ABSTRACT

HESTER, JORDAN THACKER. Karel Capek, Author of the Apocryphal Tales: A Study of Genre and the Capekian. (Under the Direction of John Kessel.)

The international position of a Czech writer, writing in Czech, no matter how cosmopolitan his writing might be, was an unenviable one in the 1930’s. Being denied access by virtue of his Czech-ness to the grand discourses of the West, Capek had to find a means of circumventing the high gates of the canon, which were for the most part closed to him. Capek employed the fantastic to this end, as has been well documented in the scholarship, and his two most commercially successful works, R.U.R. and War With the Newts both employ elements of the fantastic. This strategy is not unique to Capek, and can be seen in a number of other Eastern-European writers whose national literatures did not have the stature internationally to afford them the possibility of writing realistic literary fiction.

This thesis will discuss Capek’s use of the fantastic, specifically in the context of Apocryphal Tales, a collection of short parodies and satires of fables and myths. This book exemplifies Capek’s successful strategies for publishing great literature within the constraints of his context as a Czech and as a journalist. Apocryphal Tales employs a genre of Capek’s own devising suited to the strictures of newspaper publication and to the mordancy of Czech humor. The Apocryphal Tales are the intersection of humor and the fantastic, two of the strategies most successfully employed by Capek to gain access to the larger literary world.

The Apocryphal Tales are unique in their genre, they are in fact, their own genre, and one that is employed in later literatures by the likes of Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino, with no reference to Capek’s early mastery. The Apocryphal Tales, for their brevity and transparency are some of the critically least examined works of Karel Capek. It is the contention of this thesis that the Apocryphal Tales represent the most squarely Capekian works of all of Capek’s writing, because of their generic position, subject matter, and winking humor.
BIOGRAPHY

Jordan Hester was born and raised in Raleigh, North Carolina and attended North Carolina State University for both his undergraduate and Master’s degrees in English.
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Introduction: Karel Capek, Person

Born in 1890 in the small mining town of Male Svatonovice, Karel Capek would grow up with the young Czechoslovak Republic and would live out a life intrinsically connected to it. In his short life he published prolifically both in collaboration with his brother Josef, an acclaimed Czech graphic artist in his own right, and alone. Capek was connected by friendship if not by ideological agreement to the lights of the Czechoslovak intellectual world, and was so closely connected to Tomas Garrigue Masaryk that he would write the definitive biography of that most important Czechoslovak political figure. Capek was sickly from childhood on, and his incessant smoking did not aid his already weak lungs. He died in 1938 on Christmas Day, only a few months before the Nazis would occupy Prague. While double pneumonia was the ostensible cause of his death, Capek was deeply affected by the Munich Accords that ceded the Sudetenland to Germany and in an attempt to appease Hitler sealed Czechoslovakia’s fate. The real cause of Capek’s decline and death was said by his friends to have more to do with politics than his lungs. Alexander Matuska puts it best in the introduction to his book on Capek, Karel Capek: An Essay when he says that Capek’s “heart was pierced by Chamberlain’s umbrella.” (9)
Karel Capek, Gardener (and Sometime Author)

Karel Capek was a man of many pursuits, and many interests, but none provided him so much pleasure or demanded so much of his attention as gardening. The great difference between Capek’s small garden and his “small” books and articles is in their temporality. They have in common a shared intention to delight and amuse, and they both reflect Capek’s lifelong commitment to the celebration of the small. Capek’s Apocryphal Tales have been published, translated, re-published, and collected, whereas his gardens barely exist in photographic record, and without his frequent attention, would not have lasted his lifetime. The one intersection of his writing and gardening, The Gardener’s Year, is short and light in tone, and receives almost no critical attention. It is significant to any understanding of Capek that he would spend so much time cultivating and improving something so temporary and changeable.

Within Karel Capek’s philosophy of pragmatism, posterity holds a very different place than it does in that of other writers. At the conclusions of Capek’s anti-utopian novels and plays, R.U.R., The Absolute at Large, War With the Newts, and The White Plague, there is no transmission of valued ideas and artifacts from the past to the new inheritors of the earth. What survives every calamity Capek can throw at it, even when the human race cannot survive, is human-ness. No matter how fantastic or attenuated the circumstances, for Capek the invincibility of human nature, of the essential elements that make up the human identity, is the only posterity of real significance. Capek’s philosophy renders the question of whether or not his books will be read in the future less
important than who will read them, which is to say people, human beings. Capek’s
gardening, like his writing, like his life as a whole, is a testament to humanism brought to
its logical extreme. The neighbor who walks by Capek’s garden and stops for a moment
to admire his flowers and the person who reads his plays and novels and articles seventy
years after his death are part of the same audience, and neither has a more privileged
position. Both can, on the most basic level, be amused and delighted, and both, on
deeper examination, can see reflected in his work a man of uncommon devotion to the
cause of humanity.

The essential character of that humanity is a problematic question for Capek
throughout his career. When faced with evidence of the evils that can be found within
human nature, Capek is often vague, and the villains of his stories are often the least
realized characters, if there are discernable villains at all. For Capek, while human nature
may or may not be good or evil, it is decidedly flawed, humorous, resilient, and beautiful.
Whatever great events might be occurring in the world, for Capek it is reassuring that
somewhere a person is worrying about inconsequential things, being kind to a small
animal, or procrastinating interminably. Capek’s human-ness is not the rapturous
celebration of the Renaissance or the cold science of the Enlightenment. Neither is
Capek a psychologist or a post-modernist. Human-ness, the subject that Capek pursues
throughout his writing and throughout his life, is the everyday, the familiar and familial,
that kind of experience which makes up the great majority of life through the simple the
act of being human.
Karel Capek, Czech Author

The importance of Karel Capek to Czech literature cannot be fully understood without first examining the unique position of Czech literature in the early twentieth century. Though the Czech language existed in a formalized and recognized form since early medieval times, literature written in Czech did not exist viably until the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Czech literature of the nineteenth century was formal and staid, and was part of a larger Czech nationalist enthusiasm that sought to create a literary Czech with strict rules of usage and grammar. There were also a number of translations of classic literature from English and German into Czech during this time.

Karel Capek was a member of the first generation of Czech writers to use colloquial Czech in plays and novels. For Capek, who was trained as a journalist, the use of colloquial Czech was less a statement about how literature should be written than an expression of the desire that his writing be accessible to the average person, as all newspaper writing must be. The Apocryphal Tales, as the most literary of Capek’s journalistic endeavors\(^1\) (or the most journalistic of his literary endeavors) exemplify this use of everyday language and simple sentences. This not only makes the Apocryphal Tales more easily understood by more people, it also is formally consistent with their content, which for the most part concerns the everyday life of average people. That said, in the Apocryphal Tales, these average people happen to be characters in the great

\(^1\) The Apocryphal Tales were published originally in newspapers and magazines such as Capek’s Lidove Noviny.
literary works of the world, or important historical and religious figures. Furthermore, their everyday lives happen to intersect with great dramatic tragedies or historical events of great importance. The Apocryphal Tales are a kind of imaginative journalism, reporting on events from history or literature using the classic journalistic methods of interview and eye-witness account.

On Parables

The parable is a means of encoding information, born of religious instruction and employed to various ends as a literary genre throughout literary history. The adjectival form of parable, parabolic, usefully literalizes the epistemological course of the parable. The parable perambulates, circumlocutes, and alludes. Truth or meaning in parable is neither immediately available to the perceptive organs, nor is it the hard-won reward of ratiocinative deduction. Rather, parabolic truth is “felt” emotionally or “sensed” intuitively. Parabolic discourse depends from a pre-modern epistemology that includes faith and the concept of objective truth as necessary premises. These premises are necessary because of the structure of traditional parable. The parable consists of hidden truth and requires that the audience of the parable both accept the possibility of truth and have faith in the wisdom of the parable’s creator; faith enough to spend the time and energy to reason through the gnomic parable to the presumed wisdom contained within it.

