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TALES FROM ONE POCKET:
Detective and Justice Stories of Karel Čapek

Sergej Davydov

When Karel Čapek began his *Tales from One Pocket*, he intended to write a series of detective tales. However, what appeared in 1929 under this title can hardly be termed "detective tales" in the conventional sense. Only half of the stories deal with classic mystery; the rest preserve only the detective situation or focus on aspects lying beyond the interest of the detective genre. Čapek wrote about the composition of the *Tales*:

> My first authorial interest in detective stories originated with the problem of epistemology—how does one perceive and discover truth. *The Tales from One Pocket* are epistemological tales. As soon as I began to deal with the world of crime I became involuntarily attracted to the problem of justice. You will find the break near the middle of my book. Instead of the question "how to perceive" the question "how to punish" becomes predominant. The *Tales from One Pocket* consist of epistemological tales and tales of justice. I think the tales of justice are rather better [1956: 95].

The epistemological or "noetic" tales which make up the first half of the book are as close as Čapek gets to the detective genre. The task here is to determine how Čapek's "detective tales" are related to the detective genre and how they deviate from it.

I

The Detective Tales

Every detective story begins with a mystery *(tajna)* [Šklovskij, 1929: 125-142], *l'énigme* [Todorov, 1971: 55-64]. The majority

of Čapek's detective tales open with a classical murder mystery (4, 7, 12, 13, 15, 17, 20, 21).[1] However, a number deal with a lesser crime, one which would usually be considered substandard and trivial for a traditional detective plot. Often, instead of a crime, an ordinary, non-criminal event takes place "behind closed doors." In spite of the insignificance of these events (finding a lost letter, detecting the origin of blue chrysanthemums, discovering the infidelity of a spouse, etc.), Čapek presents them as classical mysteries. His usual procedure is to lift the veil of mystery in the quickest possible way. Often the enigma is "demysterified" at the very beginning. "Everything is a mystery, save the criminal cases," claims the police inspector Bartošek. "[A] criminal case is a well-delineated piece of reality, a segment upon which we've cast light" (16). As in all detective stories, Čapek's mysteries are successfully solved. But there is one exception. "The Footprints," which lead nowhere in the story of the same name, remain as enigmatic at the close as they had been at the beginning of the tale. This story will be discussed in the concluding part of this paper.

In detective tales there are six obligatory character prototypes: 1) the victim, 2) the detective, 3) the rival detective, 4) the detective's friend, usually the narrator, 5) a number of suspects and 6) the criminal. Čapek consistently develops only two: the detective and his rival. The suspects are invariably left out.

In the majority of Čapek's stories, we find the well-known pair of competing detectives, one successful and the other unsuccessful. The classical opposition of successful private detective vs. unsuccessful institutionalized police (e.g., Sherlock Holmes vs.

1. For convenience I have numbered the stories in the order in which they appeared in the original Czech edition: "Dr. Mejzlík's Case"–1, "The Blue Chrysanthemums"–2, "The Fortune-Teller"–3, "The Clairvoyant"–4, "The Mystery of Handwriting–5, "Proof Positive–6, "Professor Rouss's Experiment"–7, "The Lost Letter"–8, "The Stolen Papers–139/Sec. C."–9, "There Was Something Shady about the Man"–10, "The Poet"–11, "Mr. Janík's Cases"–12, "The Fall of the House of Votický"–13, "The Record"–14, "The Selvin's Case"–15, "The Footprints"–16, "The Coupon"–17, "The End of Oplátka"–18, "The Last Judgment"–19, "The Farm Murder"–20, "The Disappearance of the Actor Benda"–21, "An Attempt at Murder"–22, "The Discharged"–23, "The Post Office Crime"–24 [see Čapek, 1929]. When possible, I have followed the English translation [Čapek, 1932]. The quotations have been checked against the original and where necessary small changes have been made. Since the stories are rather short, it was not deemed necessary to indicate page references after the quotations.

Scotland Yard) is often reversed in Čapek's tales. Among the successful solvers, we find ordinary, not too ingenious and, more often than not, simply stupid provincial policemen who usually serve as the target for mockery in traditional detective fiction.[2]

Nonetheless, the cases where the police turn out to be the successful solvers are the exception rather than the rule. Čapek fills the competing members of this classical opposition with unorthodox and even paradoxical characters.

