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**Idiots on the Ball:
Švejkism as
a Survival Strategy
in the East European
Imaginary**

*Szólítsd, mint méla boruszáj
A szorgalmas szegényeket
Rágd a szivükbe, nem muszáj
Hősnek lenni ha nem lehet¹*
—Attila József

Eastern Europe entered the 20th century in a state of growing nationalism, socio-economic crisis, semi-agrarian, conservative and highly bureaucratic institutions, and political authoritarianism. Overall, 'aggressive expansionism, police terror, and military conflicts' (Berend 2003: 236) dominated domestic and international relations in the first half of the century. The communist authoritarian systems established after World War II intensified existing trends of political favouritism, abuse of power, state surveillance, lawlessness and corruption. In such distressing historical conditions, the ongoing political crises had lasting effects on the population, who had to develop intricate skills to satisfy their most urgent and basic needs for food, shelter and safety in conditions of perpetual existential instability.

Jaroslav Hašek's novel *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World War (Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války, 1923)*, a literary product of the historical crisis of World War I, is a cultural imprint of the above-mentioned pragmatic attitude. Švejk's grotesque humour and persistent popularity have long fascinated literary critics. Some connect his character to Hašek's peculiar personal history as a soldier in the war and a 'Bigamist, closet homosexual, chronic alcoholic, disciplined revolutionary, [and] intellectual parasite' (Steiner 2000: 26). Others insist on a close relationship between Kafka's absurdly tyrannical bureaucratic world and Hašek's. Karel Kosík was amongst the first to sense the absurd and the grotesque as uniquely common traits in both Kafka and Hašek's writing. Their heroes develop an identity in opposition to the 'Great Mechanism'—an anonymous form 'organizing people into regiments, battalions, and order' (Kosík 1995: 83) that is paradoxically senseless and chaotic. Milan Kundera adds an important note to this parallel, insisting on a significant difference between Kafka's and Hašek's characters in their opposing attitudes towards this

grotesque universe. The antithetical nature of Josef K.'s and Švejk's positions discloses itself

in the realm where one pole is the identification with power to the point where the victim develops solidarity with his own executioner, and the other pole the non-acceptance of power through the refusal to take seriously anything at all; which is to say: in the realm between the absolute of the serious—K.—and the absolute of the nonserious—Švejk. (Kundera 2003: 48–49.)

My own interest lies in exploring how Švejk's absolute non-seriousness becomes a survival tactic, which helps precisely to avoid K.'s tragic end in *The Trial (Der Prozess, 1925)*.

Contrary to John Snyder's argument, I do not believe that Švejk's heroism shares Don Quixote's attempt to conquer all evil in the world. Peter Stern observes correctly that 'the connection between the two novels, taken for granted by many critics, is far from obvious' (Stern 1992: 104). Švejk's figure aligns itself perhaps more with Sancho Panza-like 'kynic' heroes (Steiner 2000: 37) who linger 'at the margins of an unfriendly society' (Steiner 2000: 43), in which their much less idealistic, and much more practical, mission is to survive. Sancho, just like Švejk, represents a 'popular corrective laughter applied to the narrow-minded seriousness of the spiritual pretence [Don Quixote/idealism/ideology—L. T.]' (Bakhtin 1984: 22) and an 'overwhelming adaptability to inhospitable circumstances' (Steiner 2000: 44). Švejk's appeal lies precisely in his imbecility, shrewdness, enigmatic quality and unpredictability, which make it impossible to turn him into a 'calculable and disposable thing or quantity' (Kosík 1995: 85), to be processed and shoved around in a world that is 'a horrible and senseless labyrinth, a world of powerless people caught in the net of bureaucratic machinery

¹ 'Call them, open their eyes wide / Those hard working and penniless / Warn them, 'no need' – cry out / 'For heroism that's headless'.' (My translation.) This quote by the famous socialist Hungarian poet Attila József appears as the forward of Péter Bacsó's cult film from 1971, *The Witness*, to be discussed in this paper.

and material gadgets: a world in which man is powerless in a gadget oriented, alienated reality.' (Kosik 1995: 85–86.)

