

Strategies and dominants: a hundred years with Josef Švejk

BOHUMIL FOŘT

Masarykova univerzita, Brno
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9675-9270>
E-mail: 7103@mail.muni.cz

Abstract: It is obvious that Hašek's *Fateful Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk during the World War* (1921–1923) is centred around its main character – Josef Švejk. This study departs from the traditional interpretive model that mimeticizes Švejk and makes him part of the “Czech myth” and attempts to analyze this character as the central point of the narrative-semiotic build of the entire novel. Therefore, the study defines three principles based on the functions of Švejk as a character and his functions, physical, verbal and semantic, and shows how through these principles is essentially involved in this construction.

Keywords: Jaroslav Hašek, Josef Švejk, Czech literary, construction of novel, thematization, semantic

Discussions of Jaroslav Hašek's *Fateful Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk during the World War* (1921–1923) are many and many will surely follow, both in the professional and laic literary



This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons BY-ND 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>). © Copyright by the Author(s)

space. The genre classification of the work, its role as a national cultural phenomenon, the circumstances of its creation, as well as speculations about the possible continuation of the torso arouse the undying interest of expert and amateur researchers involved in the investigation of Hašek's work in general and in the good soldier Švejk in particular.

Undoubtedly, majority of these just mentioned discussions have a common central topic that is impossible to ignore – the book's protagonist, Josef Švejk. Yet, there is a cardinal question connected with the book's main character that has to be asked: Who really is Josef Švejk? There is no point in listing all the existing answers, which cover the whole range from the schematizing theoretical view of Švejk as a literary character – a specific subject with specific functions for the novel, on the one side of the scale, to the mimetic view of Švejk as a counterpart of a human being, on the other. As such, the latter Švejk has served as an important part of the establishment of the Czech national myth: indeed, souvenirs using Švejk and names of pubs and restaurants referring to this fictional literary figure are clearly meant to attract usually foreign tourists, however, the myth itself lives in Czech households in forms of kitschy plastics, pictures, beer glasses, beer openers and mats and others. The visual form of Švejk is firmly set by the naivistic illustrations of Josef Lada, that accompany books about the hero from the very beginning and form the hero's general and widespread image, picturing him as a chubby man with a wide smile in a misfitting uniform and with the necessary proprieties of a beer-glass full of beer with a top of rich foam and often with a pipe in his mouth. In addition, these artifacts are frequently accompanied by the slogan “Take it easy” (“To chce klid”), which supposedly refers to the nation's nature.

So, who is really Švejk of the novel? Beer drinker and pipe smoker, funny and laughable idiot, uncanny malingerer and war-avoider (pretending to be an idiot), little-big man, *homo ludens* or deontic alien, as he is often classified by readers and scholars? As such, still contributing to the national myth, Švejk usually dwells in a fine line between

a submissive retard and uncanny querulant – a symbol of nation attitude towards oppression, regardless of whether against Austrians (AHE), Germans (WW2) or Soviet Union and their allies (1968–1989).

A common thread in the attempts of defining Švejk is the fact that Švejk himself resists definition on principle: being of uncertain characteristics, being minimally psychologized and maximally unpredictable in his actions. As such, he resists not only the definition, but also the possible association with some dominant human characteristic – anyone he can be and not be at the same time.¹ Therefore, let us try to see the phenomenon of Švejk from a slightly non-traditional point of view.

In this point of view, it can be argued that the hero's actional behaviour is in concordance with verbal behaviour in terms of their effect resulting with join power to his unpredictability a puzzling image.² Indeed, Švejk seems to be tagged together from mutually incongruent acting qualities: humbleness vs. tease, mockery, obligation vs. rebellion (balancing in the equilibrium "in between" the world of obligatory and of rebellion), subordination vs. superordination, loyalty vs. disloyalty, purposeless and playfulness vs. purposeful acting, stability vs. development and emancipation – these and more others being augmented by the character's switching his role from one extreme to ano-

¹ In his study of the grotesque worlds of Hašek and Kafka, Karel Kosík comments primarily on who Švejk is not, and part of his reasoning in this sense refers to the phenomenon Lubomír Doležel (2003) calls the deontic alien; however, in another of his studies, the same author (2008) shows that Švejk adopts different strategies in relation to the deontic layout of his world (this fact, I hope, in a way supports my argument about the fuzzy dialectical nature of Švejk, which I will discuss later in this study). Sylvie Richterová, pointing out the difficulties with defining Švejk, refers to him as to "a man without qualities" (see Richterová, 1983, p. 127).