Thus the modern and post-modern use of parabolic discourse is problematic.
The parables of Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, and Italo Calvino operate within modern and post-modern epistemologies wherein questions about the availability of truth and the existence of truth become the information encoded in the parable. Borges’ short story, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” is a prime example of the post-modern parable. The story combines the genres of parable and of literary criticism to both expose the ridiculous extremes to which literary criticism can go in the application of theory and to raise questions about the nature of authorship. In the story, Pierre Menard re-writes Don Quixote, without changing a word. He publishes his edition under his own name, in the original Spanish. The literary critic narrator goes on the examine passages from the original and from Menard’s version, discussing the ways in which the context of the later work’s “composition” changes the meaning of the text. Borges’ story is heavily satiric and comic, and is interested in the interrogation of story-telling and meaning. Post-modern parables are parables that examine the nature of the parable, and of truth, the object of parable. This reflexive aspect of the modern and post-modern parable sets it apart from classical and religious parables, which tend to be directed outwards, at questions of right action or theological doctrine.

Capek’s Apocryphal Tales are parables at the most basic level of generic classification. But as relativist/perspectivist re-tellings of classical parables they often have more in common with the serio-comic thought experiments of Borges in “Pierre
Menard”\(^2\) or Kafka’s dark readings of classical mythology\(^3\) than with the instructional tools of first century rabbis and priests. That said, Capek’s *Apocryphal Tales* do intend to instruct, but only after thoroughly amusing.

It is my contention, however, that the *Apocryphal Tales* describe a unique generic and epistemological position between the positivist objectivism of the classical parable and the positivist relativism of the modern and post-modern parables. They avoid the tone of heavy-handed didacticism of the classical religious parable and do not aspire to the rarefied and austere intellectual space of the post-modern parable. The *Apocryphal Tales* occupy a familiar space and employ the tone of friendly storytelling. They are intended to entertain and to gently provoke critical thinking. They are valuable to the casual reader for their humor and concision even without their hidden arguments about philosophy, history, literature, and politics.

The *Apocryphal Tales* were published in newspapers\(^4\), and therefore do not have the literary luxury of the reader’s full attention. They compete for space on the page with the news of the day on the same page, and must therefore be consistently entertaining and

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\(^2\) The title, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” follows the form of some of Capek’s titles, like “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark” or “Goneril, Daughter of Lear”. While Borges’ title is blatantly counterfactual and therefore humorous and surprising, Capek’s titles tend to be droll understatements. “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark” implies a situation in which the author wants to be sure that the reader isn’t confused about which Hamlet the story concerns, a far-fetched concern, as Hamlet is one of the most well-known characters in all of literature.

\(^3\) The *Apocryphal Tales* intersect directly with Kafka’s treatments of mythology in “The Punishment of Prometheus”.

\(^4\) Principally *Lidove Noviny*, where Capek worked as an editor from April of 1921 until his death.
interesting. The Apocryphal Tales stubbornly avoid taking a position on the ontology of truth and focus instead on epistemological questions. The Apocryphal Tales do not say, “Here is the truth” or “There is no truth” but instead ask, like Pilate, “What is truth?” But like Capek’s Pilate, this is not the sonorous biblical question that is repeated in sermons and theological discourse. It is a question meant to needle readers, to subtly demand that they re-examine their principles. The “What is truth?” of the Apocryphal Tales is a troublemaker’s question, asked half-rhetorically, and with an impish grin, like Capek’s.

It is the contention of this thesis that the Apocryphal Tales are critically significant to the overall body of Karel Capek’s writing, and to literature in general. They are more significant than is reflected in the amount of critical attention they have received. It is the contention of this thesis that a close reading of the Apocryphal Tales is essential to any complex understanding of Karel Capek or of interwar Czechoslovakia. There are three primary factors that create this significance. The first is the generic position of the Apocryphal Tales. They comprise their own genre, one adjacent to but distinct from that of the parable. They are concerned with the application of Capek’s favorite lens, everyday humanity, to all manner of events both fictional and factual, and thus serve as a kind of proving ground for the universality of Capek’s philosophy. Thirdly and perhaps most importantly, the Apocryphal Tales are characteristically Capekian in a way that even the acclaimed novels and plays are not. The Apocryphal Tales reflect in their genre Capek’s unique position between literature and journalism. They reflect in their accessibility his commitment to the everyman. And they reflect in
their humor and lightness, their lack of didacticism, Capek’s storied warmth and wit. The
Apocryphal Tales are Capek writing for the Czechoslovak people in their language in
their most popular newspaper. The Apocryphal Tales are Karel Capek, insofar as a body
of writing can begin to describe the multivalent personality and sleepy simplicity of a
human being.

Chapter 1: Pontius Pilate, Pragmatist

“In all my writing… there are two partly ethical, partly epistemological themes. The first
is Pilate’s negative ‘What is Truth?’ The second is positive: Each man has the truth.” –
Karel Capek from Lidove Noviny No. 301 June 18, 1922.

“The Side of Many Things”: Capek’s Philosophical Background

Capek studied philosophy at three universities during his academic career, the
Charles University in Prague (where later Czechoslovak president Edvard Benes lectured
on American Pragmatism), the Freidrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, and the Sorbonne
in Paris. His focus was on American Pragmatist philosophy, as exemplified by the work
of William James and John Dewey. His doctoral dissertation is titled, “Pragmatism: The
Philosophy of Practical Life”. Capek’s academic work in philosophy is reflected in his
personal philosophy and in his writing, where his worldview is described variously as
relativism, perspectivism, and pragmatism.
Pragmatism is defined canonically within philosophy as the school of philosophy originating in the 19th Century that considered practical consequences to be essential elements of meaning and truth. Relativism is also a canonical philosophy term, but a more broad one, referring less to a specific school of philosophy than the idea that all knowledge exists meaningfully only in relationship to other knowledge. Perspectivism refers variously to the philosophies of Jose Ortega y Gasset or Friedrich Nietzsche and is a specific subset of relativism, as it shares the notion of reality’s variability based on the position of the observer, but rather than focusing on the observer’s position’s effect on observed phenomena (like Einstein’s thought experiments) perspectivism focuses on the position of the observer as the primary object of inquiry. Humanist perspectivism is a useful term for describing the intersection of these various ideologies and Capek’s personal philosophy. Objectivism is an opposite position, and holds that veritable truth exists independently of observation. Capek’s philosophy combines the perspectivist focus on the position of the observer and its relation to the meaning of phenomena with an overriding interest in and compassion for the human condition.

American Pragmatism, as a subset of Pragmatism in general, focuses on the practical consequences of meaning and truth in pursuit of practical action, and places the responsibility for determining the truth or usefulness of a proposition on the individual. During a discussion of John Dewey’s theory of conflict in his doctoral dissertation, Capek tentatively proposes a pragmatist definition of truth. “Truth would then be that content of our thought which we guarantee by taking responsibility.” (Klima 32) Truth
for Capek is not an objective fact, determined by reason, or by science (the application of reason) but rather a wholly subjective concept. For Capek, subjective truth is a moral imperative, a personal responsibility akin in tenor to civic duty and in gravity to the objectivist religions’ ideas of faith. For Capek, Truth as an abstraction is only the beginning, the premise upon which truth as action and truth as state of being are constructed. The conclusion of the paragraph from Capek’s dissertation explains his idea of the importance and purpose of philosophy. “Better for philosophy to wander in search of human good than to be infallible and without any value for a moral life.” (Klima 44)

**Pontius Pilate, Symbol**

Even by the first century AD, Pontius Pilate had evolved from the historical judge of Jesus of Nazareth and fifth Roman governor of Judea into a character, a figure that writers would interpret variously according to their varied political and theological biases. The various gospels and apocryphal accounts all differ in their treatment of Pilate. By the 20th century, Pilate’s historicity has taken a back seat to his symbolic power and rhetorical usefulness. Even in sober historical analysis (cf. Helen Bond’s *Pontius Pilate in Interpretation and History*), interpretation of Pilate’s character by interested parties trumps questions of historical accuracy. Even Tacitus’ account of Pilate’s life is not authority enough when such a freighted character’s identity is at stake.
According to Bond, “With few exceptions, this relatively favorable interpretation [that is, as a pragmatist in a difficult situation] of Pilate, based largely on the characterization of the governor in the gospel accounts, dominated the first half of the twentieth century.” (Bond xii) Bond is referring here to the dominant perspective among scholars of history, and while some scholars of history surely read Lidove Noviny, Capek’s primary audience would have been ordinary people who would likely share the popular and simplistic conception of Pilate as a villain who had a hand in the great atrocity of the crucifixion.

