

Travels of Karel Čapek. On the Role of the Imaginative Variation in the Letters from Various Parts of Europe

Keywords: travelogue, irony, litotes, correction, imaginative variation

Abstract

In the article, I take into consideration a series of Karel Čapek's letters, which deliver a charming and cheerful evidence of his travel experiences resulted from his visits in various parts of Europe. In order to unveil the Czech writer's originality regarding the poetics of travelogue, I refer to a number of figures, which are to organize his peculiar epistolary idiom. Čapek's style is, therefore, determined by irony which turns out to be streaked with subsequent rhetorical devices such as litotes, correction, and self-correction linked with elliptical presence of aposiopesis. What is more, the Czech writer invests in the so-called variant manner of writing, due to which his letters instead of the common travel knowledge provides the reader with descriptions concerning details: from the traditional point of view, they might be perceived as meaningless facts, however, in Čapek letters they are transformed into individual, unique, and exceptional events, which are to remain in the reader's consciousness.

It isn't necessary that you leave home.
Sit at your desk and listen. Don't even listen
just wait. Don't wait, be still and alone.
The whole world will offer itself to you
to be unmasked, it can do no other,
it will writhe before you in ecstasy.
(Franz Kafka 2006, p. 108)

1. The scene of foundation

Adapted in this extra-ordinary case to the so-called *eidos* towards which the idealistic desire of Edmund Husserl tends to drift, the scene

remains in the necessary relation to temporality. In accordance with the assumed temporality, each representation, act by act and stage by stage, has to develop itself in order to establish a fragile and unstable construction of theatre, once called philosophy. Thus in my essay, one of its modern countenances is in question described by the Czech thinker, Jan Patočka, as another incarnation of the “absolute idealism” that is in other words, phenomenology which stubbornly dreams about a possibility of reaching an essence of the object caught in its exposition to the phenomenological examination.¹ Husserl begins, therefore, with the considerations regarding the primal matter, since it is expected to proceed on the condition of a “mental vacuum” articulated in the philosophical language by the Greek term of *epochē*. As for the term itself, it was coined by the first critic of metaphysics, Pyrrho from Elis, who managed to establish the school of ancient skeptics that had been bringing its influence to bear on many significant thinkers, including the contemporary ones (alike Jacques Derrida and beyond). Pyrrho's unusual manner of reasoning is revealed in the following passage:

On placing the argument, on any given topic, in confrontation with one another, he discovers that they have the feature of *isostheneia*, ‘equal strength’; the arguments on one side, he finds, incline him towards acceptance no more and no less than those on the other side. This *isostheneia* also has a counterpart in its ‘unresolvable disagreement’ (*anepikritos diaphónia*) that he takes to exist, on any topic you care to name, among philosophers – and perhaps among ordinary people as well. Faced with the unresolvable disagreement, and with his own perception of the ‘equal strength’ of arguments, the skeptic finds himself suspending judgement about the real nature of the objects under discussion. [...] the result is an entirely general suspension of judgement (*epochē*) about the real nature of things (Brett 2000, p. 3; see also: Striker 1996, pp. 92–115).

From the aforementioned perspective, the *epochē* can be also perceived as a manifestation of irony, a figure of pure revision that undermines the “truth” concerning all current statements and convictions. This ironic experience of despair that imposes on the philosophy

¹ For a fuller account, consult: Patočka 1996.

a gesture of putting the contents inhabiting the consciousness of the subject in brackets refers to the Kantian world of noumena, “things in themselves,” of which total transcendence entails a permanent isolation between the outside “order” of real and the epistemological efforts of human mind.² Thus the world of noumena, as absolutely inaccessible to cognition, will have to be subsequently substituted with the world of phenomena, “things as they appear,” if the epistemological appetite of philosophy is to be sated. The act of creation (namely, any philosophical discourse), streaked with the ironic world view, clearly reveals itself in one of the phases displayed during the phenomenological examination, introduced by Husserl under the name of eidetic reduction (for more details, see: Husserl 2006; Hermberg 2006). The desired effect of this mental procedure is an invariant essence of the observed object, however, before that eidetic goal is achieved the philosopher has to apply a stage of imaginative variation that is regarded as a necessary, although accessory means of the reduction.³ In the course of that variation, all possible aspects, features, associations, and connotations that remain related to the analyzed object ought to be taken into careful consideration in order to distinguish its invariant traits, without which the very same object would be impossible to think or imagine. In a conspicuous act of contradiction with the phenomenological teleology, I would like to go into battle over the “rem-