² Karel Hausenblas, in his study on character construction in prose texts (1971), speaks in connection with Švejk of the dominance of the verbal characterization of Švejk as a character over the action and analyses this component in detail. I believe that it is not so important which component is more dominant, but rather how they cooperate in the specific construction of this unique character.

ther. Similarly, in the protagonist's verbal behaviour can be detected a mixture of the use of literal meaning vs. common sense, of construction via deconstruction (and *vice versa*) and the use of unpredicted analogies, hyperbole, and irony. These and other result in the stage in which the readers do not know much about his motivation, intentions, preference, purpose and make him as a character ambiguous and therefore sometimes hardly comprehensible. Therefore, I believe, it is time to rethink the possible cause of these results in a more theoretical and systematic way.

The point of view I propose to grasp these phenomena is based on a somewhat heretical assumption (in relation to the Švejk-figure), which does not view Švejk as the centre of the whole novel as a main character, but attributes to him a servant function and considers him a principle of the plot and semantic construction of this specific text. Obviously, the theoretical discussions on the relationship between plot and characters are also numerous and there is also no point in repeating them here – let us only stress here a certain compromise position that emphasizes their complementarity in the production of narrative.

In the case of Hašek's novel, this complementarity is clearly represented by their interdependence – everything happens because Švejk himself is somehow connected to it, there is no agency without Švejk, there is no Švejk without agency. Therefore, let us proclaim Švejk a central narrative principle of the novel. As much as Švejk as a character constantly draws the reader's attention to himself using a variety of means, he is in a position crucial for the realisation of the plot and its development – the plot itself is primarily about Švejk and realized through Švejk. Švejk "carries" the plot, is determined by the plot, he is created to meet the needs of the story, but at the same time he is determined by the motifs and themes of the text's meaning construction. Thus, delimited on the one hand by the plot and on by the state of the real world, the other, Švejk is both passively "following" the main storyline and actively implementing episodic events into it, which he mediates through his own narration.

Let us, now, extrapolate, in accordance with contemporary narrative-semiotic investigation, that the narrative principle of Švejk is strongly related to the meaning construction of the whole novel.³ To illustrate, let us quote a passage from the author's preface to the novel:

A GREAT epoch calls for great men. There are modest unrecognized heroes, without Napoleon's glory or his record of achievements. An analysis of their characters would overshadow even the glory of Alexander the Great. To-day, in the streets of Prague, you can come across a man who himself does not realize what his significance is in the history of the great new epoch. Modestly he goes his way, troubling nobody, nor is he himself troubled by journalists applying to him for an interview. If you were to ask him his name, he would answer in a simple and modest tone of voice: "I am Schweik." (Hašek, 1939, p. 5).

I believe that this passage provides an seminal key to the semantics of the whole work: small vs. big man or macrohistory vs. microhistory are possible boundaries for defining the basic semantic principle of the whole work, in which Švejk plays a fundamental role.⁴ However, as much these boundaries seem to be formed by obvious dialectical opposites,⁵ it should be noted that in the case of Švejk it is generally more a kind of *fuzzy dialectics*, whose opposites are not entirely exclusive. It is within this fuzzy dialectics as the basic principle of the meaning construction of Švejk that not only is it difficult to delimit or define Švejk, but this fuzzy dialectic practiced by Švejk is the basic principle of the meaning construction of the entire work: Švejk both follows the road (of the war machinery, the main storyline) and makes

³ It is a matter of fact that narrating Švejk fulfils the main principles of narrativity – as a non-predictable element it constantly surprises, as a controversial element it creates suspension, thus arousing the reader's curiosity; see especially Stenberg, 2001.