Capek’s choice of Pilate as mouthpiece for his own pragmatist philosophy is at once evidence of his wry, self-effacing sense of humor and simply a logical choice. Like Milton’s eloquent and sympathetic Satan in Paradise Lost, so Capek’s making Pilate into a source of great wisdom contains a kind of meta-fictional wink to readers, rewarding their attention to Capek’s choice of subject with insight into Capek himself. There is, however, arguably no better spokesman for pragmatism than the man who dared to ask, “What is truth?” during a crucial moment in the plot of an objectivist religion’s holy book.

Benchanan

Capek makes a clear distinction between his personal philosophy of pragmatism as it exists in the abstract and its potential practical application. For Capek, relativism is, “neither a method of fighting nor a method of creation… Rather it is a method of understanding.” (“About Relativism”)
Despite the tenor of this statement, Capek was close to, if not a direct participant in, political action the majority of his adult life in both his relationship with T.G. Masaryk and his journalism. In “Benchanan”, Capek outlines three perspectives on the question of the proper relationship between relativism and action, those of Annas, Caiphas, and the implied perspective of Benchanan, who plays the role of interviewer and serves as a kind of biblical proto-journalist.

Anna’s position is one of conservative, cautious pragmatism. He is concerned neither with justice nor truth, but rather with procedure, with tactics. During his conversation about the fate of Jesus of Nazareth, he pointedly asks Benchanan, “What good is truth if we don’t know how to put it across?” (AT 79) While this question is many conservative steps away from Pilate’s idealistic, “What is truth?” it is still an interrogation of truth, in this instance an interrogation of its usefulness. For Annas, the justice or injustice of Jesus’ condemnation is immaterial; what is significant is that Jesus failed to communicate his message effectively, and this failure was a direct result of tactical error. From a conservative pragmatist position, Jesus’ failure as a communicator ends with his death. This position is, however, for the reader even only marginally acquainted with the Bible, obviously, even comically shortsighted, as Jesus’ martyrdom becomes one of the primary symbols of the Christian faith. Anna’s shortsightedness and indifference to moral questions is a parallel position to that of Chamberlain’s England, which would pursue a policy of appeasement concerning Hitler that would eventually lead to the wholesale sacrifice of Czechoslovakia to that goal. Anna is thus a straw man
in Capek’s argument against the kind of pragmatism that would sell out the lives and liberty of the Czech people in an attempt to appease Hitler’s lust for lebensraum.

Capek’s Apocryphal Tales predate the events of Munich, but the argument that Capek is making against totalizing and objectivist pragmatism is the same one that he will make later in opposition to the Munich Accords. This kind of pragmatism is rooted in ideas of efficiency and bears more resemblance to utilitarianism than to Capek’s pragmatism, which is rooted firmly in an abiding humanism.

The second philosophical position described in “Benchanan” is that of Caiaphas, the high priest. Caiaphas argues that the strength and success of the Hebrew nation is a categorical imperative. The individual passion of Jesus is important only insofar as it affects the Hebrew people as a whole. His position bears a strong resemblance to the blind racial-nationalism responsible in large part for the great tribulations Europe would undergo in Capek’s lifetime. The rhetorical power of this position depends on the abstract construction of the nation. The nation is in this sense an idea, rather than the accretion of factual places and people that comprise it. Thus the jingoist/fascistic sentiment that survives long after Capek’s time is expressed by Caiaphas in his insistence that, “anyone who diminishes the Hebrews’ faith in the Pharisees is playing into the hands of the Romans.” (AT 82) Within this rhetorical construct, it is impossible for a citizen to be both critical of the government and to act in civic good faith. This is precisely the totalizing ideology that Capek spoke against directly in his journalism and indirectly in his writing in general.
The problem for Capek with this nationalist pragmatism is the premise from which it is derived. The good of the nation can only be a categorical imperative if the nation exists in its own service rather than in the service of its individual citizens. If, as in Capek’s democratic view, the nation is only useful insofar as it serves its citizens, then dramatic, even revolutionary critique of the government is logical in situations in which that government does not act in the best interests of the people.

The third philosophical position outlined in “Benchanan” is the one given no direct voice, that of Benchanan himself. He is the prototype of the investigative reporter: driven to find out the historical truth of events through direct questioning of the participants. This kind of journalism fits perfectly into Capek’s perspectivism, as the most effective and realistic accounting of events is an amalgam of the varying perspectives of the witnesses to and participants in that event. Based on the tenor of his questions, Benchanan is obviously concerned more with the justice or injustice of Jesus’ crucifixion rather than with the mechanics of messiah work or with the power structure of the Hebrew government. This points to Benchanan’s being an idealist, while his methodology indicates his being a pragmatist. It is, however, this seeming contradiction between idealism and pragmatism that describes Capek’s position most precisely.

A quote from an article in Pritomnost entitled “About Relativism” reveals Capek’s position most directly. “Relativism is neither a method of fighting nor a method of creation, both of which are sometimes straightforward and ruthless. Rather it is a method of understanding.” Benchanan does not fight, does not resist the crucifixion of
Jesus, both practically because he cannot, and symbolically because the movement of historical events is too great a momentum for one observer to meaningfully affect. Neither does Benchanan create with his pragmatism, turning the events around him into an epic poem or drama. Rather, Benchanan uses pragmatism as a means of understanding, through the perspectivist methodology of interviewing people with varying perspectives, the meaning and historical significance of Jesus’ crucifixion. Thus Benchanan is a parable of right action for Capek, a story of how he ought to act, with momentous events all around him, as an observer and investigator and how (at least within the conceit of “Benchanan”) his work might add to sum of human knowledge.

The Pilate Stories

Though Pontius Pilate is a figure whose fortunes in fiction and theology have undergone great changes through history, in the three Apocryphal Tales directly concerning Pilate, “Pilate’s Creed”, “Pilate’s Evening”, and “The Crucifixion”, chronologically, it is Capek’s attitude towards the intersection of politics, humanity, and truth that undergoes change over time.

Pilate’s Creed

“Pilate’s Creed”, written in December of 1920, is the most optimistic of the three Pilate stories and serves as a vehicle for the promulgation of Capek’s pragmatist ideals. The epigraph to “Pilate’s Creed” is a quote from John concerning a conversation between Jesus and Pilate in which Pilate asks, “What is truth?” “Pilate’s Creed” is an expansion of this idea, in which Capek casts Pilate as a proto-pragmatist.
Pilate extols a humanist relativist philosophy that exactly mirrors Capek’s own. When Pilate says, “Of course, yes and no can’t join together, but people always can; there is more truth in people than in words” this statement echoes Capek’s own view, as expressed both in his fiction and journalism. Capek prefers people to ideas, in true pragmatist fashion, as it is people that have practical reality. This aspect of Capek’s philosophy is also responsible for his preference for democratic political ideology, as democracy (at least putatively) posits a state that exists in service of the individual citizens that comprise it.

