

# Killing Jokes - Hašek's and Kafka's Reception in Hungarian Literature

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*Despite the fact that Hašek and Kafka lived in the same city, in the same era, and despite the influence each exercised on the course of European literature in the 20th century, reception of their works has gone in absolutely opposite directions. The lecture has two goals: the first is to show the parallel characteristics of the two authors; the second is to elaborate on how these two writers are incorporated into Hungarian literature: Hašek is considered as a representative of Czech humor; Kafka is seen as a writer of a prophetic influence on history.*

*Keywords: Hašek, Kafka, irony, translation, comedy, Eastern European sense of humor, Wittgenstein, linguistic determinism*

*Obwohl Hašek und Kafka zu derselben Zeit in derselben Stadt lebten, gingen sowohl ihre Images als auch ihre Rezeption getrennte Wege. Der Vortrag verfolgt ein zweifaches Ziel: Einerseits werden die Ähnlichkeiten in den Werken der beiden Autoren aufgezeigt, andererseits wird untersucht, wie sie in die ungarische Rezeption eingegangen sind: Hašek als der Repräsentant des tschechischen Humors; Kafka als ein Autor mit prophetischen Einfluss auf die Geschichte.*

*Schlüsselwörter: Hašek, Kafka, Ironie, Übersetzung, Komödie, ost-europäischer Humor, Wittgenstein, linguistischer Determinismus*

"National literature does not mean much at present,  
it is time for the era of world literature and everybody must endeavour to accelerate this epoch"  
(Eckermann, 31 January 1827)

## 1 Two “almost Hungarian writers” Kafka's and Hašek's place in the Hungarian literary tradition

Two facts have been a boon to Hungarian literature over the last two centuries: first - Hungary has been a prolific producer of works in translation; second - Hungarian is not a major language of European literature. The quality and quantity of Hungarian translations from other languages has led to a peculiar phenomenon: literary works, originally in other languages, are not only considered canonic writings by literary critics, but they have also become pre-texts for many important Hungarian literary

texts. In the only semi-ironic opinion of a contemporary Hungarian poet, Lajos Parti Nagy: “*One Hundred Years of Solitude* or *Love in Time of Colera* are good Hungarian novels; as *Ulysses* is a Hungarian novel and *Švejk* is another Hungarian novel, or else Géza Ottlik’s classic, *School at the Frontier* is also a Hungarian novel.” (PARTI NAGY 2004: 28)

The first generation of Hašek’s Hungarian readers read the novel in German, but subsequent generations came to know the Hungarian translation by Adam Réz. Kafka became well-known in the sixties when it was translated by one of the most well-known and significant Hungarian poets of our time, Dezső Tandori. Both Hašek and Kafka became pre- texts for Hungarian literature.

Many Hungarian texts can only be adequately read by referring to either Hašek’s or Kafka’s works. For example, without Kafka’s influence, the *Faithlessness* of Imre Kertész, or novels of László Krasznahorkai would be unimaginable. And regarding Hašek, contemporary Hungarian literature has learned a lot from his view of history, in which history is seen and created from the point of the ordinary man who wants to remain distant from history because he cannot be its creator, only its victim. And maybe the most important lesson from Hašek is that our sense of humor is our only shield of self-defense, the only way to maintain our integrity as individuals. For twentieth-century literature, history became a series of contradictory episodes from a false narrative rather than a vivid and personally understood tradition.

A typical Central European expression, coined by Géza Bereményi, further illustrates Hašek’s influence. The solid compound of the word “Švejkhamlet” gives us the possibility of the simultaneously comic and tragic interpretation, the fusion of the different levels of readings. Švejk, the Central-European petit-bourgeois, can be seen as a tragic hero just as the Danish prince; while Hamlet is no less worthy of ridicule than Hašek’s portly protagonist.

Hašek and Kafka are both considered writers of the twentieth century experience of being: Hašek is seen as a clown, while Kafka is considered a prophet. Despite the fact that they lived during the same era, in the same city, and despite the influence each exercised on the course of European literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reception of their works has gone in absolutely opposite directions. Hašek is seen as a representative of Czech or Eastern European humor; while Kafka is told to be a writer with prophetic influence on history.