⁴ The relationship between the big and the small man, the big and the small history is probably the most frequently mentioned semantic principle of the whole novel, for reference, let us mention here at least the book by Přemysl Blažíček (1991) or the essay by Růžena Grebeníčková (1992).

⁵ This opposition connected with Švejk's has of course not escaped the attention of scholars dealing with Hašek's work – for all, let us mention Milan Jankovič, 1995.

detours, Švejk follows the main storyline but also actively creates episodic digressions, and finally, Švejk both constructs and deconstructs his own fictional world.

If we take together the complementary narrative and semantic principles of Švejk and move into the fictional world of the novel itself, we can attempt to formulate some general principles of the construction of the entire fictional world, in the centre of which dwells Švejk. Simply, these principles are *physical, verbal* and *semantic*.

The physical principle, in the sense in which it is defined here, is linked to Švejk's physical movement within the fictional world he inhabits and co-creates. It is based on a fuzzy dialectical opposition between a tour and a detour. The tour in this case is bound to the journey of a largely dehumanised soldier as a member of the herd from conscription to the slaughterhouse, to which he is sent by absolutely detached authorities, while the detour is the individual's wandering in the human world of other individuals, living their "small" lives at the background of the "big" events. In Hašek's novel, there are two such fundamental detours (apart from episodic transitions) – the Budějovice anabasis and the front detour. Both detours are structurally and functionally similar: Švejk physically leaves the tour of the military service and war machinery, which, although not completely disappearing from the fictional world they are relegated from our field of vision, and thus form only a certain type of background for the processes. These detours take place in a specific space between freedom and humiliation. Above all, in the first detour, the reader is shown through Švejk the contrast between the life of the war machinery (macrohistory) and the life on its background (microhistory) – a contrast of two firmly connected and complementary poles. This fuzzy dialectic brings about a fundamental tension which is, of course, to a large extent connected with Švejk himself even in the moments when he does not act – by his narration of episodic plots about individuals outside (but also inside) the war machine (macrohistory).

This contrast thus actually “physically” transfers the individual (Švejk narrates about individuals to whom he himself relates in some way) into the institutional; microhistory thus constantly upsets macrohistory. However, it should be stressed that the two detours are fundamentally different in their meaning for the build of the novel – while the first detour, as mentioned, serves primarily to present individual life outside the war machinery, the second detour, connected with a real battlefield, is essentially human and, paradoxically, its only participant, whom Švejk meets, indirectly causes Švejk’s return to the war machinery, where his life is at stake and it is not lost only by a lucky coincidence. As much as any prediction of a possible continuation of Hašek’s torso is by its nature purely speculative, it is challenging to think about what a possible next detour would look like – would it end in tragedy or would it result in some fundamental choice? As we can see, Švejk’s physical movement through the fictional world has absolutely crucial symbolic potential and as a principle contributes significantly to the basic dialectically based layout of the entire fictional world and its meaning.

The second general principle of the fictional world of the novel based of Švejk is the verbal principle essentially bound to the strategy of forking.⁶ As the name of the principle makes it clear, this time it is not related to Švejk’s physical movement through the fictional world, but to his verbal actions. The notorious beginning of the novel best tells us what I mean here:

“So they’ve killed Ferdinand,” said the charwoman to Mr. Schweik who, having left the army many years before, when a military medical board had declared him to be chronically feeble-minded, earned a livelihood by the sale of dogs — repulsive mongrel monstrosities for whom he forged pedigrees. Apart from this occupation, he was afflicted with rheumatism, and was just rubbing his knees with embrocation.