Literary interpretations regard Švejk, the *geniální idiot* (Gatt-Rutter 1991: 6),² as more than just a popular character in Czech literature. He is a 'paradigmatic figure' (Hanáková 2005: 153), coming from a long tradition of folk heroes (such as the Czech Hloupý Honza or Hungarian Lúdas Matyi) who use their cunning cleverness, shrewdness and slyness to outsmart degenerate aristocrats. Švejk lends his name to Švejkism and Švejking, a 'behavioural model' (Steiner 2000: 49) in the East European cultural imagination, a fictional response to chronic historical traumas. Petra Hanáková is, overall, critical of such 'anti-heroic heroism', claiming it to be ultimately self-deprecating and counter-productive in its 'impassability, inefficiency and lack of hope' (Hanáková 2005: 159). In contrast, I see Švejk's 'main urge for self-preservation' (Hanáková 2005: 157) as truly heroic in its recognition of the only option available for the simple man to endure his godforsaken, hostile world. The Švejkian *topos*, in my view, works as a cultural hub, around which different, ongoing historical crises can come undone. The following analysis of this *topos* will point to a particular relationship between fiction and reality in Eastern Europe, one in which historical consciousness is elevated, because the ongoing historical ordeal throughout the twentieth century repeatedly shattered the life of individuals. Through a comparative analysis of Jaroslav Hašek's novel, *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World War*, and two films, *The Corporal and Others* (*A tizedes meg a többiek*, 1965) and *The Witness* (*A tanú*, 1968), I will maintain that Švejkism itself is a response of the imagination to very real problems created by these historical traumas. By relating the two Hungarian film satires to Jaroslav Hašek's famous novel, I will trace a very distinctive 'pragmatic shell' (Hanáková 2005: 153) in the face of the ongoing institutional, ideological and political turmoil in Eastern Europe, arguing that Švejkian *practicality* is in fact an essential collective coping mechanism that emerges time and again in the turbulent historical events of the 1920s, 1940s, 1960s and 1990s in Eastern Europe.

Jaroslav Hašek's novel *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World War* begins with the statement: 'And so they've killed our Ferdinand.' (Hašek 1974: 3.) The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian anarchist, the trigger of World War I, is also the event that opens Hašek's book. Through Švejk's fantastic adventures in the war, the reader catches a glimpse of the famously inefficient and arrogant Austrian bureaucracy, the senseless brutality of the military, the fundamentally corrupt and lethargic administration, the overall instability and the aggressively nationalistic and repressive political and military imperialism that the Czech ethnic minority had to face in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Hašek's characters are all delighted to see the Austrians suffer and lose the war. Švejk and his fellow soldiers happily discuss 'how Austria would be smashed' (Hašek 1974: 207). 'His Imperial Majesty must be completely off his rocker by this time' says Švejk at some point. 'He was never bright, but this war'll certainly finish him.' (Hašek 1974: 207.) The novel's bitterly ironic tone comes in reaction to the empire's repressive politics. It is the result of a mixture of Czech nationalism and anti-imperialist scepticism that saw no future with Austria-Hungary and welcomed its doom. From the beginning, it was clear that the war only served Austria's imperial expansionism, an ideology and military strategy from which the smaller nations in the empire had already been suffering. Slowly, the different ethnic groups of the defeated Austria-Hungary lost all their 'hope and patience' (Berend 2003: 287), which gave way to protests, revolts, strikes and a general atmosphere of unrest. Švejk's indifference towards the war, his cynicism and happiness over Austria's disintegration, correspond to the general feelings of the Czech, Slovak and Croat ethnic communities towards their 'beloved' empire.

Švejk's existence is inseparably intertwined with the tragic history of World War I. The not-so-pleasant 'idylls' that spin Švejk's adventures forward echo the dreadfulness of the war. Being 'much too political' (Hašek 1974: 100), as he declares himself to be, is a consequence of this 'close encounter', and it means being alert, as well as critical, towards his surroundings. This state of critical, involuntary involvement in the

political sphere characterises East Europeans in general, whose encounter with history has been similar to a tank coming through their house. Since escaping the overwhelming historical forces is impossible, Švejk's life—symbolic of East European existence in general—depends on trying to successfully endure it.

Coping with historical torrents is also the theme of the Hungarian cult film classic from 1965, *The Corporal and Others* (dir. Márton Keleti), which presents the bizarre military chaos at the end of World War II. The film was meant to fill a vacuum in Hungarian cinema as a rather serious melodramatic take on the Soviet liberation of Hungary. Instead it filled another gap, as one of the first film satires after World War II. Corporal Molnár (Imre Sinkovits), a war deserter, is the main hero of the film. By the end of World War II, after three years on the front lines, Molnár decides that it is time to quit and never to return to the battlefield. With a grenade necklace around his neck, carrying the allocation of his whole battalion, he comes across a deserted castle, whose only guard appears to be an old-fashioned footman, Albert (Tamás Major). Soon he finds out that the castle is full of renegades like himself, and he decides to take command in order to save himself and the others from a possible fatal discovery by the Hungarian, Russian or German armies. When a Hungarian soldier appears with yet another captured runaway who deserted from the penalty squad, the group pretends to be the army's headquarters to save themselves and the newcomer.

