close readings of the travelogues. *Zone* (Pásmo) was formative for Čapek's poetics of travel writing, Šolić argues, because of the *flâneur* quality of Apollinaire's journeys, which Čapek reproduced, and because of Apollinaire's poetic articulation of the beauty in the quotidian, a central and recurring theme for Čapek. (pp. 52-54) Šolić demonstrates how Čapek adapted the poem to a Czech literary and cultural context, endowing Czech poetry with a cultural transduction of the theme of travel in the process.

The next two chapters form the core of the monograph. They examine the poetics of Čapek's travelogues first from a verbal, and then from a visual perspective. In Chapter 2, Šolić makes good use of the narratological concept of *skaz* (derived from Russian *skazat'*/to tell) to characterize Čapek's first person narrative with its frequent emulations of oral speech. His modernist experimenting with its hybridisation of the travel genre was, Šolić shows, literarily liberating. Starting with the 1924 *Letters from England* (Anglické listy), Čapek's exploration of the possibilities of the genre included the addition of the author's own illustrations. Šolić offers a detailed analysis of the dynamic relationship between image and text in the travelogues. However, the centrality of this intermediality to Čapek's poetics results in significant overlaps between the book-by-book analysis of the evolution of Čapek's narrative strategies in Chapter 2, and Chapter 3, which proceeds in the same way in its examination of how the author in words and drawings presented his visual impressions from the visited countries. Careful editing would for example have eliminated the verbatim repetition of the analysis of Čapek's depictions of pelota and shoe shining in Spain. (pp. 92-93 and 135)

Šolić persuasively demonstrates that in the travelogues, "an inextricable link between natural, living, creative material and the formation of cultural and aesthetic identity forms the essence of the traveller's aesthetic and intellectual experience of the [visited] country" (p. 150). Čapek feels most at ease, most at home, wherever he senses a creative balance between culture and the natural material that shapes it. He therefore finds the noisy metropolis of London deeply alienating. Where nature takes over, Čapek tends to portray the visited lands in categories of the supernatural, most markedly so in his 1936 *Journey to the North* (Cesta na sever), but also in glimpses in his earlier descriptions of Scotland or Spain. Šolić does not use the term, but it seems tempting to see Čapek's mix of fascination and unease with the surreal dreamscape of northern Norway as his attempt to address his encounter with the sublime.

In Chapter 4, Šolić abandons the travelogues to analyse representations of travel in Čapek's 1936 novel *War with the Newts* (Válka s mloky). This makes perfect sense, since the first part of the novel offers parody adaptations of three dominant strands in the interwar poetics and practice of travel writing: exploration and adventure narratives, films featuring the topic, and scientific discourse on travel and discoveries. Šolić offers rich and well-contextualised analyses of each. Curiously, she does not even mention the presence of illustrations and the highly inventive use of

typography in the novel, although the resulting intermediality invites comparison with the travelogues.

Šolić defines her final chapter as an “Epilogue.” Based on a posthumously edited collection of essays on travels across Czechoslovakia, published in 1953 as *Images from the Homeland* (Obrázky z domova), Šolić analyses the official post-1948 reception of Čapek’s travel writing. She argues that the volume attempted to make Čapek return home, not just concretely by writing about his homeland, but also metaphorically in the sense of home from the aestheticized world of his earlier travelogues to reality, to political awareness, to the concrete world of good workers.

There is much to enjoy in Šolić’s analysis of Čapek’s essays from the homeland but in this case, I found the cultural-political contextualisation inadequate. Šolić defines the framework of her reception analysis as “the postwar Czech literature of the 1950s and 1960s” (p. 207), but this is too broad to register the dramatic changes in Čapek’s ideological standing in the mentioned decades. Statements on Čapek from 1952 or 1956 emerged in radically different contexts, and Miroslav Halík’s 1953 edition was part of a heated conflict over the correct ideological position on Čapek and his oeuvre.

Historians may take particular interest in Šolić’s analysis of Čapek’s “imaginative geography of Europe,” a theme covered in all five chapters. Her core argument here is that Čapek travelled in order to find a cultural identity common to all the European countries he visited. He sought this identity in ‘folk’ art and handicraft, reflecting his deep interest (shared with his brother Josef and numerous other artists at that time) in aesthetic primitivism and the “low” genres.

Šolić argues that unlike mostly in the West, Čapek’s primitivism was not political and exoticising. It was a “primitivism without savages” (p. 24) seeking the primitive in European tradition and the present. He approached foreign cultures from a non-imperial perspective and playfully challenged the imperial ideology of much Western literature of adventure and exploration. Šolić has an excellent example of how Čapek’s sympathetic account of the Czech explorer Jan Welzl’s culturally inclusive portrayal of Inuit life was mistranslated into English in 1932 to make it fit dominant colonial and racial discourses (p. 187). However, when Šolić compares Čapek’s 1930 *A Trip to Spain* (Výlet do Španěl) with Wyndham Lewis’ 1932 *Filibusters in Barbary* about the author’s travels in Morocco, arguing that Lewis’ account “translates into a civilizational division between the mythic African and technologized European Mediterranean, which Čapek’s imaginative geography annuls” (p. 88), I do not feel fully convinced by the argument. Lewis experienced the hostility of the locals towards Europeans, whereas Čapek, who never left Europe, meets “the Moorish” only through its traces in Spanish architecture and culture.

Šolić’s readings show that even within Europe, Čapek operated with distinctions bordering on normative hierarchies. The dominant axis of his imaginative geography runs north-south, and writing about Italy, Čapek locates himself in the “Gothic, non-Antique” north (p. 114). It is to the Scandinavian North that Čapek travels in search of Europe’s beginning and essence, but he still writes about Italy and France as variations on a shared, familiar culture, with only England being truly foreign. The only “East” covered in Čapek’s travel writing is Slovakia, which he – like many

other Czech interwar artists – presented as a pre-historic land of unspoiled harmony between the natural and the human. This may well be “primitivism without savages,” but the imagery is exoticizing. Other scholars may thus approach Čapek’s mental maps of Europe more critically than Šolić, but this takes nothing away from her insightful and readable monograph.