“Which Ferdinand, Mrs. Muller?” asked Schweik, continuing to massage his knees. “I know two Ferdinands. One of them does jobs for Prusa the chemist, and one

⁶ In a similar vein, Sergio Corduas speaks of the protagonist’s verbalization strategies in his article on possible reinterpretations of Švejk (see Corduas, 1981).

day he drank a bottle of hair oil by mistake; and then there’s Ferdinand Kokoska who goes round collecting manure. They wouldn’t be any great loss, either of ‘em.”
[...]

There’s some revolvers, Mrs. Muller, that won’t go off, even if you tried till you was dotty. There’s lots like that. But they’re sure to have bought something better than that for the Archduke, and I wouldn’t mind betting, Mrs. Muller, that the man who did it put on his best clothes for the job. You know, it wants a bit of doing to shoot an archduke; it’s not like when a poacher shoots a gamekeeper. You have to find out how to get at him; you can’t reach an important man like that if you’re dressed just anyhow. You have to wear a top hat or else the police’d run you in before you knew where you were. (Hašek, 1939, pp. 9–10).

In the first part of our slightly extensive sample, one of the basic forking strategies of Švejk’s verbal expression is evident – translation. The classic form of this kind of translation is translation from the macroworld to the microworld and vice versa. In this particular case, the pivotal point of translation is the pronoun “us”, by which Mrs Muller understandably means “our member of the ruling family”, while Švejk, similarly understandably, means “our acquaintance”. The tragedy of the main storyline is fundamentally weakened (with the contribution of irony and parody) by Švejk’s addition of two episodic insertions; the macroworld is thus simultaneously “translated” into the microworld, causing a fuzzy dialectical tension essential to the overall meaning construction of the text. Similarly, in the second part of the quotation, Švejk’s nonsensical speculation, this time based on the translation of the microworld into the macroworld using analogy, is both a bolt and a spreader of the two worlds. In any way, translation is not the only, albeit frequent, forking strategy that Švejk employs. Obviously, as much as similarity or analogy embody significant means of the translation, but other forking tactics may rely on association or extrapolation:

So there he is in the truth of God, God grant him eternal glory. He didn’t even wait to be emperor. When I was in the army, a general fell off his horse and killed himself quite peacefully. They wanted to help him back on his horse, get him off, and they’re surprised he’s completely dead. And he was to be promoted to Field Marshal. It happened during a parade of troops. These parades never lead to anything good. There

was a parade in Sarajevo, too. I remember once that I was missing twenty buttons from my uniform during such a parade, and that I was put in a jail for a fortnight for it, and for two days I lay like a lazarus, tied up in a goatskin. But there has to be discipline in the army, otherwise nobody would care. Our giant lieutenant Makovec, he always told us: 'Discipline, you stupid boys, must be there, otherwise you'd climb trees like monkeys, but the war will make you human, you stupid fools.' And isn't that true? Imagine a park, let's say in Karlák, and one soldier without discipline in every tree. That's what I've always been most afraid of. (my translation).

It is clear, now, that in Hašek's novel there can be found a variety of formally differentiated forking strategies, however, what they have in common is their functionality. From the point of view of narrative, this functionality primarily consists in disrupting the main storyline by means of episodic interruptions; from the point of view of semantics, it primarily serves to support the overall fuzzy dialectical construction of the text, to demythologise macrohistorical structures, which, by using irony, parody, hyperbolisation and the grotesque, causes a fundamental deconstruction of its fictional-world structures. However, this deconstruction is complemented by a specific construction that replaces the deconstructed parts of the world. The deconstruction of macrohistory is replaced by the construction of microhistory – this fact, of course, contributes to the overall fuzzy dialectic of the entire fictional world.