Much of the comedy in the film comes from the confusion over which army is about to endanger the small group. The Hungarian national army is now under the command of the new, German-supported fascist Arrow Cross government, which also has its own military forces.³ The Russian and the German armies also appear frequently, always unexpectedly. But, for Molnár, there is no difference between the Hungarian army, the Arrow Cross troops, the Germans or the Russians. Each military force poses an equal threat to him and his group. The goal of this twisted 'game' is to skilfully navigate among the different threats in the chaotic turmoil of the war. The difficulty of doing so is the main source of humour in the film.

Molnár's behaviour in numerous hopeless situations is presented as the only sensible response to the chaotic world of the war. His sharp mind, tactical brilliance and highly practical thinking help him adjust quickly to the constantly varying circumstances and save not only himself but the rest of the group, too. While he is clearly 'in it for himself', Molnár soon realises that in order to stay alive he needs the help of his comrades. His heroism lies in the ability to successfully navigate in the highly complex and dangerous circumstances. The film depicts Molnár as he desperately tries to 'make it to the shore', to escape from the tragic historical situation into which he and the others, just like Švejk in an earlier war, have been thrown.

Péter Bacsó's Hungarian cult classic *The Witness* reconstructs and satirically comments on the hysterical and pathological atmosphere of the infamous show trials of the early 1950s in Hungary, with great sensitivity to the particular absurdity and brutality that characterised this era. Pelikán's quiet, poor, rural idyll is turned upside down when he gets caught in the machinery of the communist bureaucratic system. Pelikán is first arrested when the police find evidence of illegal pig-slaughter. His crime has come out of despair in a country where 'The number of animals to be kept in a peasant household was proscribed, and illegally slaughtering a pig was condemned.' (Berend 1996: 56.) Minister Dániel, who is unexpectedly visiting the levee and Pelikán, is enraged by the police's accusations, and lashes into a ferocious dyad, defending his old friend by describing his immaculate, heroic communist past. Pelikán, according to the story, saved Dániel from the Nazi Gestapo during World War II. The climax of the scene comes when Dániel discloses the cellar where he was hiding with other members of the communist resistance while the Nazis tortured Pelikán for information.

2 See Gatt-Rutter's endnotes for an extensive list of references discussing Švejk as *geniální idiot*.

3 Arrow Cross was the Hungarian fascist military organisation supported by the Nyilaskeresztes Párt—Hungarista Mozgalom (Arrow Cross Party—Hungarianist Movement), a pro-German, anti-Semitic fascist party that ruled the country between October 1944 and January 1945.

Unfortunately, the cellar is now full of ham, lard, sausages and cracklings made from ‘poor Dezső’s’ (the pig’s pet name) dead body, a result of Pelikán’s desperate decision to kill the pet animal in order to feed his large family in a time of severe meat shortage. Dániel is embarrassed, while the ‘great hero of communist resistance’ readily confesses to the ‘severe crime’ and is consequently taken to prison. While in prison, Pelikán shares a cell with his Arrow Cross ex-torturer and with a Catholic priest. Although at first it is unclear whether he will get away with just a fine or will be given the death penalty, ultimately he is pardoned—despite his own insistent confessions of guilt—due to unpredictable bureaucratic manoeuvres and mysterious ‘high connections’. Soon after his release, a big black car takes Pelikán away again, this time to a secret place. Here, ready to ‘confess to everything’, he meets Comrade Virág, an important and enigmatic party official. Virág shares his grand plan with Pelikán during a luxurious dinner: in the ‘steadily intensifying international situation’ he wants to turn Pelikán into a true hero of communism.⁴ The roast pig on the table reminds Pelikán that he has no other choice than to take the ‘illustrious jobs’ kindly offered to him.

The Švejkian plot of the film, just like the world it satirises, is one of delay, coincidence, luck and chance, instead of logic. Pelikán’s life is subject to complete unpredictability; random forces of the system throw him back and forth between prison and prestige. Pelikán is first made the director of a swimming pool, despite his protest that he is ‘not ideologically well educated’. He fails miserably in his first ‘privileged’ job because he lets in the regular people who have tickets and throws out General Bástya, who is swimming inside by himself without a ticket. After Virág rescues him from prison for the second time, Pelikán is made the director of an amusement park. But his invention, the ‘original socialist ghost train’ nearly scares General Bástya to death, so his short-lived career ends in a prison cell again. Finally, he is appointed the leader of the Hungarian Orange Research Institute, but there he disappoints again, because one of his children eats the first Hungarian orange. He tries to cover up the fiasco by

replacing it with a lemon, but its taste does not satisfy General Bástya. This time he can only save himself by testifying against his old friend, Minister Dániel, who in the meantime has been accused of and put on trial for treachery. Virág claims that this is Pelikán’s most important and final heroic act in the ‘continuously intensifying international situation’ and also an opportunity for Pelikán to recover his ‘heroic communist image’ from World War II. Minister Dániel’s turn of fortune and Pelikán’s hectic fate are both representative of the fears and uncertainties characterising the time period.