² „What our understanding acquires through his concept of a noumenon, is a negative extension; this is to say, understanding is not limited through sensibility; on the contrary, it itself limits sensibility by applying the term noumena to things in themselves (things not regarded as appearances). But in so doing it at the same time limits to itself, recognizing that it cannot know these noumena through any of the categories, and that it must therefore think them only under the title of unknown something” (Kant 1999, p. 270).

³ “Imaginative variation (more properly, ‘imaginative free variation’) is the process of approaching the phenomenon being experienced from different perspectives by imaginatively varying features of the phenomenon. [...] As you can imagine, imaginative variation is potentially a very powerful technique for enabling us to uncover the layers of meaning and invariant properties of an experience” (Langridge, 2007, pp. 19–21).

nants” of Husserl’s procedure. Speaking of remnants, I wish to concentrate on those abandoned variant contents, that is in other words, the margins of essence, its non-*eidos*, wherein, in between its irregular, open borderlines, there is always a perspective, which allows me to undertake some creative negotiations with conventions, and to invest in the lingual space of the individual subjectivity. For only the counter-phenomena, consisted of non-eidetic elements, seem to be able to construct secret places of which essence is erased, places that ironically dismay the so-called immanent consciousness of Husserl. To go walkabout through those variant places, one needs to turn to the letters, written by Karel Čapek between the wars, the letters which attempt to introduce margins coexisting within European centres. Turning back to those creative negotiations with literary traditions concerning travel discourse, it must be clearly stated that the Czech writer never gives up his enthusiastic Avant-garde comportment, due to which he manages to invent his own language of traveling. With regard to that language’s formulation, a certain arrangement of factors should be indicated by virtue of which Čapek’s idiom constitutes itself. According to Mirna Šolić,

Čapek used three approaches to express his experience of traveling. First he founded his own aesthetics of the so called “marginal forms” or “low-brow genres” which he simultaneously interpolated in his prose. Their use, which greatly changes the perspective on travel writing, is visible in comparison between Čapek’s and previous travelogues. Secondly, he introduced *skaz* as stylized spoken language to Czech literature, and changed the traditional role of the narrator and his addressees in travelogues. Thirdly, he used visual elements of language, combined verbal and visual arts (illustrations and drawing) in the narrative.⁴

In the examination of Čapek’s letters, Šolić carefully explores the above indicated approaches in order to recognize the lingual possibilities, resulted from the idiomatic features which are re-invented and developed by the Czech writer in his travelogues. However, the prob-

⁴ M. Šolić, *Karel Čapek’s Travels: Adventures of a New Vision* – to be found in the Internet under the address: tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/17321/1/Solic_Mirna_200811_PhD_thesis.pdf [admission: 10.12.2016].

lem of Čapek's self-awareness considering literary means of expression still demands a bunch of reflections that are to highlight a figurative "existence" of his signature. For that reason, I will make an attempt to distinguish these rhetoric devices, which might be perceived as the most significant properties of the Czech writer's travelogues.

2. Towards irony

Yes, yes, yes, I have been everywhere;
but now allow me to sit down and speak of
something else. What did I want to say?
(Karel Čapek 2004, p. 45)

The process of creation, illuminated by irony, can be never considered as an issue of delimitation, since it has nothing in common with cohesion and harmony which reveal themselves as an outcome of the so-called close narratives. The lack of cohesion and harmony, resulted from the activity of irony, cannot establish a stable model of the artist and of the world. Furthermore, irony always imposes either on the writer or the reader a constant movement of re-creation, which itself decentralsizes the sphere of meaning and unavoidably leads to a specific poetics of displacement and discontinuity. The above mentioned remarks are derived from the treatise devoted to a complex theme of romantic irony, nevertheless, they still maintain their significance that might be easily observed in writings under the banner of deconstruction.⁵ Regardless of the context that is to induce irony into my essay on Čapek's letters, the basic question must be fully articulated namely, what is that work of permanent re-creating or re-writing, behind of which the ironic artist from time to time emerges? In this literary technique, with which Čapek seems to be well acquainted, one might discern an indication of some defense strategy against the inner chaos,

