

# 1 “Ordinary Life” as Polyphonic Composition

VLADIMÍR CHRZ AND IVO ČERMÁK

## Abstract

Čapek’s novel “*Ordinary Life*” is interpreted from the point of a narrative approach. The authors argue that Čapek’s novel, published in 1934, anticipates more recent narrative approaches in psychology, in which identity is conceived as a permanent reconstruction and reinterpretation of multiple versions of life stories. Čapek tells the story of an elderly man, who feels he must find some answers concerning the issue of his own identity. He starts to write an autobiography and during this process he finds plurality in himself, he uncovers the human being as a multitude of real and possible persons. The authors propose that Čapek’s novel corresponds to the contemporary narrative approaches in these following aspects: a) narrativity is considered as a tendency against trivialization (platitude, obviousness, straightforwardness, definiteness); b) identity is conceived as a polyphonic narrative construction; c) full narrative integration is possible only from the perspective of finitude of human life.

**Key words:** narrative voices, narrative identity, Čapek’s novel.

## Purpose of the Study

The focus of our paper is a novel “An Ordinary Life” written by the Czech writer Karel Čapek. This novel is the last volume of trilogy, “*Hordubal*”, “*Meteor*”, and “*An Ordinary Life*”. Čapek created them between 1932 and 1934. The plurality of the stories, which permeates all three volumes, enables the human identity to disappear in order to be found again. The aim of our contribution is to point out that Čapek’s novels from the early part of the previous century anticipates contemporary approaches to the narrative construction of identity and the “multivoiced self”.

### **Context of Čapek's Novel**

In the first part of the trilogy, the tragic fate of the farmer Hordubal is narrated in three ways, which are mutually incompatible. At the end the teller is finding that *"the heart of Juraj Hordubal was lost somewhere ..."*. The motif of this part is an identity fading in the plurality of the stories of other people.

The first volume of the trilogy is quite sceptical, whereas the second volume is endowed by certain trust to the plurality of stories, in which the lost identity could be re-found. It depicts a man who literally "fell from heavens", who was found mortally wounded in a fallen aircraft, who is in a coma, and who has no name, no face, no identity card. Almost nothing is known about him, including where he was flying from and his destination. Several people around his bed – physician, nurse, poet and visionary - are telling a story about him, based only on several tiny signs. They are trying to narrate who he is, where he came from, and where he ended up. In other words, Čapek's novel is about an identity constructed through story telling, so it is about the narrative construction of identity. Moreover, we can see how the stories are constructed in tellers' minds, how they are concocted (or thought up, or dreamt up) in their minds. It is a poetics of identity or rather several poetics, which are the focus of the novel. Čapek shows how the poetics of every human being rises up from his or her individual and unique view of the world.

Čapek comments on the "multi-voiced identity construction" of man "fallen from heavens":

How terribly big and complex, how spacious is reality when there is room enough for so many different interpretations! But it is no longer a chaos, it is an abundance, a distinct plurality; it is no longer an uncertainty, but a polyphony.  
(Čapek, 1990, p.468)

The question: How can a human being relate himself or herself to the plurality of the real world, to that "multi-voiced world"? is still open in the second volume of the trilogy. So Čapek decided to explore the *"I, that we insert into our interpretation of reality"* (Čapek, 1990, p.468) in the third volume.

### **Plurality of "Narrative Selves"**

The novel "The Ordinary Life" tells the story about a man, who found plurality in himself at the very end of his life, and he found that *"man is a host of real and possible persons"* (Čapek, 1990, p.468). Čapek shows that this plurality is a plurality of possible links creating story lines, that the human being is a representation of many *"continuous life stories"* and moreover something else, that which is not included in these links. According to Čapek, those "things"

are also not included into the construction of our identity. We can see some similarity to Roy Schafer (1976) view of ‘displacement’ – which is something what is not narrated. Schafer argues, that a patient comes to be analysed with a story containing serious gaps or fissures, which needs to be given continuity. The analyst reconstructs his or her personal history in order to co-create a continuous and meaningful story. The patient could take responsibility for this process and his or her personal identity could be re-constructed. The psychoanalyst is trying to find, together with the patient, such a story within which “the displacement” could be included.