WHAT’S FOR DINNER?

Švejkism, in line with my central argument, has been defined as a ‘defensive use of mental dimness’ (Petković 2006: 386), a functional imbecility employed to get by and survive in a fundamentally unpredictable, absurd and authoritarian world. Švejkian practicality stands for a certain behaviour deeply suspicious of official discourses and institutional practices. It implies ways of acting with a focus on one’s immediate and concrete needs as well as on the specific means of fulfilling those needs, while consciously ignoring any ideological affiliations or moral obligations. What stands at the core of Švejkian practicality is a shared experience of history, characterised by complete existential unpredictability, abrupt political turns and artificial changes in social structures. On the level of the texts, the existential insecurity manifests itself in several ways. For instance, Švejk’s ‘adventurous’ life in World War I consists of randomly changing masters and relocations, of being in and out of prisons and military hospitals. Similarly, Pelikán, who erratically moves in and out of jail throughout the film, never knows whether he will get a fine for his misconduct or eventually end up with a death sentence. He is equally frequently moved into and removed from prestigious Party positions. Corporal Molnár and his team can never be sure whether they are about to face the Russian, German, Hungarian or Arrow Cross troops—all equally threatening—so they need to adapt their act to each new situation instantly. Consequently, these characters are solely preoccupied with

trying to survive in a world that is 'full of unpleasant surprises'.

The effect of these continuously hectic and distressing historical experiences is a fundamental distrust of state institutions, government officers and political principles. Švejkian practicality becomes the cultural mark of a general social wariness, which is intentionally resistant to ideological messages, political commitment and a moral stance. Practicality plays an essential role in the face of existentially threatening situations such as World War I, World War II or communist totalitarianism, because it urges the Švejkian hero to satisfy immediate bodily needs and obtain a basic security. Aware of his own limited ability to actively participate in and change the larger political scene, the Švejkian hero's interest turns to the technical details of everyday life. Focusing on details also keeps him from having to face the larger picture, the devastating historical realities.

In order to endure the brutal conditions of human deprivation, the primary question becomes how to satisfy one's basic bodily needs, securing the necessary food, drink, sleep and heat. The Švejkian hero's world, not surprisingly, revolves around basic bodily functions, such as eating, drinking, pissing and defecating. The lower bodily stratum, which Mikhail Bakhtin claims stands at the core of the carnival and the grotesque, is crucial for the Švejkian hero's practicality. The 'materialistic concept of being, most adequately defined as realistic' (Bakhtin 1984: 52), in other words, 'grotesque realism' is a perfectly fitting qualifier of Švejkian practicality. Eating is not simply a pleasure in the carnival, but a way for the body to conquer the world. As Bakhtin put it, 'No meal can be sad. Sadness and food are incompatible.' (Bakhtin 1984: 283.) Therefore, eating is a joyous triumph over the world, a devouring and digesting of it, together with its pains and problems. The recurrent images of feasts in medieval grotesque realism show a triumphant openness and gay connectedness of the body to the world, a connection that disappeared with the Romantic grotesque, but returns again in such products of the 20th century cultural imagination as Švejkism.

One of the chief Švejkian concerns is to always have enough to eat and drink. Eager to take advantage of every occasion when food is served or drinks are free, feasting is the most important, 'mighty aspiration' (Bakhtin 1984: 280) of Švejkism. For instance, in the military hospital where Švejk is placed with other 'malingerers' and where he is denied basic needs, such as food, he receives a visit from a baroness who, having heard about his 'heroic' decision to join the army voluntarily, offers Švejk cigarettes, food and drink as a way of saying thank you.

Before Dr. Grunstein could return from below, where he had gone to see the baroness out, Švejk had distributed the chickens. They were bolted by the patients so quickly that Dr. Grunstein found only a heap of bones gnawed cleanly, as though the chickens had fallen alive into a nest of vultures and the sun had been beating down on their gnawed bones for several months.

The war liqueur and the three bottles of wine had also disappeared. The packets of chocolate and the box of biscuits were likewise lost in the patients' stomachs. Someone even drunk up the bottle of nail-polish which was in the manicure set and ate the toothpaste which had been enclosed with the toothbrush. (Hašek 1974: 73.)