⁵ In order to comprehend the complexity of romantic irony that itself constitutes the poetics of fragments, see: Szturc 1992; Schlegel 2000. As for irony, defined (after F. Schlegel) as a permanent parabasis of allegories, and subsequently incorporated into the project of American deconstruction, see: Man 2000.

which itself can be understood as a result of two fundamental *aporias* or insolubilities. Their activity resembles a play of antithetical motions: the centrifugal movement that runs from the unrecognizable, however, the most original, own "self" of the subjectivity in the act of creation, and the central one that stands for the summa of influences, through which transcendence ergo the unknown reality appears to the wandering consciousness of the writer. With regard to that play, a serious problem of duality takes the floor, in which brutal light the creating "self" comes across the impossibility of identification with the reflective "self". The only hope for this troubled subjectivity, suffering from the condition of already unveiled dilemma, is a flight towards "this strange institution called literature" that fortunately appears, although it carries with it a vague atmosphere of belatedness (in Harold Bloom's terms⁶), always under the absence of event, for reason of which it writes itself...

The letters of Čapek, remaining, as is already known, an unique combination of the "marginal forms" (which might locate themselves between the conventions of anecdote and aphorism), *skaz*⁷ and iconotexts, cannot be obviously regarded as a simple continuation of the poetics of classical travel literature, however, their self-ironic language might indicate a peculiar resemblance to the idiom of Sterne's novels.

⁶ „Hegel says that history ended in October, 1806, with Napoleon's victory at the battle of Jena. Let us say that Poetry ended just about then also, with the Wordsworthian crisis-poem setting a pattern that subsequent strong poems seem doomed to repeat, whether the variations of rhetorical substitution. From Wordsworth through our contemporaries, the trope defends against literal meaning in the same way that psychic defenses trope against death. Literal meaning, where belatedness is so acute in poetic consciousness, is synonymous with repetition-compulsion, and so literal meaning is thus seen as a kind of death, even as death itself seems the most literal kind of meaning" (Bloom 1975, p. 47).

⁷ With regard to this form, I would like to quote a short commentary, since it renders quite accurately the character of *skaz*: "there's something surprisingly poetic about this prose, a subtle manipulation of the rhythms of colloquial speech which makes it an effortless pleasure to read, and re-read. As jazz musicians say, it swings" (Lodge 1992, p. 17).

Furthermore, if one more carefully explores the archive of literary genres, a form of classicistic epistle, called a menippean letter, will be encountered: its extra-ordinary freedom of composition enables a fusion of many various styles, motifs and themes in which an projected depth of reflection is often suspended by an impishness of brief anecdote.⁸ The very same anecdote might be found in Čapek's letters – it usually appears instead of the expected description of the place, to which the narrator invites his readers. The phenomenon of simple narrative renders, therefore, a necessity of defamiliarization that is streaked with a new philosophy of language, according to which words liberate themselves from their conventional referential function, or loose their traditional transparency. In the following remarks, the Czech writer makes us aware of his own attitude towards words:

A joke, an anecdote, a pun is not playing with things but playing with words; it is constant amazement at the sense and nonsense in words; it is detachment from their serious and objective meaning. They say the man became human when he began to speak, but no sooner did he begin to speak than on the second day he made a joke; he found to his astonishment that one can play with words (Čapek 1951, p. 38).

To this, however, must be added something else. The form of anecdote confirms the permanent presence of irony, often expressed by a specifically privileged figure of Čapek's narrative namely, litotes that radically plays down a significance of event, frequently introduced in the title of the letter.⁹ Thus the anecdote, made of litotes, fights for its own idiomatic existence, the existence of variant form which would be certainly skipped or passed over by the traditional travel discourse. Due to the presence of this belittling figure, Čapek's visit in Cam-

⁸ For more details, see: Pusz 1985. As for the conception of such a letter, its name is derived from the ancient genre of Menippean satire (or – Varronian satire) due to significant formal similarities between those literary phenomena (see: Baldick 2000, pp. 202–203).