According to Čapek, it is not a life of “split personality”, but an ordinary life, ie. a web of stories intertwined with each other and entangled, a web that has its own unity, tension and conflicts.

### **Finitude, Biography and Identity**

The plot of the novel begins at the moment, when an old man, working on his garden realized that death is coming. The question “*who are you?*” emerges. As a consequence he decided “*to put my things in order*”. Firstly it is an external order, ie. he tides up and brings order to his letters, files, and other paperwork. When he is finished he feels that it is not enough and that he should put his life straight (“*I’ll put my life straight*”). He finds a way to do it – the solution is to write his own autobiography. What has happened here? Awareness of finitude wakes up the need “to put things in order” - this urgent need took the shape of “biographic work” as a way of answering the question of identity, namely, “who are you?”.

It could be argued that Čapek’s view of identity and McAdams (2001) approach to the development of narrative identity are similar. McAdams suggests that the whole narrative integration is possible only from the perspective of finitude. According to him it is only in the middle of adulthood that the second half of life becomes visible and the life becomes something that has not only a beginning and the middle, but also an end. The perspective of finitude represents a challenge and the man answers by the configuration of his life story.

Experience of human finitude is related to the finiteness of the story. Stories enable us to shape the finitude of human existence because they are “finite” by their own substance. The stories we live by and the narrated stories are “finite” because: 1) they are intended, they have purpose, ie. it is in their nature to point to the end (“*intentio finis*”), 2) they are integrated into a larger whole, ie. configuration, which has a beginning, a middle, and an end, 3) they are bound, ie. limited to include “infinite” richness of human experience, and 4) they embody the fragile and vulnerable human being surrounded by the

possibility of non-being. The stories bridge the “abyss of non-being“, which we can see in Scheherazade’s storytelling of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

### **Various Voices**

The original intention of the old man is to write the story of “an ordinary man”, ie. the story in which “*nothing extraordinary*”, “*nothing dramatic*” happened. He wants to shape his life as “*obvious*”, “*straight*”, “*ordinary*”. Jerome Bruner (1986, 1990) claims that the key moment of narrative construction is the violation of the usual, the canonical or the expected, something that is called “trouble” in story. The trouble is something that drives the story and makes the story worthy of being told. “Trouble” also means suffering, crises, or a problem. If the old man decided to write a story in which everything is usual, expected and nothing is extraordinary and if the core of narrativity is violation of the usual, then the “*ordinary life*” in the approach of the old man would be life without trouble, thus the life without story. But in spite of the original old man’s intention, the accounted life asserts itself as a story in its plurality.

#### *The First Voice: An Ordinary Man*

The first voice tells a story of an ordinary man by which the original intention of autobiography is accomplished. The story configuration consists of certain figures and plots. The crucial figures are “labour in the garden” or “labour on the railroad”. The plot could be described as a “happy completion” and “trust into the wise necessity of fate”. The “ideology” of this voice (ie. explicit or implicit interpretation of that who is good, what is worth to striving for, or how to act properly) could be expressed as the following: *to do his job properly or to accept the wise order of things*.

The story of the ordinary man has been told almost to the very end. But at the final part something strange has happened. The last sentence says: “*It was an ordinary but of its kind a complete life; and as I look back on it I see that in everything that happened some kind of order was realized, or ...*” the sentence remained unfinished, because the writer has suffered a heart attack. This is important also in relation to symbolic value of the heart in the context of the novel. Čapek himself suggests in epilogue, that the heart in the novel is being lost and re-found again in our stories. The heart has risen up against a limited and straightforward version of life, and at that moment another voice appears on the scene and starts to tell a different story.