	SOLVER	
STORY	UNSUCCESSFUL	SUCCESSFUL
2	The police and all village inhabitants	The village idiot, Klára
3	The police inspector	The fortuneteller
4	The public prosecutor	The clairvoyant
7	The police	Harvard Professor Rouss
8	The secret police	The State Secretary's wife
9	Military intelligence	The local police inspector
10	The police	The innkeeper
11	The police	The surrealist poet
12	The secret police	The wholesale dealer, Mr. Janík
21	The police	The surgeon, Dr. Goldberg

As a rule, Čapek's successful detectives are not the typical professionals. Rather, it is the accidental outsiders, dilettantes, laymen and quacks who turn out to be more competent. A reversed variant of this opposition is present in "The Fall of the House of Votický." Here a professional historian together with a police inspector try to solve a family murder dating to the fifteenth century. In accordance with Čapek's strategy, the seemingly

2. Čapek wrote his *Tales* at a time when the detective genre with brilliant detective stars was fully established. This might also be the reason that Čapek, in searching for his detectives, reached for the least ambitious representatives of the trade. Čapek humanizes his inspectors and adds a poetic touch to his humble heroes. One should also bear in mind that the majority of his tales are based on existing criminal cases covered in the daily press.

incompetent police inspector, rather than the seemingly competent historian, solves the historical riddle.[3] Every mystery, save one, is finally solved. In "The Footprints," neither the layman nor the professional can decipher the riddle of the footprints in the snow.

The idiosyncratic method which Čapek's successful detectives employ also deserves mention from a generic point of view. Todorov, following Van Dine, characterizes the classic detective method as follows: "5. Tout doit s'expliquer d'une façon rationelle; le fantastique n'y est pas admis . . . 8. Il faut éviter les situations et les solutions banales" [1971: 62]. In eleven of fifteen tales, Čapek reaches the solutions by a completely unorthodox method. Chance (1, 2, 12), occult methods (e.g. fortunetelling, clairvoyance, surrealistic perception, ESP: 3, 4, 7, 8, 11) or simple intuition (10) prove more successful than classic induction or deduction. This Chestertonian turn, in which the intuition of Father Brown triumphs over the logic of Sherlock Holmes, characterizes the majority of Čapek's tales [see Bradbrook, 1961]. "It's nice to say 'method'; but a detective who simply is not lucky is worthless" (12), admits a police inspector to Mr. Janík, the wholesale dealer in paper and cellulose who haphazardly helps the police to solve three mysteries. Even more remarkable is the fact that Čapek's successful solvers, though endowed with outstanding supra-rational abilities, are seldom aware of their own exceptional nature. They readily admit to being quacks and charlatans, and only rarely do they learn that the mysteries solved by them have baffled the experts.

In a number of tales, Čapek obviously parodies the classic inductive and deductive method. For instance, the fortuneteller in the story of the same name, who is accused of bamboozling her clients, applies typical Holmesian inductive methods. She confesses to Master Justice Kelly how she had told the fortune of his wife:

> "When the young person called upon me she was all dressed up, but her left glove was torn, which looked as if she was

3. By interchanging the members of the classical opposition of successful private detective vs. unsuccessful institutionalized police, Čapek does not trespass against the laws of the genre. The reversal of variables does not neutralize the invariant function of the opposition.

> not too well off, but she wanted to make a show all the same. She said she was twenty, but now it turns out she's twenty-five. . . . Well, she wanted to get married, what I mean to say is, she made out to me that she wasn't married. So I arranged cards for her that would foretell a wedding and a rich husband: I thought that'd fit the case better than anything else."

Ironically, the prediction turns out to be correct, but the fortune-teller never learns about it. A characteristic parody of Holmesian methods is also present in "The Death of the Baron Granada" *(Tales from the Other Pocket)*:

> Uncle Pitr [inspector] muttered that he would carry out the search and proceeded to the site of the crime. Needless to say, he didn't find anything. He scolded the detectives and returned to sit down and light his pipe. Anyone who saw him in the midst of the stinky cloud would think that Mr. Pitr was thinking about his case, but he would be wrong. Uncle Pitr did not think, because he was radically opposed to thinking. "The criminal doesn't think either" he used to say. . . .