⁹ In the Anglo-American tradition, the term 'litotes' is frequently substituted for 'meiosis', nevertheless both of them render the same meaning of understatement or 'belittling', and participate in the effect of irony (see: Wales 1997, p. 282).

bridge, even though depicted with many details, forms a seriously moving deposit in one's consciousness thanks to the variant anecdote:

Sometimes I also dream about the Cambridge rabbit. They gave him some gas to breathe to see what his rabbity spleen would say to it. I saw him die; he breathed frantically and his eyes bulged. Now he haunts me in my dreams. God be gracious to his long-eared soul (Čapek 2004, pp. 80–81).

Another example of the imaginative variation, achieved through litotes, is a letter dedicated to Rome of which barbarian-Catholic face, manifested by the artistic codes of Renaissance and all-pervasive Baroque, strongly discourages the narrator. But Čapek finds his own way to deal with the capital of Italy: besides the critical look at the monumental facades of the sacral architecture, there is a marvelous chance for the variant narrative wherein some tiny churches like Santa Maria in Cosmedin, the early Christian catacombs and eventually the cats living at Trajan's square appear to gather together, for, as the writer tenderly notices, "Even the cats have their own deity, to whom they sing on moonlight nights: and why not indeed" (Čapek 1929, p. 40). With reference to this quotation, I cannot refrain myself from the following digression: nowadays you will not find those cats either at Trajan square or at the front of Marcello Theatre that separates the Jewish quarter from the riverside. It goes without saying that the current absence of cats results from the city's politics of dealing with un-wanted and homeless animals.

The activity of the ironic litotes stakes everything on the minor, often ephemeral events, or beings which are considerably absent from the conventional travel literature (in none of the commonly known guidebooks to England I haven't encountered a single remark or mention of a stem oak, of which majestic size, conjoined with its venerable age, becomes for Čapek an emblem of tradition, allied itself to the British political conservatism¹⁰). The figurative agent of irony also en-

¹⁰ "Maybe these trees have a large influence in Toryism in England. I think that they preserve aristocratic instincts, historical precedent conservatism, protectionism, golf, the House of Lords and other old and peculiar things." (Čapek 2004, pp. 28–29).

croaches the canonical themes of travel writing, regarding the great European painting. The variant glance of the narrator tears the art companions to pieces, and by dealing skillfully with sources it often manages to cast a streak (or a string, as the poet would say) of some new light on the acknowledged masterworks. Due to such a new light, the title excursion to Spain reveals a shocking performativity of the paintings of Francisco Goya, recognized by Čapek as a one of the most modern citizens of Madrid. For this reason, the narrator's exclamation situates Goya against the realistic convention, and juxtaposes his work with an attack or revolution¹¹. On the other hand, in the case of El Greco, Čapek discovers an astonishing contamination of the eastern Christ from the heart of Byzantine Gothic with the human, somatic Christ of the western Baroque. This contamination is rendered by the secondary oppositions, perfectly articulated in the Czech writer's language: the Baroque tornado against the Gothic verticality, or the saint silence against the thunders of church organs. The antithetical styles, contradicted in the paintings of the medieval Greek lost in the Spanish Baroque, constitute an effect of duality that is to transform itself into a grotesque, the aesthetics that anticipates another one – of a caricature, regularly used in Čapek's child-like drawings.¹² On the margins of my writing, it is worth noticing that the so-called ignorance of the narrator, manifested frequently and sometimes too persistently, inscribes itself overtly into a conduct that seems to refer to irony of the yokel. However, this poor thing from Prague, turned unexpectedly (and against his will, so to speak) into a globetrotter, is a cleverly as-

¹¹ In the conclusion, the Czech writer emphasizes the force of Goya's painting by exclaiming that „There is a revolution in Madrid: Francisco Goya y Lucientes is erecting barricades in the Prado.” (Čapek 1931, p. 50).

