CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Karel Čapek

The War with the Newts

Válka s mloky

Presented by: Anna Gawarecka

The thickening political atmosphere of the 1930s, caused by the intensification of repressive totalitarian practices used by both - Nazi and communist - regimes caused anxiety and a sense of threat not only among politicians and the ethnic and social groups subjected to these repressions, but also gave rise to the need to formulate an "anticipatory-prophetic" reaction in literary and artistic circles. It is no coincidence that the gradual abandonment of avant-garde experimentation was accompanied by a revival of more traditional narrative forms on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by a departure from "pure anti-illusion" creative strategies and focusing attention on the most important contemporary problems. Their literary diagnosis was facilitated by recalling old utopian ideas about a perfect world, but questioning them and giving them anti-utopian attributes.

In 1936, Karel Čapek, a writer already internationally renowned and considered an intellectual and ethical authority, published the novel Válka s Mloky ("The War with the Newts"), which fits into futurological-dystopian trends, but goes beyond it by broadening the field of interest to include pessimistic forecasts predicting the impending disappearance of humanity, understood both as a biological species and as a cultural construct. The plot of the text, although it is impossible to talk about the "standard" order of fictional events based on a logical sequence, tells about the discovery of thinking lizards, previously living only in the Far Eastern endemic island enclave, and about their "capitalist exploitation", i.e. the implementation of intelligent amphibians - in the form of cheap labor - into the system of a global (and at the same time subordinated to particular national interests) economy.

Heterogeneous in genological construction (drawing inspiration from travel literature, science fiction, adventure novels, stereotypical exoticism or popular romance) and using the strategy of mixing discourses (journalistic, scientific, historiosophical, philosophical, political), the novel uses polyphony characteristic of 20th-century fictional prose, thus engaging (on an autotelic level) in the ongoing debate on the topic the crisis of novelism and the paths leading to its actualization. However, the attractiveness of this game with conventions and the humorous (satirical) tone of most of the statements do not conceal the serious message of the text. Čapek, at that time intensely involved in the issue of disseminating the idea of active opposition to the spread of Nazi propaganda (or, more broadly speaking, authoritarian tendencies increasingly visible in geopolitical theories and practices) among European intellectuals, transformed the phantasmagoric history of the civilizational emancipation of the animal species into a transparent allegory of processes taking place in contemporary reality. This does not mean, of course, that The War with the Newts should be treated in terms of naive literary agitation against the Nazi/Stalinist oppressive policy and the system of intimidation and oppression "perfected" by its functionaries. Regardless of the way in which this novel was read at the time of publication (primarily seen as an appeal warning against the "fascist danger") and in which it is interpreted nowadays, the range of meanings which it

generates is much richer and refers to a number of disturbing phenomena that, although in the interwar period were only just beginning to affect the cultural face of the anthroposphere, sometimes taken to extremes, determine today's trends that raise serious concerns, because they describes the prophesied by the writer disappearance of the Western (and not only) world. Apart from this seemingly disinterested game with the patterns of commercial writing, proving that popular culture is slowly gaining a hegemonic position (in the meaning given to this concept by Antonio Gramsci), Čapek focuses here, among other things, on the manipulative role of the media, which are increasingly oriented to sensationalism, using stereotypes, avoiding in-depth social/political analyzes and thus steering public opinion. He does not avoid depicting colonial abuses and, to a greater extent, criticizing the expansive methods of functioning of transcontinental corporations. However, what seems urgent to him are the processes leading to the unification of the horizon of expectations of all users of culture and turning them into thoughtless (and interchangeable) producers of the tasks assigned to them (their allegory is a lizard transformed into an "ideal employee"), resulting in the atrophy of the spiritual dimension of existence. The writer believes that the reason for this loss of individualism and interpersonal differentiation is the breakdown of balance that increasingly clearly defines contemporary educational practice, namely: its domination by the teaching of sciences, which favors technological development, and, as a result, the weakening of the role and prestige of the humanities in school curricula.

The global perspective for which Čapek was looking for an adequate novel formula, finding it in the deformation of the plot order, the spread of the depicted space on all continents or the sylleptic mixing of fictional (fantastic) events with the presentation of historical facts and figures (famous actors, artists, real politicians) is used here for asking asks surprisingly relevant contemporary questions which concerns not only the limits of anthropocentrism and the prospects for the survival of human civilization, but also about the direction in which this civilization is heading which leads to designing countermeasures that can prevent the ultimate catastrophe. It should be emphasized, however, that these questions remain unanswered, and the tone of the novel seems extremely pessimistic. In the last chapter (“The author talks to himself”) the final words are: “And what next? I don't know".

Almost immediately after publication, the novel attracted international attention and was quickly translated into a number of languages. The first editions in English were published in 1937 (in the United Kingdom and the USA), a little later The War with the Newts appeared on bookstores in most countries of the world. It is also often the subject of literary studies and interpretations, both Czech and foreign. Tracing these statements - in chronological order - shows how analytical strategies have changed (depending, of course, on the evolution of research methodologies and, perhaps more importantly, on the attitude of interpreters to the issue of writers' right to express their ideological views through fiction), and how they are "adapted" to the situation (social, cultural, political) in which individual exegeses were created. Therefore, there are approaches exposing the anti-totalitarian and anti-war dimension of the novel, searching for traces of Marxist theories in it, bringing to the fore the structural innovation of the text, showing its futurological (post-apocalyptic) potential, and even giving Čapek the status of a precursor of postmodernism.

LANGUAGE: Czech / Český

This title was not censored before publishing