Pilate’s opposition to Jesus’ crucifixion is a personal one; he finds the violence and injustice of the act distasteful. He explains to Joseph that he did not crucify Jesus in order to appease the “loudmouths shouting for their Barabbas” (AT 89) but rather because Pilate recognized Jesus’ ideology as dangerously objectivist. Pilate predicts that “his [Jesus’] disciples would crucify others… kill other truths and hoist other Barabbases on their shoulders” (AT 89). Because Jesus’ followers would posses a totalizing ideology that denies all others, they would be just as destructive as the Pharisees or the Romans. Pilate professes a more tolerant ideology. He tells Joseph that, “…there is as much of your soul in your mistake as there is in your truth” (AT 91). Humanist relativism prefers human error to abstract perfection, because within that context, it is only human error that has practical reality.
The Crucifixion

“The Crucifixion”, written in April of 1927, is more pessimistic than “Pilate’s Creed”, as it reflects Capek’s growing distrust of politics and of government. Despite the relative calm and good health Capek experienced during this period, the circumstances that would engender the second world war and the end of Capek’s beloved democratic Czechoslovakia were forming all around Europe. Capek’s writing was increasingly turned towards the analysis of social problems and veiled warnings of the coming conflict. It is ironic that this period also marks the development of Capek’s friendship with T.G. Masaryk, the Czech politician he most admired (with the possible of exception of Benes, whom he had seen lecture at Charles University on Capek’s great passion, American Pragmatism). Masaryk’s devotion to democracy and centrist politics was encouraging to Capek, but political developments abroad were discouraging in the extreme.

“The Crucifixion” casts the crucifixion of Jesus as a political event within the context of history. That Capek employs the character Nahum as Pilate’s interlocutor, who is described variously as a prophet and as a historian, and that he is described in the story simply as “a learned man well-versed in history” (AT 83), further supports Capek’s historicization of the crucifixion. With Nahum as his mouthpiece, Capek explores another kind of pragmatism, as flawed as the versions described in Benchanan. This is

5 In the Hebrew bible, Nahum is the minor prophet who prophesized the destruction of Nineveh and of Assyria generally.
the academic pragmatism that sets about to see the long view of things, to understand
events within broader contexts and with the inclusion of as much data as possible.

In answer to Pilate’s disbelieving questions Nahum describes the inevitability of
crucifixions. In Nahum’s view, which is the educated, “long” view, the brutality of
political process is such that crucifixions are a necessary part of political progress.
Nahum does not support crucifixion, but neither can he imagine a world without it. In all
his discussion of politics and comparison of the right and the left, Nahum sounds wise. It
seems as though Capek is simply playing with the story of the crucifixion, forcing readers
to see a new perspective on the event, as he so frequently does in the Apocryphal Tales.

The story does not end, however, with Nahum’s musings. The last paragraph
describes, in biblical language, the earthquake that followed the crucifixion and the
damage it caused to the temple. Here Capek is revealing the ultimate purpose of his
story, in keeping with the other Pilate stories, as a vehicle of philosophical argument.
Nahum’s academic pragmatism is another aspect of pragmatism from which Capek
distances himself. For all of Nahum’s erudition, he is as ignorant as any of the picnickers
at Calvary of the real significance of Jesus’ crucifixion. Because religious fervor and the
use by religious movements of historical events for their own ends are irrational and
difficult to predict, they are therefore outside the expertise of a man like Nahum. But
Nahum (and later academics) misses the point of the crucifixion in seeing it without its
attendant religious consequences. In the context of this story, the academic pragmatist
willfully ignores the forest to write an exhaustive treatise comparing the various positions and orientations of tree branches.

Capek believes in history and in science, but they are not sacrosanct. These perspectives too can be shortsighted, and Capek goes to great lengths in the Apocryphal Tales to demonstrate exactly how they can fail, how they differ from his own humanist perspectivism. That said, neither is the philosophy of perspectivism immune to the critical examination that it applies to other ideologies. Capek is at times critical even of his own philosophy, a testament to his humility and good humor.

**Pilate’s Evening**

In March of 1932, Capek’s relationship with Masaryk was at its most intimate and his writing was at a turning point. While 1932 is the year he collected his political essays in Zoon Politikon, it is also the year he began his trilogy of psychological novels, which would mark an utter departure from his previous writing. Hordubal, Meteor, and An Ordinary Life are deeply psychological books, almost completely silent on politics. They are focused instead on the nature of individuality and communication between individuals. This reflects Capek’s ever-increasing pessimism about the efficacy of government. In the conclusion to “Pilate’s Evening” Capek expresses this pessimism as directly as he ever dared in his published writing, when Pilate exclaims,”… what a futile thing it is to govern!” (AT 88)
“Pilate’s Evening” concerns the dinner Pilate has after Jesus’ crucifixion. He dines with Suza, a younger man with much less experience of the world. Suza’s enthusiasm for the novelty of having experienced an earthquake is a classic Capekian relativist argument. The earthquake is an expression of the great passion and tragedy of Jesus’ crucifixion and is intended to terrify and chastise both Jews and Romans, as evidenced by the particular and symbolic damage of the Temple. Suza, however, has never experienced an earthquake and finds it a “stroke of luck” to witness such a “rare phenomenon”. In fact, Suza found the whole experience to be “great fun”. In true perspectivist fashion, even an event as freighted with meaning as the earthquake and eclipse following the crucifixion of Jesus is interpreted differently by everyone who experiences it. Pilate’s response to Suza, “I was in an earthquake once... That one was bigger” further contextualizes the earthquake signifying Jesus’ death. Not only is it stripped of its significance as an omen for some observers, for others; such as Pilate, it is only one in a series of earthquakes, and not even the most intense or destructive. (AT 86-87)

In “Pilate’s Evening” Capek takes the most liberties with the biblical Pilate of any of his Apocryphal Tales. Pilate wonders aloud about the people of Bethlehem and why they didn’t come to Jesus’ defense. Pilate imagines them to be virtuous people, better and simpler than the “scruffy nobodies” and “scandalmongers” who populate Jerusalem. Pilate wishes they had come to Jesus’ rescue because this would have restored some of Pilate’s faith in the goodness of humanity and the worthiness of governance. Pilate does
not state directly but hints towards Jesus’ potential as a leader in his hometown, and Pilate’s ability to be useful as a procurator in instating Jesus as a leader.

This is all conjecture, of course, as the people of Bethlehem did not appear to save their townsman from the vicissitudes of Jerusalem politics. Pilate here not only washes his hands but also admits his powerlessness to affect events in Jerusalem when so many competing groups have such influence and vested interest. This kind of weariness of bureaucracy sounds less like the language of a Roman soldier turned procurator than that of a modern democratic leader like Masaryk. In the face of great international upheaval and unrest within Czechoslovakia, Masaryk must have felt, at least in his darker moments, the kind of frustration that would lead Capek to have Pilate defeatedly exclaim, “what a futile thing it is to govern!” This skepticism would be borne out by historical events, as within three years of the story’s publication, Masaryk would be dead, and within seven, Benes would be exiled and Hitler’s troops would march on Prague.

The Pilate stories are evidence of the persistence of Capek’s early concern with philosophy. Despite his having become a newspaper editor and fiction writer, Capek’s interest in pragmatism and his own particular brand of pragmatism, humanist perspectivism persist in even his light and entertaining Apocryphal Tales, an unavoidable undercurrent of all of his writing. Importantly, the Pilate stories are not pedantic philosophy lessons. The genre of the apocryphal tale demands that the Pilate stories be brief and amusing, and easily read, despite their weighty intentions.
Chapter Two: Lot of Sodom, Patriot

In “The Punishment of Prometheus”, “Pseudo-Lot, Or Concerning Patriotism”, and “The Ten Righteous”, Capek employs classical mythology and biblical stories surrounding the destruction of Sodom in the service of discussing the relationship between the individual and the community, or state. The subject of the nation-state is a fraught one for Capek as an ardent patriot of the young Czechoslovak republic and a critic of the nationalist forces responsible for the two massive wars in his lifetime. Capek explores this tension with characteristic subtlety in these three stories, maintaining his ambivalence. He celebrates the passion and intensity of Lot’s deeply-felt personal patriotism and reveals the patent logical absurdity of grouping large numbers of diverse people into arbitrary states. Lot loves Sodom because his identity as an individual is intrinsically connected to his identity as a citizen of Sodom. However, God’s judgment and condemnation of Sodom ignores the individual citizens of Sodom in favor of a sweeping generalization. In all three stories Capek supports his conviction that the individual human beings are more significant than their ideas or abstract allegiances, which conviction is an important tenet of his humanist perspectivism.