¹² In order to express such a paradox distortion, Čapek remarks that „the Gothic line warps, and a surge of Baroque darts up and permeates the perpendicular eruption of Gothic; at times it seems as if the Picture were cracking with the tension of these two forces. [...] Greco the Byzantine came from the basilicas of holy silence into the churches with their loud surges of organ music and frarried processions” (Čapek 1931, pp. 42–44).

sembled mask behind of which a concrete sensitivity is hidden, not only having a gift for empathy, but also equipped with a quite consolidated knowledge regarding both the artists, their work, the wonders of European architecture, and the places visited by the letters' creator. This knowledge, articulated in the informal, strongly personal or private style, gets lost in an impenetrable maze of digressive metaphors which, alike the wrought-iron fences or marvelous lattices of Seville, open a view over the textual travel all around the passages of the writer's imagination in order to record the marginalia, that is in other words, to save matters of secondary importance.

Altogether it would appear that embossed lattices form a speciality of national Spanish art; never could I produce any verbal embossings and twirlings to match a church lattice, while as for secular lattices, instead of a doorway there is a fine lattice leading into every house, the windows twinkle with lattices, and tendrils of flowers hang from latticed balconies; for which reason Seville as a whole looks like a harem, like a cage, or – no, wait a bit – it looks as if across it were stretched chords, upon which your eyes strum an amorous refrain to your enchantment (Čapek 1931, pp. 65–66).

The imaginative variation, displayed in Čapek's letters, thus seems to be undertaken against the metaphysical thought of hierarchy, since it consequently accentuates the significance of peripheral issues, as for which, before the Czech writer, no one had posed a single question. In his narrative, the objects are never estimated due to their little or great relevance: the event of corrida performance and the scene of cleaning of boots, as the colorful but also ambivalent determinants of Spanish culture, are equal, and deserve the same attention of the traveler.

The cleaning of boots is a national Spanish trade; or in exacter terms, the cleaning of boots is a national Spanish dance or ceremony. In other parts of the world, Naples, for instance, a bootblack will hurl himself upon your footwear furiously, and will start brushing it as he were conducting the experiment in physics, by which heat or electricity is produced as the result of friction. Spanish boot-cleaning is a dance, which, like the Siamese dances, is performed only with the hands (Čapek 1931, p. 23).

In the above quoted passage, the escaping or subversive character of Čapek's irony is perfectly unveiled, since instead of the promised

description of Spanish boot-cleaning, previously compared to dance or ceremony, the reader receives a brief depiction of Italian manner regarding the cleaning of boots in Naples, juxtaposed with some physical experiment. And this is a cardinal principle of anecdote: to promise a story means to face its projection of alternation. The cited fragment, however, is framed by two parallel sentences that are to delimit a scope of dance, and this event of delimitation one more time reveals the negative work of irony, for the phenomenon of dance pervades the whole Spanish culture. The chain of substitutions refers also to a vital activity of another figures, subordinated to irony namely, correction and enumeration which might be comprehended as a substratum of a specific comportment that characterizes Čapek's attitude towards knowledge or cognition. In other words, the writer inscribes himself in the perspective of hesitation, streaked with some skeptic presumption that the world as it appears might be a question of delusion. For that reason, the narrator grants to himself right of non-knowing, which is visible in the following quotation:

And wooden cottages the same as on the other side of the frontier, but poorer; and no longer they are made of perpendicular planks, but of horizontal boards, and they are brown and grey like the rocks; and they do not stand any longer only just on the ground, but on stone, or on little wooden legs so that they do not get wet from below; and they are not covered with tiles, shingle, or thatch, but – with – what, in fact? – is it turf? Or peat? Even [now] I don't really know (Čapek 1942, p. 68).

The ironic strategy that enables representation of non-knowledge (in the above passage each clause begins with negation regarding the essential properties of the described landscape of Norwegian village to finish with a confession that enforces lack of knowledge) entails a peculiar style that could be called a counter-writing. Čapek's counter-writing consists in a specific, quite original use of amplification that invests in the ironic set of the already indicated figures of litotes, correction and enumeration. The long series of enumerations often replace the traditional descriptions, commonly used in guidebooks composition; as for corrections, usually conjoined with enumerations, they are to negotiate with words for the one that seems to be the most

exact, the most precise, however, such a word does not exist, so, again and again, one has to accept this permanent circulation of signs. And one has to enjoy it as is well shown in most of Čapek's anecdotes. For example, if you turn back to the above cited passage exposing Seville's lattices you will discover a sequence of stylistic negotiations, interplayed by the narrator as if he wanted to be caught in the act of installing a suitable comparison which, according to the principle of correction that enables the textual amplification, remains in the constant state of restitution – third time lucky, maybe such a content is boot-legged in the recalled quotation... Nevertheless, sometimes the imaginative variation gets close to an apparent demonstration of lack of belief in the creative force of language (even if fulfilled with iconotexts):