The last general principle of the meaning construction of the text is the principle that I call semantic. Practically, it consists in a thematization of the basic dialectical tensions of the novel. Specifically, it is the thematization of the opposition of macrohistory and microhistory, the opposition of institutionalized dehumanization embodied by ideology and the war machinery and individual, everyday humanity embodied by the physical and verbal acts of free human beings. It is clear from the previously illustrated that the semantic principle is firmly bound to both preceding principles: it is, to a large extent, determined by them, and in turn itself substantially contributes to their development. Obviously, this omnipresent semantic principle stems from and is supported by particular motifs and strategies creating the general dialectic

tension of the novel – of which the most substantial one can be identified with Švejk himself. Indeed, Švejk and his actions within the fictional world represent the most important active principle for the establishment of this essential semantic structure of the global shape of the whole fictional world.

Let me conclude with a certain metaphor, which is loosely connected to a crucial propriety of Hašek's fictional world – the train that brings soldiers to the war. This train, which carries its helpless passengers like cattle to the slaughterhouse, runs on two tracks. Let us try to connect one rail with macrohistory, ideology, the war machinery, dehumanization, but also with the general story-line, and the other rail can be connected with microhistory, free everyday life, individual humanity, but also with episodic plot digressions. If we do so, it becomes clear that the train that runs on such rails has de facto qualities of both kinds, the former because of its purpose and mission, the latter because of its passengers. The final part of this metaphor relates to a classical optical phenomenon, namely the sight of rails seemingly converging in the distance. The question then is whether this optical illusion is also applicable to "our" rails, or whether "our" rails really intersect at a sufficiently distant point. Obviously, if the second possibility were to occur, it would mean a true fusion of this time rigidly dialectical opposites. If we decide to accept this hypothesis, all that remains is speculation, of two kinds. First, what is such an ultimate point at which the fusion of antagonistic opposites occurs? Second, there is the good old speculation arising from the torsiness of the whole work – how might the novel have proceeded if the author had been able to complete it? Obviously, the two questions are intrinsically related. It is also clear that the second question has no answer in our real world, while there is only one answer to the first question: such an ultimate point is destruction and death, the end, the nothingness that reconciles frapant opposites. But if we opt for the option that this all is a mere optical illusion, we can continue the metaphor in a different way, by declaring the two rails to be separate but complementary. Then they would represent the two necessary pillars of war, which are

inseparable but not compatible, the eternal opposition of man and society, freedom and slavery, humanity and ideology, microhistory and macrohistory. Either way, the metaphor of the train and the rails has brought us to the final point of our reflections. I hope that it has shown that Hašek's novel is a structure consisting of many layers interwoven with different types of strategies, a structure whose ultimate meaning is deeply human and essentially existential.

Literature

BLAŽÍČEK, Přemysl. (1991). *Haškův Švejk*. Praha: Československý spisovatel

CORDUAS, Sergio. (1981). Některé poznámky k možné reinterpretaci Haškova Švejka. *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity. Řada literárněvědná* 30(28), 19–27

DOLEŽEL, Lubomír. (2003). *Heterocosmica: Fikce a možné světy*. Praha: Karolinum.

DOLEŽEL, Lubomír. (2008). Cesta historie a zacházky dobrého vojáka. In *Studie z české literatury a poetiky*, 84–91.

GREBENÍČKOVÁ, Růžena. (1992). Rozpaky nad Haškem. In *Literatura a fiktivní světy I*. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 322–336.

HAŠEK, Jaroslav. (1939). *The Good soldier Schweik*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books

HAUSENBLAS, Karel. (1971). K výstavbě postavy v prozaickém textu. In *Výstavba jazykových projevů a styl*. Praha: Universita Karlova, 115–127.

JANKOVIČ, Milan. (1965). Spor o Švejka? *Literární noviny* 14(44), 1–3.

KOSÍK, Karel. (2003). Hašek a Kafka neboli groteskní svět. In Michal Přibáň (ed.), *Z dějin českého myšlení o literatuře 3*. Praha: Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 103–112.

RICHTEROVÁ, Sylvie. (1983). Jasnozřivý génius a jeho slepý prorok. Haškův Dobrý voják Švejk. In *Slova a ticho*, 126–141.

STERNBERG, Meir. (2001). How Narrativity Makes a Difference. *Narrative*, 9(2), 115–122.