The Punishment of Prometheus

George Gibian’s Essay, “Karel Capek’s Apocrypha and Franz Kafka’s Parables”, uses the “Punishment of Prometheus” as a primary point of comparison between Capek and Kafka. It is a logical choice, as Kafka also has a short parable on Prometheus, and also because “The Punishment of Prometheus”, in Gibian’s words is “one of the
The story of Prometheus is a particularly apt one for any artist, and Kafka’s attraction to it as outsider and man barely appreciated in his lifetime for his gifts is obvious. Capek’s interest is less because of any personal identification with Prometheus, and more in the way the story could shed light on the way that individuals, and creative people particularly, interact with their communities and the governments of those communities.

It is the fashion in the majority of Czech literary criticism to draw distinctions such as this one between Capek and Kafka (with the notable exception of Ivan Klima’s *Life and Work*), and the Gibian essay has the same kind of contrast as its thesis. Gibian concludes his essay with the statement, “The two Prague authors form a pair which belongs to the series of other eternal antinomies and complements, such as Montaigne and Pascal, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.” (Gibian 247) While it is true that Kafka and Capek are very different people, writing in different languages and with totally different bodies of work, it is no coincidence that two of the three great Czech writers of the 20th century (Jaroslav Hasek being the third) choose to write short stories re-examining the Prometheus myth.

Prometheus, as the betrayer of the Gods in the cause of man, is an important figure for authors like Capek and Kafka, both writing at the tail end of modernism, and both deeply concerned with the fate of the individual in the coming age of powerful industrial nations. In Capek’s version, Prometheus is punished not because he betrays the Gods but because the community in which he lives cannot tolerate the innovation of fire
occurring outside of socially-approved avenues. For Kafka too, the idea of the individual whose behavior is unacceptable to society at large is a recurring theme. While Kafka’s darker and more existentialist writing differs greatly in tone from Capek’s light and humanist work, for both writers, the individual as opposed to the community with which he grapples is the primary subject. The Prometheus story often read as a metaphor, with Prometheus’ disobedience of the Gods and resultant punishment standing for the struggle of humanity generally for free will. The polytheistic authority with which Prometheus grapples in the original is updated by both Kafka and Capek to reflect the modern world.

Kafka’s promethean parable also has a Capekian note in its apparent concern with perspectivism. Kafka relates four different versions of the punishment of Prometheus, each one more skeptical about the logic of mythology than the last. In the final version, eternity proves too long for even the Gods and their divinely ordained punishment. “The gods became tired, the eagles became tired, the wound closed itself tiredly.” (Kafka 432) While the various versions of the legend are not attributed to any particular characters, they are obviously derived from different sources and are an example of the way literary (and historical) reality changes when viewed from varying perspectives. Kafka’s parable is an essay on storytelling and the problem of truth. Capek’s apocryphal tale is more concerned with the ways that communities interact with individuals, but it also comments on the problem of storytelling and truth.

The Apocryphal Tales as a genre call into question the accuracy of the accepted versions of literary, mythological, and historical reality. By revising stories or filling in
omissions, the Apocryphal Tales demand that the reader re-examine the original sources of the tales. “The Punishment of Prometheus” is particularly eloquent on the subject of storytelling and historical accuracy, in that Prometheus’ voice is conspicuously absent from the story. History is written by the victors, in this case the court that tries, convicts, and sentences Prometheus. This is a perspectivist position, as the truth of the events varies according to who is telling the story. Like the four versions of Prometheus’ punishment in Kafka’s parable, the various senators in Capek’s story all have different perspectives and biases that lead them to different conclusions concerning Prometheus.

As in R.U.R., with its Dickensian character names, in “The Punishment of Prometheus” Capek plays with names to comic effect, with all of the senators having names similar to Prometheus: Hypome; theus, Ametheus, Antime; theus, and Apome; theus. Capek is here relying on a false etymology of the name Prometheus that connects it to the greek root “manthano” (to learn). Thus all of the senators’ names are comments on their positions in relation to learning. The senators are either against, below, without, or far from learning, based on their names. None of the senators are capable of seeing Prometheus as an innovator and creator of knowledge, but instead are limited by their conservative positions to seeing him as a transgressor who must be punished.

In a typically Capekian twist, the end of the story shows Hypome; theus’s humanity and blindness to his situation. Hypome; theus thinks himself the real innovator rather than Prometheus, as he thinks of a way to season roast mutton. For him, the innovation of fire is not the great accomplishment, but the refinement of that innovation.
to a practical purpose: cooking, and the further refinement of that purpose in the
discovery of the means of properly seasoning food cooked with fire. Besides the comic
shortsightedness of Hypomeuthus’ position the story also serves as sharp skewering of
the way bureaucracy functions. Great innovation and change are frowned upon, even
criminalized, while polite minutiae are celebrated.

“The Punishment of Prometheus” is an examination of the role of the artist in the
community and also of the nature of government. It is a rare direct intersection of subject
matter for Capek and Kafka, and in that, a means of seeing their similarities, even in their
differing treatments of the Prometheus legend. It is also an example of Capek’s
commitment to the endurance of human nature. Prometheus’ discovery of fire, a subject
of numinous significance for the many writers who have treated it, is at the end of the
story most notable for its contribution to that most homely and human of concerns, the
preparation of food.

Pseudo-Lot or Concerning Patriotism

“Pseudo-Lot, or Concerning Patriotism” is a story that examines three kinds of
loyalty: political, religious, and familial. It follows the biblical story of Lot in the time
before the destruction of Sodom. Like “The Ten Righteous” it employs a great deal of
direct quotation from the bible. What Capek adds to the story that does not appear in the
biblical account is an examination of Lot’s experience of conflicting loyalties. In
“Pseudo-Lot”, Lot is torn between his loyalty to his hometown, his family, and his God.
The story deals both directly and metaphorically with the patriotism of the title, as Lot’s loyalty to Sodom is a kind of patriotism, and is also a figure for patriotism such as Capek’s deeply felt sentiment for the young Czechoslovak republic. Lot’s argument with God concerning the fate of Sodom comprises the majority of the story, followed by his attempts to save his family. Capek includes a great deal of direct biblical quotation, filling in the gaps between the biblical passage with his own imaginative exegesis of what goes unsaid. At the conclusion of the story, Lot returns to Sodom as it is being destroyed, unable to abandon the city and the people that he loves.

Perhaps most striking about “Pseudo-Lot” is its strange prescience about Capek’s eventual fate. Though the story was written in 1923, fifteen years later Capek would refuse in the last year of his life to leave his beloved country, even on the eve of its destruction at the hands of the Nazis. Capek claimed at the time that he could not leave because he felt he would be needed more at home, but he must have known that for as outspoken a critic of Hitler and fascism generally as he was, to stay in Czechoslovakia was to make likely if not certain his imminent death. The great departure of “Pseudo-Lot” from the biblical story, Lot’s inability to abandon Sodom, even when it means his certain death and he has been given every opportunity to escape, sheds light on Capek’s motivation in staying in Czechoslovakia. For Capek, patriotism is more than an allegiance to an abstract state, more than a civic duty. Capek’s patriotism is personal in the extreme. As Lot sacrilegiously says, “I believed in the Lord because He seemed to me the God of Sodom; if there is no Sodom, there is no Lord.” (AT 61) Capek’s belief in
humanity was general, but he owed its entire development to the Czech people. Despite his worldliness, and the great insight of his “Letters from” books, Capek’s perspectivism makes his and Czechoslovakia’s existences co-extant. Capek’s perspective on the world, that which, for him, is the most important factor determining the nature and meaning of the world around him, is a Czech perspective. Without the country from which his worldview is derived Karel Capek would cease to be Karel Capek. He therefore could not leave his country when he knew it was in imminent danger of destruction. So Capek stayed in Prague, and died of pneumonia December 25th, 1938, only three months before the Nazis arrived in Prague. His brother and many of his friends would make the same choice, and be sent to concentration camps, where many, including Josef Capek, would die.