The same Uncle Pitr, in a dialogue with his rival, the inspector Dr. Mejzlík, draws a paradoxical conclusion concerning methods in general:

> "If they'd given [the case] to me, I'd do it my way, and make of it an ordinary robbery with murder. Had they given [the case] to you, you'd have made of it a sensational criminal case, a romance or a political crime. You have a romantic taste, Mr. Mejzlík. . . ."[4]

Čapek also mocks in analogous fashion the criminal and his method. In "The Stolen Papers—139/VII Sect. c," the mystery

4. In his detective stories, Čapek goes beyond the mere parody of the genre and seems to make a philosophical statement about the nature of truth. The truth (criminal case), if presented not as an ontological category per se but as a direct product of the applied epistemological (detective) method becomes inevitably relative and subjective.

which baffles the military secret police (top secret papers have been stolen from the General Staff Lieutenant-Colonel's pantry) is readily solved by the local policeman, Mr. Pištora, who is a connoisseur of various criminals' methods.

> "It was Pepek or Andrlík who done that. But I reckon that Pepek's doing time. If the glass had only been pushed out, it might have been Dundr, Novák, Hosička or Kliment. But this here was one of Andrlík's jobs." "You seem cocksure about it," growled the Colonel. "You don't think there is anybody new round here after pantries?" said Mr. Pištora with sudden gravity. "I don't reckon it's likely. There's Mertl who opens windows with chisels, too, but then he never goes after pantries, sir, he don't. What he does is to get through the closet into the house, and all he takes is linen."

Čapek's brother Josef describes in his book *The Humblest Art* the manner in which a naive painter depicts the bloody scene of a murder:

> Here the murderer, far from resembling a blackguard, looks rather much like an unhappy man, who is still capable of feeling the pangs of conscience. The misfortune is depicted with care, elaborated with piety, and seems to rely on the beneficent help of God [1930: 29].

The same words can also be applied to Karel Čapek's technique of depicting his villains. In "There Was Something Shady about the Man," "The End of Oplatka" and "The Farm Murder," we find the best examples of this kind. Čapek "demysterifies" his criminal. His villains are gentle and friendly, obedient creatures, often harmless and basically pathetic. The police inspector simply makes a house call whenever he needs to arrest one of them. With the simplicity of a naive painter, Čapek humanizes and poeticizes his criminals.

We can now draw several conclusions regarding the generic status of Čapek's detective stories. Stories 1-13, because they preserve the detective situation or at least a semblance of it, can be loosely termed "detective stories." Čapek breaks half of the eight rules which, according to Todorov, ought to capture the essence

of the detective genre [1971: 62]. This transgression against the canon of pure genre gives the stories their parodistic character. Čapek parodies the detective and the criminal, their respective methods and the classic mystery in general. In the majority of cases, the mystery is solved in a transrational way. The cult of determinism, established by the classics of the detective genre, is replaced by a new cult of relativism. We will return to the philosophical consequences of this turn when discussing the story "The Footprints."

Todorov points out two types of artistic norms—the "higher" and the "lower"—which operate in the domain of literature [*ibid.*: 56]. Detective literature, according to Todorov, falls under the jurisdiction of the lower artistic norm. Originally, however, it was the high literature of romanticism that gave birth to it. But since the time of Poe, the founder of the high genre, detective literature has made its way from the center to the periphery of artistic literature. What Čapek attempts is to return this humble literary genre to its artistic origin. His *Tales from One Pocket* meet truly high artistic standards and occupy a transitional position between the low and the high artistic norms.

II

The Justice Tales

As Čapek has pointed out, the *Tales from One Pocket* consist of two types of stories. The tales which deal with the methods of solving the mystery are detective stories (1-13). Because they are concerned with the investigation, or rather the perception of crime, Čapek calls them "noetic" (epistemological) tales. The second half of the *Tales* (approximately 17-24) focuses on problems which arise after the mystery has been solved and the criminal captured. The question of "how to perceive a crime" is replaced in the justice tales by the question of "how to punish a criminal."