*Both Hašek and Kafka respond to the loss of the center of the world and their reactions to this waste are not as different as their reception seems to show. All of them are variations for the theme of absurd. According to Camus, “The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.” (CAMUS 1955: 20)*

Both of them fight this “unreasonable silence of the world”. This absurdity is embodied in the hierarchy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire:

*This bureaucracy reaches into all aspects of life, ready to seize the powerless citizen at any moment and consign him to some rubric determined by the incomprehensible machinery by which it works, and individuals are powerless to change or even to challenge it (Hašek is a very different writer from his contemporary Kafka, but in this respect their fictional worlds are recognizably similar).” (JOHNSTON: The Satiric Target Section, para. 4)*

However, the problem of absurd goes beyond the political-sociological reflections and makes possible a deeper interpretation.

Hašek is taking on the role of buffoon, forcing readers to laugh at his text even if it is as bloody as history itself. Kafka works with the genre of parable. According to Adorno, in Kafka's writing—“Every sentence says ‘interpret me,’” he muses, “and none will permit it” (ADORNO 1967: 246). So Kafka should be and cannot be interpreted at the same time. This ambiguity endows the texts a certain secret that makes them inextricable. And this is the reason why the Hungarian translations raise up stylistically Kafka's texts.

It is a literary curiosity that the first translation of Kafka's text in Hungarian was made by Sándor Márai. It was *Die Verwandlung*, in 1921, published in the Hungarian-language written newspaper of Kosice. Márai, proceeding Kafka's short story, made a text of his own: its style gives the Hungarian reader a text almost in the nineteenth century style.

If we have a look at Kafka, we can say that this writer from Prague, who died at the age of 41, leaving behind his work in fragments, has become a part of the European philosophic discourse.

From Adorno to Lukacs, from Wiesel to Žižek, Kafka became part of the philosophical canon. Elie Wiesel once quoted Kafka, who said that he did not know what theology is, what speech "about" God is, if at all one could only speak "to" God. (WIESEL 2003) When Žižek is talking about God (and, in the spirit of Wiesel, maybe to God) he does it using the following Kafka's words:

*Either one can take the inaccessible, transcendent character of the Centre (of the Castle, of the Court Room) as a mark of an ‘absent God’ - the universe of Kafka as an anguished universe, abandoned by God - or one can take the emptiness of this transcendence as an ‘illusion of perspective’, as a form of a reversed apparition of the immanence of desire. The Inaccessible transcendence, its emptiness, its lack, is only the negative of the supplement of the productive movement of desire on its object. The two readings make the same point: that this absence, this empty place, is always found already filled by an inert, obscene, dirty, revolting presence. (ŽIŽEK 2005: 123)*

In contrast, Hašek's image presents the good humored guy from Prague, though in his novel he paints the image of hundreds or thousands of corpses in a single phrase:

*They were now going back to the front to get new wounds, mutilations and pains and to earn the reward of a simple wooden cross over their graves. Years after on the mournful plains of East Galicia a faded Austrian soldier's cap with a rusty Imperial badge would flutter over it in wind and rain. From time to time a miserable old carrion crow would perch on it, recalling fat feasts of bygone days when there used to be spread for him an unending table of human corpses and horse carcasses, when just under the cap on which he perched there lay the daintiest morsels of all—human eyes. (HAŠEK 1974: 230)*

Anyway, it would not be too much of a leap to make a collation of Hašek's *Švejk* and Bakhtin's *Rabelais*.

The validity of this parallelism is given by the language. In Hašek's case, the farce point of view draws on the linguistic level of the everyday speech to Bakhtin's approach:

*We cannot expect the inn-keeper Palivec to speak with the same refinement as Mrs Laudová, Doctor Guth, Mrs Olga Fastrová and a whole series of others who would like to turn the whole Czechoslovak Republic into a big salon with parquet flooring, where people go about in tail-coats, white ties and gloves, speak in choice phrases and cultivate the refined behaviour of the drawing-room." (HAŠEK 1974: 215)*

Hašek did not even allow Volunteer Marek, the philosopher of the novel, to enter into the deep intellectual, philosophical discourse. Marek, having not finished his studies in philosophy, is an outsider, whose outstanding is coming from the refusal of the official linguistic level. He gives a kind of its parody.