Food as a prime tool of institutional control here becomes the battleground between the state and the individual. The combat zone between the monarchy and Švejk takes place over the body, through the control of basic bodily functions. To keep the hospitalised soldiers away from any decent food is part of the doctor's strategy to force them back to the battlefield, by making the hospital a worse place than the front itself. Providing a 'banquet for all the world' (Bakhtin 1984: 278), in a time and

4 The 'international situation is steadily intensifying' was one of Stalin's favourite slogans, but the phrase became especially popular in Hungary after the release of Bacsó's film.

place of severe food shortage such as World War I, brings about a vital victory for Švejk. The 'greedy body' (Bakhtin 1984: 292), which drinks even the nail polish, carries a general desire for more and "more" abundance' (Bakhtin 1984: 292) and manages to overflow, to defeat the world or, more specifically here, to dupe and overcome such existing repressive institutions as the army hospital.

The protagonist of *The Witness* shows a very similar interest in eating and drinking. Pelikán maintains a healthy appetite throughout the film. Although terribly frightened of Comrade Virág, when given the chance, Pelikán happily accepts and greatly enjoys the 'small bite' offered by his interrogator. When Virág asks him what he usually drinks, his answer is simple: 'anything'. '*In vino veritas*' is literally true in Pelikán's case, as his life is in permanent danger. Drinking and eating become vital signs of his being alive; indeed, he enjoys every drink and every bite offered. The roast pig served for dinner is meant to evoke Pelikán's sense of guilt (as he was first arrested for illegal pig slaughter), but it does not seem to destroy his appetite, as he happily nibbles on the meat. When Virág proposes the possibility of a future visit of friendship to his family, Pelikán's main concern is that he won't be able to supply such a fancy meal for his guest as he has received. Also, each time he is in prison, Pelikán's first question is 'What's for lunch/dinner?' Although the answer is always the same: 'tarhonya', a kind of cheap and plain pasta dish, he finds this consistency almost comforting in a world in which life is completely unpredictable, except for the permanent food shortage.

Prison meals thus become the measuring standards of different political systems. When the ex-fascist prisoner complains about the food, claiming that during his time (fascist Hungary in World War II) they cooked better, Pelikán shuts him up saying 'I ate your food, too'. Not only does this declaration mean that the food was no better under the previous political system, but also that Pelikán was a victim of that nomenclature as well. In other words, from the point of view of food, or from the point of view of Pelikán's life, there is hardly any difference between the communist and the fascist

systems. One is identical to the other, as both bring the same tasteless prison food, inequality, human deprivation and political oppression to the people. Fascism and communism in Eastern Europe share some essential characteristics from the point of view of everyday life. Hence, Pelikán takes the only viable path, namely to ignore historical change and concentrate instead on ensuring his and his family's well-being. At the very end, to the surprise and disappointment of his prison guard, Pelikán fully and cheerfully consumes the specially ordered last supper before his execution. He does not allow the shadow of death to take away his appetite, or ruin his mood.

For Corporal Molnár, the fascist and communist armies pose equal threats of being arrested and possibly executed. He is just as aware as Pelikán of the absurd nature of the world around him. He uses every means available to stay alive in the precarious disorder characterising Hungary at the end of World War II. Since the pantries of the castle are empty, one of the group's main concerns is how to get hold of more food. In the desperate circumstances, Molnár's treasure box, which is full of bread and sausages, and which he never lets out of his sight, becomes invaluable. Molnár, in line with his character, refuses to share the food with the rest of the group. Moreover, he stuffs himself happily in front of them. This upsets the other soldiers, who decide to quit acting their parts in the masquerade. In order to satisfy everyone, Molnár proposes to follow up on the communist deserter Szijjártó's information that a local hunter and his family have recently slaughtered a pig. Before they leave, Molnár hides his treasure box with great care in a fireplace in one of the rooms. Later, he is painfully disappointed when he finds that a fire was lit in the fireplace and the food has burned to ashes. On another occasion, Molnár and Szijjártó save a group of men from being forcefully drafted by the Arrow Cross army and, when the women give their blessings to them, Molnár impatiently replies, 'We can't live on blessings. Do you have anything to eat?'

It is not only Molnár or the Hungarians who are so concerned with food. The German officer whom they come across at the hunter's

house refuses to leave until he has had his dessert, even though the 'Russians are in the pantry already'. He is concerned with nothing but eating. Later the Germans interrupt the Hungarian escapees' dinner in the castle and their dogs discover the dinner that Molnár and the others have hastily hidden in the cupboard earlier. The officer, even before touching the food, asks for 'baking soda' to help his digestion and advises his aide to call the doctor if he deems it necessary. The pathologically obsessive German officer, with his Hungarian accent (memorably played by the famous Hungarian actor, László Márkus), is a source of great comic pleasure, his appetite being an ironic commentary on the endless imperial hunger of Nazi Germany.