[...] how shall I say it; in short, it is no longer of this world, and it is impossible to draw it, describe it, or play it on a violin; dear me, I give it up; as if I could report on something that is not of this world!

I tell you, all this can be seen and sensed with the eyes, for the eyes are a divine instrument, and the best part of the brain; they are more sensitive than the tips of the fingers, and sharper than the point of a knife; what a lot can one do with one's eyes, but words, I say, are good for nothing: and I shall not say any more about what I saw (Čapek 1942, p. 172, 178).

The perspective of non-knowledge is involved in a problem of refutation regarding the (im)possibilities of description (due to – Čapek's Scandinavian experience of fjords).

But in *Letters from Spain*, the reader can also find the most important instruction that itself can be perceived as the artistic credo of the Czech writer, for he clearly states that "Every divergence deserves to be cherished simply because it widens the bounds of life" (Čapek, 1931, p. 102),

3. A few remarks upon the form of the intersemiotic travelogue

The adventure concerning travel writing that occurs due to his journalistic commitments, Čapek begins in 1923 with two-month expedition to Italy. By contrast with his ironic remark in accordance to which the writer announces a general lack of intention to travel, next

year he goes to the United Kingdom that results in the correspondence written from England, Wales and Scotland. After a few years break, in 1929, Čapek visits Spain, and in 1931 he travels to Holland. This adventure is to exhaust itself with his “conquest” of territories in the North – in the summer of 1936 the writer, this time accompanied by his wife, Olga Scheinpflugová (that seems essential due to her poetic signature, presented in these letters)¹³, travels to Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Čapek’s letters are published systematically in *Lidové Noviny* for which the writer officially works as a journalist; shortly after his travel books appear, repeatedly reissued in the interwar period. It is also worth remembering that besides the official letters which are to give birth to the series of marvelous books, Čapek writes a private correspondence to his wife and friends behind of which a different view of world emerges. Due to this, let me cite a fragment from the *Introduction to Toward the Radical Center: A Karel Čapek Reader*, in which Peter Kussi comments upon this dual activity of the Czech writer:

Čapek traveled extensively, and described his experiences in a series of travel books: *Letters from England*, *Letters from Italy*, and so on. These amusing reports, illustrated by his own clever drawings, tell of exciting journeys, visits with famous people, fascinating sights. Yet at the same time, Čapek was writing another set of letters, home to his wife and friends, which tell an entirely different story: loneliness, homesickness, dejection. The image of a cheerful, witty cosmopolitan, comfortable in his own skin and thoroughly at home in the world, was a persona Čapek created for himself – one of his characteristic attempts at transcending contradictions (Kussi 1990, p. 21).

In *Radość podróżowania z pisarzem*, Leszek Engelking, the author of an Afterword to the Polish edition of Čapek’s travel letters, actualizes the term of travelogue in order to emphasize the Czech writer’s Avant-garde innovation that visibly transforms the strategies of travel writing, developed in the nineteenth century. However, in this part of my essay, I would like to focus on the phenomenon of iconotext that should be comprehended in the slight opposition to the literary device of ekphrasis as representation of representation, since it is related to a “spectacular” exchange of medium that itself constitutes a poetics of

fluctuation between text and image. But it does not mean that the writer never makes use of such means of expression like ekphrasis, on the contrary, he faces it quite often when his narrative enters the realm of arts in order to commune with Giotto, Goya, El Greco, Velazquez, Murillo, or Rembrandt. As it has been already pointed out, Čapek’s travelogues are expanded through his own drawings and illustrations which tend to participate in the counter-writing. According to Lilian Louvel,

[...] the term “iconotext” [...] illustrates perfectly the attempt to merge text and image in a pluriform fusion, as in an oxymoron. The word “iconotext” conveys the desire to bring together two irreducible objects and form a new object in a fruitful tension in which each object maintains its specificity (Louvel 2011, p. 15).