As already shown, the detective tales are structured according to the opposition of a successful but seemingly incompetent detective versus a seemingly competent but unsuccessful one. The pairs of rival detectives are replaced in the justice stories by pairs of successful and unsuccessful judges. As a direct result of two

concepts of guilt operating within the stories—guilt *de jure* and guilt *de facto*—the notion of justice becomes relative and ambiguous, and the judges are often left with the dilemma of passing either just but inadequate, or adequate but unjust sentences. The justice stories present three basic combinations of this opposition: a person is guilty *de facto* as well as *de jure*; a person is guilty *de facto* but innocent *de jure*; or finally, a person is innocent *de facto* but guilty *de jure*. The first case is simple: just and adequate punishment presents no problem. Such is the case in the first three stories of the justice cycle (17, 18, 19). In "The Disappearance of the Actor Benda" and "The Post Office Crime," on the other hand, we have proof of guilt *de facto* but lack the necessary evidence *de jure* for just and adequate punishment. In both stories, a private, self-appointed judge, who from a legal point of view is neither entitled nor competent to judge, takes upon himself the role of guardian of justice. In "The Disappearance of the Actor Benda," Dr. Goldberg, a surgeon and friend of the murdered actor, steps in for the investigator and the judge, and metes out punishment to the murderer, whose crime would be impossible to prove in the courtroom because of insufficient evidence. It is for a similar reason that the village policeman Brejcha in "The Post Office Crime" takes into his own hands the task of punishing two people, one of whom is actually guilty of murder but legally can be charged only with petty theft:

> That night . . . I sat under the stars and judged the two; I asked God how I ought to punish them, and I understood the bitterness and joy contained in justice. If I were to turn him in, [he] would get a couple of weeks on parole, and his crime would be difficult to prove. [He] killed that girl; he wasn't an ordinary thief. Every sentence seemed to me both too severe and too mild. That's why I was trying and punishing them by myself.

In both stories, instead of a legal penalty, the self-appointed judge arouses pangs of conscience in the guilty party, and thus administers more adequate and just punishment.[5] In "The Farm Murder"

5. In "An Attempt at Murder," the evildoer's own conscience fulfills the role of the self-appointed judge.

and "The Discharged," however, the situation is reversed. Here we have full evidence of *de jure* guilt but lack proof of real guilt. The professional judge is faced with an insoluble dilemma. Instead of a sentence according to the letter of the law for the "righteous murderer"—a peasant who killed his father-in-law because the latter wanted to divide a field which "was meant to belong together"—the judge prefers an unorthodox and absurd one:

> ". . . I felt that if we had to pass sentence, you know what I mean, by any law of God, then we'd have to pass sentence on those two fields. Do you know what I'd do if I had my way? I'd stand up, take off my robes and say: Vondráček, in the name of God, because the blood that has been shed cries to heaven, you will sow those two fields with henbane, henbane and thorns, and until your death you'll have this field of hatred before your eyes."

This unorthodox, Old Testament sentence, though inadequate *de jure,* seems *de facto* more just. On the other hand, the legally adequate sentence would be inevitably unjust. The story ends here and leaves the dilemma unsolved, but the judge as well as the reader knows only too well that a miscarriage of justice is at hand. In "Discharged," only the suicide of the wrongly accused hero releases the judges from the responsibility of an unjust but inevitable sentence.

In a number of stories the ability to carry out true justice seems to be beyond human reason. A judge suggests to his colleague:

> "Dear colleague, sometimes it is God who ought to pass sentence; you know, He could inflict such ghastly and great penalties. To pass sentence in God's name—we're hardly equal to that."

It is significant that in "The Last Judgment," the judges are people who have also been lawyers on earth, whereas the highest guardian of justice, God, appears at the trial as a mere witness. As to why this is so, God answers:

> "The judge knows only about your crimes, but I know all about you. All, Kugler. And that's why I can't judge you."

> "But why do the same people also judge here in Heaven?" "Because man belongs to man. As you see, I am only a witness; but the sentence, you know, the sentence will also be passed by people in Heaven. Believe me, Kugler, it is all right; men don't deserve any justice other than their own."

And the concluding lines of the last story of the book seem to echo this view:

> ". . . I tell you, there must be Someone who is the most just. I am sure there is, Sir. We [people] can only punish; but there must be Someone who would forgive. I tell you, the true and highest justice is something as strange as love."