The Ten Righteous

“The Ten Righteous” takes up the theme of “Pseudo-Lot” again, eight years later, in 1931. Rather than focusing on Lot, “The Ten Righteous” takes Abraham and Sarah as its main characters. The story opens with a long passage from Genesis, in which Abraham negotiates the preservation of Sodom from God’s wrath if he is able to find ten righteous people within it. Capek’s contribution to the biblical story is an account of Abraham and Sarah’s conversation about the people of Sodom and their inability to agree on ten righteous people to present to God.

6 Letters From England, Letters From Holland, Letters From Spain, and Letters from Italy.
Abraham and Sarah impose petty judgments on everyone suggested as candidates for the list of ten righteous people, including their own family members. Sarah cannot imagine that Lot’s daughter could be included among the righteous because of, ”the way she waggles her bottom” at Abraham. (AT 54) Sarah, from the beginning, is unable to consider others objectively because of her emotional perspective. Her jealousy about and protectiveness of her husband renders her unable to see Lot’s daughter as righteous. However, she is ready to count her among the righteous a few moments later for the sake of expediency. Abraham and Sarah are eminently human, an old married couple bickering about their neighbors. They are also human in the changeability of their convictions, the ease with which they go from praising someone’s worthiness to condemning their sinfulness.

There is an obvious perspectivist bent to the story as well, as it is Abraham and Sarah’s respective positions that determine their perceptions of reality. They are unable to see others with anything approaching objectivity. In the biblical context, this kind of objectivity is only available to God, and therefore it is God who is the only appropriate judge of man. For Capek, however, this simplistic Christian moral is not the entire story. While Abraham and Sarah are obviously not appropriate judges of the people of Sodom, God’s plan is to destroy all of the people of Sodom, the righteous and sinful alike. Abraham’s privileged position as God’s confidant seems unwarranted based on the various sins that he and Sarah exhibit in their conversation. Their enmity towards the people of Sodom stems from pride, envy, lust, and greed. Their judgments, and by
extension, human moral judgments generally, seem arbitrary, particularly in the case of Namuel, whom both Sarah and Abraham judge to be pious initially. Sarah then remembers that Namuel “practices the sin of Sodom”, presumably homosexuality. That Namuel could be pious except for his homosexuality is a blatant contradiction, and one that human minds, rooted in their personal perspectives, are hard pressed to reason through.

“The Ten Righteous” also shows Capek’s growing skepticism about the logic of the nation-state. Sodom is a metaphor for any nation, which must, by virtue of its size contain diverse people, of differing and even contradictory beliefs and ideas. That any state could be justly judged or even seen as an expression of a single person or ideology is a difficult question for Capek, whose strong belief in democracy as the best possible government for Czechoslovakia is more of a recognition of practical realities than a good faith adherence to radical perspectivism. Democracy is designed to empower the people, but it still must, as any governmental system must, ignore the wishes of some in favor of others. It is the size of the nation-state that is at fault more than the ideology that governs it. The modern nation-state is, from a strict perspectivist position, too big and too diverse to be effectively and fairly ruled.

That Czechoslovakia would be judged as a whole, by flawed human reason at Munich, bears out Capek’s skepticism. Capek could see the nationalism that had caused World War One leading Europe into another massive conflict, and “The Ten Righteous” is one of the more soft-spoken of his warnings about the coming troubles. Like “Pseudo-
“Lot”, “The Ten Righteous” possesses an eerie prescience about Capek and Czechoslovakia’s future. Capek could not have known what would happen at Munich in 1938, and in fact would likely have argued against anyone who predicted the abandonment of Czechoslovakia by Capek’s beloved British. Capek could see, however, in 1931, that the illogic of the nation-state could produce great suffering, and that any ideology that groups people into objectified groups facilitates the mistreatment and subjugation of human beings.

Chapter Three: Karel Capek, Author of the Hamlet

In the Apocryphal Tales that revisit well-known literary works, Capek engages in a kind of parodic exercise that would become commonplace after his death in the writing of Calvino, Borges and others. In Capek’s case, he re-imagines the characters and plots of King Lear, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, and Don Juan through the lens of humanist perspectivism. Great tragedy requires great passions on the part of its characters, but everyday life has little room for such excessive emotions and reckless behavior. This understanding is a particularly important one to Capek, whose romantic life was limited by both his physical infirmities and his fragile emotional nature. Capek imagines literary characters as human beings, rather than tragic figures, and does so with great humor and wit. Besides amusing his readership, these Apocryphal Tales also serve as vehicles for Capek’s ideas about aesthetics and the role of the artist in society.
In “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark”, Capek not only prefigures Tom Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead\(^2\) but also raises questions about the relative value of artistic work and political action. “Don Juan’s Confession” interrogates the myth making required of both literature and gossip. “Romeo and Juliet” is a critical examination of tragic romance in the face of mundane reality. “Goneril, Daughter of Lear”, attempts to imagine how an evil character might think of herself, and how she might justify her own actions to herself. All of these stories take as their basic premise that there is a divide between literary reality and factual reality, and imagine how characters might behave if they were factual people rather than literary creations.

**Goneril, Daughter of Lear**

“Goneril, Daughter of Lear” is probably the least productive of Capek’s revisions of Shakespeare. The story consists of a conversation between Goneril and her nurse, during which Goneril attempts to justify herself and her famously evil behavior. George Gibian, in his discussion of the Apocryphal Tales, finds her to be a convincing character, and writes that she explains, “quite sensibly and humanly how and why she has become an evil woman.” (Gibian 240) This is Capek’s goal with the story, but he fails to accomplish it as effectively as Gibian imagines.

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\(^7\) The author has been unable to find any reference to Stoppard’s having been acquainted with “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark”, despite Stoppard’s Czech origins and likely awareness of *R.U.R.*
Rather than explaining how she has come to be such a bad person, Goneril makes excuses for herself and focuses on having been treated unjustly, and having been right when she disagreed with her father and sister. Goneril is neither repentant nor a convincing victim of circumstance. Rather, she lists her grievances and positions herself as helpless to be anything other than evil. It seems unlikely that Goneril’s rhetoric would have convinced even herself of her lack of culpability.

If Capek is successful in making any statement in “Goneril” it is one about the helplessness of literary characters before the will of their authors. Goneril is so exceptionally evil, and has so few personal details beyond the ones that Capek lists, that she is unable to be anything other than Shakespeare’s creature. Other characters like Hamlet or Don Juan are rich enough in complexity and ambiguity that Capek is capable of taking them far beyond the bounds of their respective plays in the Apocryphal Tales. Goneril is too one-dimensionally drawn to be capable of escaping her role as one of the two evil daughters of Lear. In keeping with Capek’s focus on the difference between literary characters and real people, this limitation of Goneril could be seen as another example of the artificiality of literature. Whether Capek’s intent was to demonstrate the limitations of Goneril’s character and thereby the artificiality of literary characters in general or whether he attempted to write a full exoneration of Goneril and came up against the dearth of humanizing details of her in King Lear, the tale serves as an object lesson in the difference between literary reality and historical reality. It is also an example of Capek’s dedication to his craft, as it implies a host of similarly unsuccessful
Apocryphal Tales, unwritten or at least unpublished, in which Capek would attempt to redeem all of the great villains of literary history by means of perspectivist re-imagining. Such a project would combine Capek’s renowned kindness and desire for empathy with his quixotic hunger for utopian undertakings.