Rabelaisian hedonism is undoubtedly related to the practicality necessary for survival. Desperate times seem to be frequent in Eastern Europe and, when food and drink are luxury items, Švejk, Pelikán and Corporal Molnár's enthusiastic interests in eating and drinking, besides being a recognition of the most basic means of survival, signify the celebration of the small joys offered by a fundamentally gruesome life. Following Bakhtin's description of Rabelais's medieval carnival, the Švejkian 'encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself' (Bakhtin 1984: 281). He 'eats away' the surrounding dangers and conquers the world with every warm meal. Eating and drinking are positive, empowering forms of participation in the carnival world surrounding Švejk, because through them 'the limits between man and the world are erased, to man's advantage' (Bakhtin 1984: 281).

THE IDIOT'S GUIDE TO POLITICS

Intense nationalism in a historically multi-ethnic region, the mixing of feudalism with democracy, deep rooted despotism and corruption, devastating wars and dictatorships and, finally, the sudden and extreme regime changes from fascism to communism to capitalism left their marks on the expectations and hopes of the peoples of Eastern Europe. In these constantly

shifting ideological extremes and notoriously absurd political experimentations, the Švejkian hero becomes the fictional imprint of a gradually developing immunity to political principles. Such comic scepticism is part of Švejkian practicality: the complete subjugation to any absurd order, never questioning superiors, but also never fully committing to any political agenda. Calculated idiotism and deliberate stupidity serve an important part in the Švejkian strategy of surviving the political turmoil.

Švejk's mischievous behaviour is accompanied by the physical and verbal display of complete idiotic innocence. While Lieutenant Lukáš is furious to find that the beloved new pet that Švejk had promised him was in fact stolen from a crazy colonel, 'the kindly innocent eyes of Švejk continued to glow with gentleness and tenderness, combined with an expression of complete composure; everything was in order and nothing had happened, and if something had happened, it was again quite in order that anything at all was happening.' (Hašek 1974: 209.) Such expressions of idiocy are very characteristic of Švejk. He is more than ready to admit to all accusations, especially if that entails being a complete idiot. When Lieutenant Lukáš in his desperation asks, 'Švejk, Jesus Mary, Himmelhergott, I'll have you shot you bastard, you cattle, you oaf, you pig. Are you really such a half-wit?' Švejk readily answers, 'Humbly report, sir, I am.' (Hašek 1974: 209.) It is plausible to interpret such behaviour as part of the strategy of a political kamikaze. Švejk's literal (mis)interpretations of official orders, and the idiotic enthusiasm with which he executes them wrongly are in fact veiled forms of civil disobedience, often resulting in severe consequences for both himself and his supervisors. Precisely through such participatory adventures, Švejk unmasks the futile bureaucratic, nationalistic and autocratic nature of the empire's political system.

Pelikán's self-declared dumbness, just like Švejk's, is part of a pragmatic strategy. The genuineness of his idiocy is irrelevant as long as he plays his part well. His defensive response to avoid political interpellation is that he is 'not ideologically educated', thus declaring himself ideologically and otherwise incompetent. His foolish excuse after throwing the general out of

the swimming pool is that he could not recognise him because of the shining light. He is also 'too dumb' to remember the false confession he is supposed to learn by heart, although he has genuinely good intentions, just like Švejk. He begs to be excused from testifying, saying, 'Please spare me, I am a complete idiot!' Pelikán's repeated declaration of being 'ideologically undereducated', and therefore unsuitable for important official positions, is coupled with his lack of political erudition and disinterest when it comes to political issues. The second time Pelikán is put into jail, the inmates ask him about what is happening outside. His reaction is simple and to the point: 'Let's not politicise... what's for dinner?' The political situation outside is so confusing and disturbing that Pelikán sees no point in trying to understand or explain it; instead, he turns his attention to simple matters, such as eating, that will bring security in the crazy, volatile world. He maintains his ideological naiveté all the way to the end, and refuses to recognise the intricate political situations that he is a victim of.

Molnár, unlike the other two, is a purposeful, cunning and sharp strategist, an experienced soldier who is well aware of his surroundings. While, in the case of Švejk, readers and critics still wonder whether he is really quite as stupid as he seems or only acts that way (the impossibility of deciding this is one of the main merits of the novel), Molnár's shrewdness is clear from the beginning, when he refuses to return to the battlefield after his contingent was destroyed in Budapest. He lies and disobeys orders without hesitation in order to achieve his goal of staying away from the front. If deemed necessary, he has no problem pretending to be an idiot as part of a strategy to escape persecution. For instance, when he is finally caught and arrested by the Hungarian fascist Arrow Cross army, he presents an innocently naïve face, claiming to be lost and worried to death about his contingent.