#### *The Second Voice: One With Elbows*

The second voice argues with the previous one whether this is a really "complete story", what is being included in it and what is not, why characters acted in certain way and why this and that has happened in that way. It is a dispute of voices about the sense of life. Both offer their figures and plots giving the meaning to the particular events and to the life as a whole.

The voice called "one with elbows" offers distinctly different life theme from the case of the ordinary man. The theme (a crucial category of McAdams model "identity as a life-story") is a "repeated pattern of wishes and intentions". Čapek uses for the "life theme" the apposite expression, 'stuff'. He says about the way in which the "one with elbows", shapes their life: "And it's life made out of completely different stuff, unsatisfied and puffed up, which always wants more space for itself". It is a "story of somebody who wanted somehow to rise above small circle in which he was born". The configuration of figures and plots is also different from the story of an ordinary man. The main figures are for instance: "a boy has been sitting high up the heap of boards", "height", "expansion" etc. The plot of this voice is created by "increasing" and "falling (loss)". The ideology of this voice could be formulated as the following: "it is necessary to become a success and overtake others".

*Further voices: a valetudinarian, a romantic, a reprobate life, a poet, a hero, a beggar at the temple door.*

In the middle of the dispute between "an ordinary" and the "one with elbow" raises another voice: "Keep quiet, you there, and don't quarrel ... it doesn't do me any good. I've been accustomed to looking after myself". The voice called valetudinarian comes to the scene with his themes, figures, plot, and ideology. The other voices appear successively at the scene.

*Romantic (dreamer):* The "Motif" of his story is dreaming, amorous, heroic, adventurous fiction. Emotions and generosity, wide blue yonder, hidden and unknown life.

*Reprobate life:* Something that could go on only in solitude and in the dark, what could be experienced only secretly. Evil, the reprobate, "lives on its own account, it is not neither me, neither he, it is a kind of it, something low and repressed, it doesn't made any personality".

*Poet:* Not whole story, but only a fragment. He touched the low, but something higher was also in him:

... and sometimes it looked as if perhaps that evil and cursed thing might be cleansed. As if through the chinks into that darkness some kind of intense and dazzling light were penetrating ... Perhaps it was that that unredeemed thing was to become a soul in me, I don't know, I only know that it didn't; the accursed remained accursed, and the deuce took the poet who had nothing to do with that

which was my acknowledged and legitimate self; there was no place for it in the other stories. (Čapek, 1990, p.439)

*Hero*: Episode doesn't fit with any continuous history. Courageously acting as something obvious, pragmatic and objective. Enjoyment is inferred from a common manly piece of work.

*"Beggars at the temple door"*: Proneness has no needs, wishes, poverty, humility, devout pleasure, vainness of everything, only to be and nothing more.

These various "voices" form different configurations from "the raw material" of the events. Separate parts of the life events break into diverse plot lines in various ways. For example, in the story of "the ordinary", the figure of the *"work for the railway"* represents the order, while it represents distance, travel and adventure in the story of "the romantic".

Čapek's novel strongly corresponds with Hermans's concept of "dialogical self". According to Hermans (1992) the "self" is composed from a set of "positions" and "voices" corresponding to them. Each "voice" has its own wishes, intentions, its own specific way of "actorship", its own values and beliefs and also its own figures and plot lines. The dramatic dimension of a life is enabled through narrative configuration. It enables us to depict the images of one self as well as the others as the "characters", ie. as dynamic "positions" moving and interacting in space and time. It also enables us to express these "positions" via "voices", in the dialogues or the "disputes" in the meaning of which is constituted.