**Romeo and Juliet**

“Romeo and Juliet” is one of the lightest in tone of the Apocryphal Tales, which is appropriate considering the story’s interest in the mundane details of human love. Capek imagines how the historical Romeo and Juliet’s lives would have played out had they not been the subjects of Shakespeare’s great romantic tragedy. Oliver Mendeville, an Englishman abroad, stops at a remote village where he is offered hospitality by the parish priest, Padre Ippolito. This priest happens to be from Verona and happens to have known Friar Laurence and therefore knows in detail the stories of Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet. The priest’s version of their stories varies greatly from Mendeville’s recollection of the events of the play, to great comic effect. The underlying message of the contrast between the two sets of events is the difference between the kind of romantic love most often portrayed in novels and on the stage and the kind of love that most often occurs in the lives of factual people. Capek’s perspectivism is an important aspect of this apocryphal tale, particularly in contrasting the way that Mendeville and Ippolito each interpret the events of the other’s story, based on their own positions and experiences.
For Mendeville, as for much of Capek’s readership which would have been familiar with *Romeo and Juliet*, the two teenagers’ tragic affair and eventual deaths was touching and inspiring, the height of romantic literature and sentiment. But for anyone involved directly, or indirectly as Padre Ippolito was, their deaths would have been foolish and unfortunate. The great obstacle to the lovers in the play is the feud between the Montagues and Capulets. In the context of a tragic romance, this feud is seen as a foolish grudge that brings only evil. But in Ippolito’s mind, the feud is a sensible disagreement between families of differing financial means and political views. In Padre Ippolito’s words, “As if the wealthy Capulets would have given their daughter to one of those bankrupt Montagues. And besides, the Montagues backed Mantua, whereas the Capulets were on the side of the Duke of Milan.” (AT 144)

That Verona is called the “city of Juliet” in England touches Padre Ippolito only insofar as he thinks that name is a tribute to Juliet’s virtuous and fruitful womanhood and marriage to Paris rather than the few childish indiscretions of her teenage years. The tragic sacrifice of her own life when she sees Romeo’s dead body is reduced to “mere childishness on her part” as she did “take a tiny drop of poison”. (AT 145) Interestingly, Mandeville gets this part of the story wrong, as Juliet’s famous “oh happy dagger” speech is followed by her stabbing herself, not drinking poison. Such meticulous accuracy is not important to Mendeville’s romantic version of the story. What is significant is that Juliet dies for love, fulfilling the expectations of romantic tragedy.
Padre Ippolito’s version of the story is concerned with details, but only insofar as they establish that Romeo and Juliet both adhere to the expectations of polite society, Juliet as a wife and mother and Romeo as a ladies’ man who eventually wins the heart of a wealthy young woman and runs away with her. Padre Ippolito defends his paucity of information on Romeo’s fate with “but I’ve forgotten the particulars; of course”. (AT 147) Romance, even real-life romance, exists in this kind of gauzy state of forgotten particulars (such as the method of Juliet’s suicide), whereas, at least in Padre Ippolito’s world, upright family life like Juliet’s is remembered and repeated as exemplary behavior.

Capek employs a number of devices in “Romeo and Juliet” to make the contrast between romance and reality clearer. Mendeville’s excitability and emotional temperament is contrasted with Ippolito’s conservative calm. Mendeville’s enthusiasm for tragedy and romance is contrasted with Ippolito’s sensible love of comfort and peace. Also, in a textbook example of pathetic fallacy, the sun of reason emerges at the end of the story to banish the romantic and mysterious rainstorm that opened it. All of these devices are employed to make sure that the reader does not lose sight of Capek’s message among the wit and humor of the story. Capek, is more concerned with the fate of individuals than with great romance, and is determined to show that even in the case of the most cherished of love stories, the position of the observer has everything to do with the meaning of events.
Don Juan’s Confession

“Don Juan’s Confession” is set in the days immediately preceding the death of Don Juan Tenorio, storied womanizer and rake. The first half of the story concerns the attempts of Father Jacinto to receive Don Juan’s confession, and his failure to do so. In the second half of the story, a Jesuit priest makes a second attempt at hearing Don Juan’s confession, and succeeds, in the sense that he discovers the great secret of Don Juan’s life: that he is not, in fact, a great seducer of women, but is instead a boastful pretender who had never had sex with a woman or known romantic love. The story concludes with the priest recommending that Don Juan be granted absolution.

The choice of the name Tenorio implies that Capek is using as his source the Spanish play “Don Juan Tenorio: Drama religioso-fantástico en dos partes” by Jose Zorilla. The plot elements point to Mozart’s Don Giovanni, though they are altered in the death of the virtuous Dona Elvira, who in Mozart’s version installs herself in a convent. Don Giovanni had its premiere in Prague at the Estates Theater in 1787, and has been a part of the opera company’s repertoire there ever since. Capek would have been familiar with the opera in that connection, which makes it a likely source for “Don Juan’s Confession”. That said, Capek is primarily concerned with the character of Don Juan as he existed in the public consciousness, rather than fidelity to any particular version of the story.
For Capek, whose love life was troubled by physical infirmity and an abiding suspicion about romantic love, the character of Don Juan is a comic one, even an unbelievable one. In his *Life and Work*, Ivan Klima writes, “…the mutual relations between his male and female characters were mostly, in one way or another, unusual or even abnormal” (56). In keeping with Klima’s reading of Capek’s treatment of romantic love, it is appropriate that Capek’s Don Juan would be a fake, a pretender to love. The story revolves around this pretense and its revelation to the reader. Don Juan is reduced to tears when the truth of his life is revealed to Father Ildefonso, and by implication, to himself.

Don Juan’s role as pretender is the primary deviation Capek makes from the traditional Don Juan stories. This deviation points to Capek’s purpose in writing “Don Juan’s Confessions”: to discuss the difference between literary and factual reality. In factual life, the number of stories of great womanizers and seducers greatly outnumbers the factual don juans. The human love of gossip and exaggeration creates myth and reputation, which often has little relationship to the truth of events. Capek imagines that a real-life Don Juan would likely have not actually performed many of his exaggerated exploits.

The psychological examination that Father Ildefonso inflicts on Don Juan is also an important element of Capek’s message. The priest insists that Don Juan’s womanizing was motivated by his great insecurity and his abiding fear that he could never be loved. For this same reason, the priest imagines that Don Juan could never consummate his
seductions, as he was terrified of actual human connection. How much this reflects Capek’s own insecurity about romantic love and avowed fear of intimacy is open to speculation, but it is obvious that Capek is suspicious of the motivations that would lead a man to the ardent pursuit of many women.

In keeping with his relativistic ideas, Capek does not moralize in “Don Juan’s Confession”. He puts the words of reproach in the mouth of a Catholic priest, an unlikely mouthpiece for Capek’s ideas, and rather than showing a repentant Don Juan, Capek only shows him reduced to tears, a man revealed as a fraud. It is not womanizing, or the pretence to womanizing that is Don Juan’s great flaw, but the inauthenticity of his life, which has at its root a psychological weakness. For Capek, Don Juan is sick, and his disease has gone undiagnosed too long. Don Juan’s tragic flaw is his inability to see himself, his flawed self-knowledge, which is a common human failing and is the province of art and of psychotherapy rather than of the church and religious morality.

**Hamlet, Prince of Denmark**

Capek chooses the subjects of his *Apocryphal Tales* exclusively from literatures (and languages) other than Czech. In most of the tales, the original is handled as if it were Czech, with seamless integrations of translated quotes. Capek’s strategy is significantly different in “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark”. The story is not only formatted like a play, but mimics Shakespeare in its meter. While pentameter (arguably) is a natural meter for English poetry, it is definitely not a natural one for Czech.
The wit and accomplishment of Capek’s Czech blank verse is lost to the English language reader of the AT, a great irony in that Shakespeare’s Hamlet is one of the best known English texts internationally, and many of Capek’s Czech speaking readership would have been familiar with the music and meter of the original.

The title of the story, “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark” is ostensibly a simple echo of the original’s title, “The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark”. The two titles are totally different in effect because of the contexts of the two works. For Shakespeare, specifying that Hamlet is a prince of Denmark is a necessary factual addition, as the audience of his plays would not necessarily know who Hamlet was. But for Capek, writing after Shakespeare’s fame has become universal, specifying which Hamlet he is referring to is an unnecessary and therefore comic move. In the world of the Apocryphal Tales there are many possible Hamlets, and Capek’s Hamlet considers many roles other than that of prince of Denmark.