Kafka is considered a representative of the tragic world view, who "knew and felt the terror and horror of existence" (Nietzsche). In Hungarian versions, his linguistic degree is raised to a higher stylistic level. Kafka acquired his leadership role in European thinking during and after the Second World War. *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Camus was published in 1942, Adorno's *Prisms*, including the *Notes on Kafka* published in 1955.

## **2 Laughter as a response to the lack of freedom**

After the Second World War, Hašek's *Švejk* was no longer interpreted as having a tragic attitude toward History, instead retaining the label "absurd". That is why the reader has to realize that as *Švejk* chats his way through a short paragraph, hundreds or thousands of man can be murdered. The language of Hašek covers the essence of his novel worlds: laughter is not simply separated from the good humor, as it was as

Bakhtin, but it is absolutely on the opposite side. This kind of humor does not make being unbearably light, but shows it as a bloody carnival deprived of freedom.

Quoting from the fifth book of Aristotle's *Poetics*:

*Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type, not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain.*" (ARISTOTLE 2000: 10)

Kafka's and Hašek's texts are to imply pain. And in the European tradition the separation of comic and tragic position is always a linguistic matter. Let me quote the Greek philosopher's sixth book: "Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality - namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle and Song." (ARISTOTLE 2000: 12) Out of them the third one, the Diction which has a peculiar importance for our train of thought.

In the European tradition, the comic or tragic point of view has always presented a stylistic problem. The language of tragedy is elevated; the language of comedy is diminished, and that is the why the stylistic question becomes a problem in the literary theory and beyond, in the realm of philosophy. The question: "Whose language do we speak?" is not far from the Hölderlin's question: "Under whose gaze do we live?"

In one of his works, titled *Hrabal's Book*, Péter Esterházy gives a definition of the so called "Eastern European paranoia": "Eastern European paranoia is when someone is paranoid because he is being watched!" (ESTERHÁZY 1990: 36) Eastern European humor, based on this Esterhazy's *bon mot*, comes in the situation when someone is laughing at the world and at himself because he cannot do anything else or, even more, he should cry. Hašek lets the reader laugh, while Kafka does not offer a definitive opinion.

According to Kant "Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing." (KANT 2007: 133) And in the case of Hašek and Kafka this is really the nothing we are laughing at. Both of them are killing jokes, but there is a great difference. In Hašek's world, the heroes escape from this nothing, while Kafka's heroes internalize it.

Referring again to Bakhtin, this kind of laughing has no correspondence with freedom. This form of laughter finds its origin in the lack of freedom, just as our two writers come out from Gogol's "Overcoat".

Moreover, this sort of lack of freedom is not a historical or political question but a philosophical, ontological one. Freedom exists nowhere else but in the lunatic asylum:

*There's a freedom there which not even Socialists have ever dreamed of. . . . Everyone could say exactly what he pleased and what was on the tip of his tongue, just as if he was in parliament. . . . No one would come to you and tell you: 'You mustn't do that, sir. It's not decent. You should be ashamed of yourself. . . .' As I say it was very pleasant there and those few days which I spent in the lunatic asylum are among the loveliest hours of my life." (HAŠEK 1974: 31 -32)*

The concept of freedom is linked to the concept of history. Approximately 50 years before Hašek and Kafka, Tolstoy refuses the thought of freedom in history by completing his *War and Peace* with these words:

*In the first case it was necessary to renounce the consciousness of an unreal immobility in space and to recognize a motion we did not feel; in the present case it is similarly necessary to renounce a freedom that does not exist, and to recognize a dependence of which we are not conscious. (TOLSTOY 2009: 3092)*

Kundera, in his *Art of Novel*, puts Hašek and Kafka side by side:

*What has happened to war and its horrors if they've become laughing matters? In Homer and in Tolstoy, war had a perfectly comprehensible meaning: people fought for Helen or for Russia. Schweik and his companions go to the front without knowing why and, what is even more shocking, without caring to know. What, then, is the motor of war if not Helen or country? Sheer force that wills to assert itself as force? The "will to will" that Heidegger later wrote about? Yet hasn't that been behind all wars since the beginning of time? Yes, of course. But this time, in Hašek, it is stripped of any rational argument. No one believes in the drivel of the propaganda, not even those who manufacture it. Force is naked here, as naked as in Kafka's novels." (KUNDERA 2005: 10-11)*

No one believes in the drivel of the propaganda, not even those who manufacture it. That is why on the first level of narration *Švejk* is the elegy of the sober senses. Hašek's novel is the nostalgia of the possibility of outstanding, the elegy of the illusion, that the ordinary man could win the madness of history even if its price that in the eyes of the world this freedom is equivalent to the madness.

While Kafka's oeuvre is considered a quasi-sacred text, Hašek's novel also contains numerous biblical allusions. Though Hašek's *Švejk* could also have a biblical reading, the final Golgotha scene of Kafka's *Trial* is much more well-known as a paraphrase of the passion:

*All three of them now, in complete agreement, went over a bridge in the light of the moon, the two gentlemen were willing to yield to each little movement made by K. as he moved slightly towards the edge and directed the group in that direction as a single unit. (...) In this way they quickly left the built up area and found themselves in the fields*

*which, in this part of town, began almost without any transition zone. There was a quarry, empty and abandoned, near a building which was still like those in the city. (...)* The moonlight lay everywhere with the natural peace that is granted to no other light. (KAFKA: Chapter Ten: para. 6-7)

When Švejk is escorted to military chaplain Katz, the scene is also a paraphrase of the straining. Christ in the Centre, the two rogues on the sides:

*His escorts were men who complemented each other. If one was lanky, the other was small and tubby. The lanky one limped with his right foot and the small tubby one with his left. (...) They walked solemnly alongside the pavement and from time to time looked sideways at Švejk, who strode in the middle and saluted everyone he saw. (HAŠEK 1974: 99)*

And this choreography is repeated at the end of the novel:

*Half of an hour later a strange procession emerged from the office of the station command and approached the staff carriage. At the head walked Švejk, grave and sublime, like one of the early Christian martyrs being dragged into the arena" (HAŠEK 1974: 544)*

Volunteer Marek, the chronicler of the battalion, quotes the Apocalypse while playing card with his brothers in arms after having read the fictive (but official) report of the battles. He speaks of the coming Apocalypse:

*Marek had indeed great good fortune. While the others were trying to out – trump each other, he always out – trumped their out-trumping, so that they burst one after the other and he grabbed stake after stake. He called out to those who had lost: "And in the places there will be great earthquakes, and tribulations of famine and pestilence, and there will be great miracles from heaven. (HAŠEK 1974: 614 – 615)*

So he speaks about the Judgment Day while the world seems to be already ending: the past, the present and the future are mixed, blended and the goal of language is not to separate them but to express their eternal confusion. The words cannot represent anything because they do not mean anything. As Imre Kertész, in his Nobel Prize accepting speech, said:

*Consider what happened to language in the twentieth century, what became of words. I daresay that the first and most shocking discovery made by writers in our time was that language, in the form it came down to us, a legacy of some primordial culture, had simply become unsuitable to convey concepts and processes that had once been unambiguous and real. Think of Kafka, think of Orwell, in whose hands the old language simply disintegrated. It was as if they were turning it round and round in an open fire,*

*only to display its ashes afterward, in which new and previously unknown patterns emerged.* (KERTÉSZ 2002: para. 6)

If “laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing”, in the case of Hašek and Kafka we have to take cognizance that it is the competence of language that has fallen into nothing. It has “simply disintegrated” and we are the ones who are laughing and we are the ones who are laughed at. We are the principals and the victims of these killing jokes.

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