A different point of view, to which we have referred to already several times, is brought by McAdams's model of "identity as the life story". This model enables us to depict individual aspects of multi-voiced narrative construction of an identity and in some way corresponds to Čapek's formulations. According to McAdams (1993, 2001), the identity can be seen as a life story, it is an internalized narrative integration of the past, present and anticipated future, that the individual feeling of integrity and purposefulness. The basic theme of McAdams's model is what Čapek calls "story stuff". The analysis concentrates on the ways in which the narrative construction is being built from this "stuff" during the description of: 1) the choice of key events, 2) perspective aiming of the story and 3) ideological base (values and beliefs). The fourth, synthesizing category of this model is represented by imagoes – personified images of oneself and the others. From the perspective of McAdams's model, thematic lines, perspective aiming, figures, plot lines and ideologies might be perceived as the aspects of the imagoes (or as the aspects of "positions" and their "voices"). McAdams assumes, that during life the imagoes are integrated (with their themes, aiming, ideology, etc.), not in the sense of some "unification", but as "the plural unity", in a dramatic tension, in the dialogue.

Finally, the depth of Čapek’s insight into the polyphonic character of the human identity with “I” can be illustrated with the help of few of his formulations:

“whatever of those lives I lived or whichever of those figures I was, it always was myself, and that self was always the same, and never changed ... It’s most probable that self was only riding on those lives”. (Čapek, 1990, p.445)

This quotation presents the traditional (substantial or essential) idea of “the true self” that is expressed in individual “voices”, figures and stories.

On the other hand, this quotation:

Admit that a man is something like a crowd of people ... One of them is always in front and leads for part of the way ... he carries a standard on which is written myself, (Čapek, 1990, pp.445-446)

is much closer to the current view of the “multi-voiced self”. What is “real”, is the dynamic and dialogical plurality and the “self” is only something like “the conduction requisite”. It is as if Čapek became frightened by the possible consequences of elaboration of some of his formulations and needed to stick to the traditional understanding of the “self” as a metaphysical entity existing in the background of its multivoiced manifestations.

The next quote concerns the relation between “self” and “the displaced”:

That low and evil being never became myself: when its moment arrived the standard, so the speak, was lowered to the ground; there was no self, it was only chaos without guidance or a name. (Čapek, 1990, p.447)

In this articulation “the self” is a manifestation of “the conduction” mentioned above. Consequently, the displaced could be conceived as something that lacks such kind of manifestation.

In one of the final scenes Čapek shows a certain shape of that multi-voiced, dialogical integration:

The one with the elbows doesn’t talk any longer so haughtily and doesn’t preach about what ought to be done, he holds his head in his hands and looks down at the ground ... That ordinary good fellow doesn’t know what to say; he is terribly sorry for the man, for that ambitious egoist who has spoiled his life ... But on the other hand, God’s little beggar sits at the table, he holds the hypochondriac by the hand, and whispers something as if he were praying. (Čapek, 1990, p.449)

In the last quotation from the epilogue Čapek gives some ontological and epistemological sense to the human multi-voice:

It's all in order; the reason we can apprehend and understand plurality is that we ourselves are such a plurality ... we are of the same stuff as that plurality of the world. (Čapek, 1990, p.468)

Although Čapek is not unequivocal in his articulations, he expresses the narrative nature of human life with a wise scepticism after all and thus anticipates narrative ways of understanding which appeared in the “professional scene” much later.

### **Acknowledgements**

This study was mostly funded by the Grant Agency of Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic (Text Analysis as a Tool for Research and Assessment, GA 406/06/1577) and partly also by the Research Project of the Institute of Psychology, Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic (AV 0Z70250504) for which we are very grateful.

### **References**

- Bruner, J.S. (1986) *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J.S. (1990) *Acts of Meaning*, Cambridge, London, Harvard University Press.
- Čapek, K. (1990) *Three Novels: Hordubal, Meteor, An Ordinary Life*, North Haven, CT, Catbird Press.
- Hermans, H.J.M. (1992) The Dialogical Self: Beyond Individualism and Rationalism, *American Psychologist*, 47, 1, 23-33.
- McAdams, D.P. (1993) *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*, New York, William Morrow.
- McAdams, D.P. (2001) The Psychology of Life Stories, *Review of General Psychology*, 5, 2, 100-122.
- Schafer, R. (1976) *A New Language for Psychoanalysis*, New Haven, Yale University Press.