Let me throw an inquiring look at this “fruitful” tension, since the Czech writer’s travelogues might be perceived as a series of events that are to expose an inner relationship between the textual situations and the child-like drawings, so to speak. From the suddenly altered view-point, Čapek’s travel experience can be also considered as a constantly developing interplay between text and image, the interplay that is streaked with a wayward mimetic intention, pertaining to the poetics of picture book. Čapek’s illustrations, successfully performing a childish compulsory need of imitation (alike in the world of child’s imagination, speaking of a deer imposes an irresistible wish to draw this animal), may also surprise the reader because of their skillful stroke and acute sense of humor. The procedure of familiarization with the foreign landscapes leads through the drawings which are, generally speaking, to compensate for writing deficiencies, nevertheless they also function as the means of the author’s emotive expression, even when they try to neutralize a pervasive sense of dread engendered from Čapek’s encounter with the crowded and noisy centre of London.

It goes without saying that the Czech writer’s travelogues confirm his desire to expand knowledge of both the natural and cultural phenomena, and, in Kussi’s terms, the very desire constitutes “an attempt to interrogate the world and pry loose one of its hidden tricks” (19–20).

What is more, along with this process of interrogation Čapek manifests himself as a follower of the human scale of things that makes him, according to Arthur Miller, “a wonderfully surprising teller of some astonishing and unforgettable tales” (10).

4. Instead of conclusion

In a brief writing ironically entitled *On Literature* (included in *Intimate Things*, 1935), Čapek turns back to the times of his childhood in order to evoke a vivid bunch of memories resulted from the art of observing “all human activities at close quarters” (Čapek 1990, p. 315) made by a boy from a small country town, who might be easily identified with the author himself. Regardless of these autobiographical indications (“When I was a boy...,” and so on, Čapek 1990, 315), it is worth emphasizing that the title of the commented text and its content do not tally, since instead of the expected remarks on literature the reader receives a series of scenes, in which several professions are introduced and depicted (represented subsequently by a local doctor, miller, baker, farmer, painter, innkeeper, cobbler, hurdy-gurdy man, stone-mason, prostitute, butcher, carpenter, and homeless poor, to exhaust the boy’s list). The narrator refers to the commemorated enumeration of the human activities because he needs to cast some light on his own commitment, which is illuminated in the following passage:

Now I have a profession of my own, and I work at it the livelong time. But even if I were to sit on the porch with my work I don’t think a single boy would come – standing on one bare foot and rubbing his calf with the other – and watch my fingers to see how the writer’s business is done. I don’t say that it is a bad or useless profession: but it isn’t one of the superlatively fine and striking ones, and the material used is of a strange sort – you don’t even see it. But I’d like all the things I used to see to be in it: the ringing hammer-strokes of the smith and the colors of the whistling house painter, the patience of the tailor and the careful chipping of the stone-mason, the bustling of the baker, the humility of the poor, and all the lusty strength and skill which men of towering stature put into their work before the astonished and fascinated eyes of a child (Čapek 1990, p. 317).

The quoted fragment clearly displays an obvious contradiction between the essence of the material world and the one that belongs to the realm of literature, yet the material objects as well as their sensual “substitutes” described in Čapek’s writing matter above all because of their handiness derived from Heidegger’s reflections on being and time. Any object defined in Graham Harman’s terms as a “tool-being” with a clear reference to Heidegger’s handiness (that is, rendering what is called *zuhanden*) is at the same time a thing in itself and a phenomenon namely, a necessary reduction to its presence in human thought. The letters of Karel Čapek seem to bring evidence for their author’s awareness regarding the aforementioned reduction, since he never gives up concentrating on the belittling properties of the world, which itself remains partially hidden in its essential absence. In other words, the writer presumably knows, that the question of imperfect human knowledge is determined by the reality, which allows the observer to deal only with some of its facets, with its deformation in miniature, so to speak.

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