III

"The Footprints"

Having analyzed the detective and justice tales, we can now turn to "The Footprints." This unusual and utterly extravagant tale does not seem to belong to either of the above-mentioned types.

One night Mr. Rybka is returning home. On his way he follows a chain of lonely footprints in the fresh snow. Just when Mr. Rybka is about to cross the street, he notices that the footprints also make a sudden turn in the direction of his home. But to his great amazement he sees that the footprints abruptly end right in the middle of the street. In front of the last footprint lies only virgin snow. Perplexed, Mr. Rybka calls a policeman. Both start to speculate over the footprints and offer a number of miraculous explanations. Unable to find a solution, the policeman concludes matter-of-factly that the police exist to catch people who transgress criminal rather than natural laws and that the elucidation of miracles is none of their business. Here the story ends, leaving the mystery unsolved.

Due to its pivotal position between the detective and justice tales, "The Footprints" seems to provide the key to Čapek's larger design, both compositionally as well as philosophically. The chain

of footprints is all that remains of a detective situation. But unlike in a detective story—where the discovery of one footprint leads to the discovery of others and eventually to the solution of the mystery and the capture of the criminal—the footprints in the snow lead nowhere. What follows the last footprint is no longer a detective mystery, but the mystery of the Absolute. As W. Harkins writes, Čapek sometimes uses the detective form "as an allegory of man's search for truth" [1962: 120]. Human footprints in the snow reflect the familiar relation between cause and effect, which is the essential noetic tool of human cognition. The same cause-and-effect logic lies at the base of the detective method. By miraculously interrupting the familiar cause-and-effect chain, Čapek poses a fundamental "inquiry concerning human understanding" in a manner recalling David Hume:

> If you saw upon the seashore the print of one human foot, you would conclude that a man had passed that way, and that he had also left the traces of the other foot, though effaced by the rolling of sands or indulation of the waters.
> [Hume, 1975: 143]

Human reason is eager to detect causal relations among all phenomena. But for Hume, "all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are derived from nothing but custom" [1978: 183]. Hume's philosophy is a fundamental attack on the notion of causality. For Hume, causality is a mere product of the rational mind, a result of the epistemological method, and therefore lacks ontological support:

> [We] never can, by our utmost scrutiny, discover anything but one event following another, without being able to comprehend any force or power which the cause operates or any connection between it and its supposed effect.
> [1975: 74-75]

For Hume, the human mind, always inclined to think in terms of causality, also understands truth as a direct effect of human reasoning. As such it remains only an inadequate tool for apprehending the truth. Thus, the limitations of human reason and the inaccessibility of truth are the only truth which the relativistic

philosophy of Čapek intends to stress [cf. Harkins, 1962: 123]. Čapek adapts Hume's skeptical idea in order to challenge the smug perfection of human reason.[6] The "rational laws" manufactured in the mind's "factories for the Absolute" dictate the rules not only for the detective genre but also for detective and legalistic practices. Čapek reproaches human reason for being prone to measure and judge human imperfections by standards of its own deficiency.

The chain of footprints simulates a rational, detective method. It reflects the causal order which we human beings understand, and according to which we investigate, judge and punish. In opposition to this order stands the realm of inexplicable phenomena. The elusive footprints which refuse to follow the implications of causality lead us to another order of things, to some unknown but intuited, more perfect truth. "God cannot be traced by detective method," says the hero of "Elegy." If humans were allowed to follow the footprints all the way to their flimsy destination, they would no longer be able to investigate but would know everything; no longer would they have to judge but would understand everything; and no longer would they have to punish, for they would have already forgiven. This is, then, the elliptic message of the interrupted footprints in the snow.

6. Hume also left his imprint on two earlier stories of Čapek from the collection entitled *God's Torment* (1917). "The Footprint" and "Elegy" from this collection are also epistemological tales dealing with evident but inexplicable truth. In "The Footprint," a metaphysical dialogue develops between a philosopher and a passer-by over a single footprint left in the snow. "Elegy" deals with the miraculous disappearance of the philosopher's brother. Both stories depict the horror and helplessness of man to explain transrational phenomena in a rational way. It is ironic that the philosopher is faced with a miracle after having delivered a lecture on the nature of truth to an Aristotelian philosophical society, the very name of which suggests the inventor of formal logic.

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