Švejk's political views are very simple, while his comments about the war and Austria-Hungary are utterly sarcastic. For instance, when sent to the front as punishment, he is 'awfully happy' to go, and tells Lieutenant Lukáš with great eagerness, 'It'll be really marvellous

when we both fall dead together for His Imperial Majesty and the Royal Family.' (Hašek 1974: 213.) The 'Great Empire' in Švejk's purposefully simplified view is a political aberration sustained by the 'complete idiot' (Hašek 1974: 202) Imperial Family. In his most philosophical observation on the subject, he declares that a 'monarchy as idiotic as this ought not to exist at all' (Hašek 1974: 208), to which the person listening to him immediately adds that 'When I get to the front, I'll hop it pretty quick.' (Hašek 1974: 208.) Švejk's enthusiasm about the war can at best be interpreted as naïve, and at worst as a slightly nationalistic aspiration for the Empire's total destruction. He is critical of Hungarians for 'brawling for the sake of the King of Hungary'⁵ (Hašek 1974: 232), and of Germans for their ignorant and repressive nationalism, demonstrated by stories such as that of a German editor from Čáslav, who 'refused to speak Czech with us, but when he was drafted into the march company, where there were nothing but Czechs, he was suddenly able to speak it.' (Hašek 1974: 235.) Such vulgar, self-destructive and cynical political commentary permeates the novel, signalling a fundamental scepticism toward the future of Austria-Hungary and its privileged but decaying royal family.

While waiting for his execution in prison, Pelikán tries to help the guard do his homework for his communist seminar, but he either doesn't know the answers or gives naïve explanations of the terms he is asked to define. For instance, the phrase 'boycott of the Duma' he explains as meaning: 'everyone has to keep quiet'.⁶ This scene explicitly shows Pelikán's main problem, namely that he continuously misreads the complicated political sign-system around him. He gets into trouble because he doesn't understand the ideological discourse he has to decode and act upon. Yet, precisely this limitation is why Pelikán finally refuses to testify against his friend Dániel. He admits to his lack of understanding of the ideological intricacies of the trial, but at the same time he also demands a simple explanation as to why he should become a false witness against his old friend. Ultimately, this gesture of refusal, Pelikán's apolitical, uncomplicated but pragmatic common sense, imposes itself on the absurdly intricate

and completely illogical communist world, a twisted mixture of repressive ideology, political authoritarianism and institutional bureaucracy.

In *The Corporal and Others*, the pessimistic lieutenant who, although not a fascist, identifies with the Hungarian nationalist political discourse of victimhood, gets into a fierce ideological debate with the communist Szijjártó about the correct ideological position on the war. Molnár, however, angrily interferes, saying that the whole argument is 'bullshit!' His bitter disappointment over political agendas of aggression and naïve ideological devotions is evident as he continues: 'Since I was born they have been feeding me with gammon and spinach [bullshit]! And look where I ended up?!' Molnár's rejection of the nationalist victim position and his resistance to Szijjártó's utopian communist optimism (who, by the way, does not speak any Russian, and can only communicate his communist enthusiasm to the Grisa through Corporal Molnár) comes from his practicality, which is sceptical towards any hegemonic ideologies. In his experience, both fascism and communism lead to totalitarian regimes, intolerance, imperialistic visions and aggressive militarism. The justification for his cynical attitude towards politics in general is the ongoing war itself, and its obviously disastrous consequences for the population on all sides.

AMORALITY

Part of Švejk's practicality is a distinctive, open-minded interest in all things new, devoid of any emotional compassion or moral responsibility. The Švejkian character lacks any social or moral liability. Bakhtin describes the lower bodily stratum taking form in defecation and reproduction, as characteristic of the carnivalesque. However, this element of the grotesque is pushed even further in the Švejkian world, presenting signs of a 'downward movement' (Bakhtin 1984: 400) also in ethical terms. Moral travesty, the conscious disregard for basic human codes of right and wrong, escapes Bakhtin's insightful investigation of the medieval carnival. Yet, such behaviour is so obviously part of Švejkian practicality and the East European grotesque that it needs further clarification.