Shakespeare’s Hamlet is the archetypically self-aware character, with his brooding melancholy and monologues of self-examination. The “to be or not to be” speech, which Capek parodies at the end of “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark” is the archetypal expression of self-doubt in English literature. Shakespeare’s Hamlet is also a self-aware text, as evidenced by the meta-textual play within the play. This self-awareness or reflexivity is Capek’s prime subject in “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark”, as he uses Hamlet’s self-examination and critique to question the roles of author, character, and genre in creative work and in life generally.
The first and most obvious way that Capek’s “Hamlet” differs from Shakespeare’s is his tone. Capek is consistently light and humorous in the Apocryphal Tales, in keeping with the context of their publication and readership. The comedy in “Hamlet” operates on two levels. The banter between the characters and their consistent interjections and interruptions give the piece the tone of a comic play. Capek is well-suited to this kind of writing, as his dramatic work is often comic and always contains tightly woven dialogue. In “Hamlet”, characters repeat each other and answer questions with wit typical of Shakespearean comedy. The second and more significant kind of comedy in “Hamlet” relies on the readers’ knowledge of the original and Capek’s winking departure from it.

Here, as in Shakespeare’s version, Hamlet carries a secret he conceals from the court, including his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But in Capek’s version, when Hamlet reveals his great secret, which in the original would have been his knowledge of his uncle’s treachery, Capek performs a comic bait-and-switch. Hamlet’s great secret is instead his desire to leave behind the court and his role as a prince and to become an actor. Here, as in so much of his other work, Capek takes a simple premise, and in exploring it to its logical (or illogical) conclusion, creates insightful and entertaining prose. In this case, the premise that Hamlet, who is forever questioning himself and his role, might contemplate a life as an actor after the “fabulous success” of the play performed for the court that he organizes. In another comic move, Capek’s Hamlet imagines the role of murderer for himself. The role of Hamlet is one of the most sought-
after and prestigious in theater, yet Hamlet, were he acting in the play, would much rather play the villainous uncle than the melancholy prince.

Hamlet’s imagination does not stop at acting. As he begins to imagine improvements to the play, his mind immediately leaps to another, grander ambition: “Dear Rosencrantz, I want to write plays.” (AT 130-31) As Hamlet lists the subjects of the plays he will write, Capek’s quiet humor continues. “-That villain was the first. The next will be about disgraceful, fawning courtiers-” (AT 131) Rosencrantz interrupts this obvious reference to himself with typical obsequy. Here Capek seems to predict Tom Stoppard’s “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead” some thirty-two years in advance. In that play, as in “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark”, a seemingly insignificant premise (two minor characters in Hamlet) is expanded and examined artfully as a means of producing original creative work. Hamlet imagines (in Capek’s deadpan Shakespeare imitation) that writing will provide him an escape from the tyranny of his uncle and a way for him to endure his situation.

This leads to a digression on one of Capek’s most visited themes, that of the role of the creative person in politics. Hamlet sees his “eloquence” as a potential vehicle for change, even though as a prince he is more empowered to directly effect change than most people. This reflects one of the great conflicts of Capek’s life; Capek is close to Masaryk and thereby close to political life, but chooses to limit his involvement to that of an adviser and friend.
Capek’s position as a journalist afforded him the ability to formulate his political views and his reactions to the growing problems in Europe, but he chose to do so obliquely, through the Apocryphal Tales and extended metaphors in his newspaper columns. When Capek would, later in his life, write more directly and passionately about the necessity of preserving the democratic Czechoslovakia, it was under duress, as the threat to that democracy from Hitler and from vocal communists and socialists within Czechoslovakia was imminent and clear.

“Hamlet, Prince of Denmark” concludes with Capek’s great parodic coup, his revised version of the “to be or not to be” monologue. Here Capek stays exceedingly close to Shakespeare’s language, using direct quotes and close paraphrase, such as “all that’s rotten in the state of Denmark” and “to be or not to be, that is the question.” Hamlet initially considers direct revenge, he will “avenge a father’s death and wash the shame from out a mother’s bed!” but then decides that art is the best and most lasting revenge. “Better to convict him for all time” as an actor playing the role of his uncle. Hamlet has a moment of comic hubris reveling in the eloquence of his own phrase, “suppurating sore”, and imagines that his eloquence is wasted as an actor and would be better employed in the service of oration, and specifically political oration. “A man of eloquence could raise a purging storm against all tyrants!” (AT 134)

But Hamlet is too internally conflicted to alight on any one option for long. He wavers between careers as Like Capek in his relativist pragmatism, Hamlet can see the virtues and limitations of his options too clearly. He is paralyzed by the wealth of
possibilities before him, and ends his monologue on a characteristically Capekian and characteristically human note. “If only I were something! - Yes, but what? That is the question!” (AT 134) The question has evolved from whether or not to exist: “to be or not to be”, a question which Capek in 1934 would not have entertained, as he most assuredly did exist and there was much for him to do in the service of humanity and of his country, to “what to be”, a question troubling Capek and troubling Czechoslovakia generally on the eve of great and tragic historical events. Should Capek give up his gardening and animal husbandry, his eloquent celebration of small things, and devote himself completely to the cause of his country? Should he continue to polemicize in Lidove Noviny and hope his words had some effect? Should he retreat into the world of small things of which he was the uncontested literary master in Czech? And tiny Czechoslovakia, prospering at the height of its short-lived democratic republic, what could Czechoslovakia be, caught as it was between the ravenous ambition of Hitler and a Europe made gun-shy by the first world war and Chamberlain’s England, which would avoid direct conflict with Germany at any cost?

While these questions are by no means explicit in Capek’s “Hamlet”, and would not have been obvious to the readership of Lidove Noviny, they are appropriate to the gravity and breadth and inquiry of Shakespeare’s original. By invoking Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Capek also invokes all the numinous depth and multiple meanings of that play, which for Capek and Czechoslovakia generally had dire and immediate importance.
Conclusion

A study of only one of Karel Capek’s many books, and only a selection of the stories it contains, could never be a complete statement on Karel Capek. The great strength of Capek’s work is in its sweeping diversity of genre, form, and style. The Apocryphal Tales are perhaps the most intrinsically Capekian of those genres, for their wit, humor, brevity, satire, and philosophical bent. They are intimately related to the detective stories of Tales from Two Pockets, in that both collections of stories tend to diverge from traditional notions of genre. This is true to some degree of all of Capek’s work. The detective stories often resemble traditional parables more than the pseudo-parables of the Apocryphal Tales. Capek’s science fiction, as exemplified by Factory for the Absolute and War With the Newts, has both too much social commentary and satire and not enough science to fit comfortably into the traditional confines of that genre. Capek’s position in relation to genre is an oblique one.

As a well-read Czech lover of English literature, Capek was conversant in the recognized genres of that literature, but was also writing in a language whose literature did not yet possess enough original work to demand strict delineations of genre. It follows from Capek’s humanist pragmatism that he would not be bound by any set of abstract conventions, let alone one so distant from the individual experience as the traditional conception of literary genres. For Capek, every person is an individual first, and a participant in various associations of various sizes second. This is also true for his writing, as each piece resists traditional generic classification, but all seem
characteristically Capekian. And what is characteristically Capekian? A list of adjectives like wry, mordant, satirical, rollicking, brief, sympathetic, humanist, et al could go on for pages and defeat the point of definition. The Capekian is the doctor of philosophy who writes, “We don’t need relativism to see that a stick has two ends, it just requires the simpler intellectual undertaking of looking at it’. (About Relativism) It is the journalist who spends whole pages in *War With the Newts* viciously (and accurately) satirizing the media. It is the adult, educated man, constantly pained by physical infirmity who writes with a child’s wonder and innocence in the *Letters From* books. Most of all it is the soft-spoken man from a small country who without raising his voice commands the attention of his readership briefly enough to amuse and long enough to teach.
Works Consulted

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