An overt acceptance of dishonesty characterises the behavioural pattern in Švejkism. The Švejkian hero shows no concern for questions of morality or ethical behaviour. Moral dilemmas never bother his conscience; he solves any problem with total disregard for questions of right or wrong. For instance, as the chaplain is always short of money, in order to get hold of some income, Švejk sells the piano from their house, which belongs to the landlord. By selling the landlord's piano and sofa to an illegal dealer, he is sure to solve the chaplain's monetary problems. At the same time, Švejk completely ignores the immorality of conducting illegal business with someone else's property. He only sees the final goal (to get money) and the possibility of getting some extra booze. Later, when Lieutenant Lukáš desires a pet dog, Švejk obtains one for him by carefully plotting a theft with an experienced friend of his. Although the mischief is almost instantly discovered, Švejk shows no sign of remorse even though he is promptly transferred to the front as punishment. In his world, the end always justifies the means, and 'good intentions' outweigh all unethical methods. Švejkian practicality only concentrates on the target, as Švejk's sole purpose is to survive in the highly stressful and insecure circumstances.

If Austria-Hungary's participation in World War I marks Švejk's life with uncertainty and randomness requiring instant adaptation, Colonel Molnár's survival is endangered by multiple perils, due to Hungary's catastrophic situation by the end of World War II. His only objective is to stay alive amidst the military chaos, and no moral code or ethical dilemma will stop him. Molnár is ready to do what it takes to keep himself and his comrades safe from the three different, yet equally hostile, armies. After his contingent was destroyed in Budapest, he escaped with their allocation, which he carefully hides and intends to keep and invest after the war. When they run out of provisions, Molnár doesn't hesitate to take food and

5 Franz Joseph was also the King of Hungary.

6 The Duma is a Russian institution that corresponds to the lower house in a parliament, but it means 'chitchat' in Hungarian.

drink from the home of the hunter, who himself is also suffering from shortage. He blatantly lies about his identity when caught, and masterfully impersonates different characters, such as the aristocrat owner of the castle, a fascist sympathiser or a communist insurgent, in order to confuse the enemies. He also produces and shares several fake letters of delegation to show to the authorities. All in all, the colonel's sense of right and wrong is exclusively determined by his aim of living through the war and staying away from the combat zone. No political belief or moral principle can deter him from looking after himself. The question of fighting for the 'right reasons' leaves Molnár unmoved, even at the very end when his comrades join the Soviet forces. After spending three years on the battlefield, there is no 'good enough reason' for which he would be willing to endanger his life. He is suspicious and critical of any ethical or ideological principle that tries to justify the ongoing war.

At the very last moment, Molnár changes his mind and runs after his comrades' truck on its way back to battle, although he never quite reaches them (leaving the film with a playfully open ending). This obviously artificial transformation of his character does not influence the viewers' overall perception of Molnár's Švejk-like practicality and heroism, which focuses on survival. As the Hungarian critic Tibor Hirsch very correctly observed,

The corporal, a true survivor—like an emblematic figure from the Kádár era—at the very end 'voluntarily' joins the *ad hoc* partisan commandos helping the Russians, but contemporary audiences easily forgive this obviously artificial face-lift of the character: as otherwise it resembles so much their own ideal, since the Hungarians in the middle of the 1960s [and not only—*L. T.*] turned the simple survivor into a model, and Hungarian cinema popularises such survivors without specially ordered political campaigns.⁷ (Hirsch 2007.)

The behaviour of the main characters in the *The Witness* is also fundamentally amoral, sometimes even consciously critical of moralising itself. Some, like Pelikán, are pushed into

moral immunity by the exceptionally strenuous circumstances, while others, such as Virág, are active promoters and beneficiaries of the communist system, which thrives on deception and corruption. Although Pelikán always tries to do the 'right thing', even at the very beginning he has no choice but to slaughter a pig illegally in order to feed his family. He is a good citizen, just like Švejk is a 'good soldier', but 'goodness' in this case does not entail strict ethical codes. Pelikán, following Virág's suggestion, lies to the general in order to cover for his son who ate the first Hungarian orange, claiming that a lemon *is* in fact the first Hungarian orange. Virág himself is frankly sceptical about any endeavour involving fairness and justice. When he and Pelikán are looking for General Bástyá, who is on a rabbit hunt, Pelikán feels pity for the rabbits (being a victim similar to them). But Virág cuts him short with a sarcastic warning: 'Are you moralising again?'

In the communist era, lying was not considered immoral by the general public under certain circumstances, and stealing from the state was straightforwardly laudable. The black market was thriving while state-owned shops were empty. Deceit became part of the corporate strategy in order to report outstanding results even when factory production was declining. East Europeans spent the last century alienated from their governing institutions, a situation that did not change with the arrival of capitalism. 'Corruption', a favourite idiom when describing the most important problem of the region from the point of view of Western investment, in fact refers to an institutionalised immorality that grew out of the generally relativised ethical behaviour of the people. Imported and unregulated capitalism brought about severe economic hardships in the region, which once again reaffirmed the value of Švejkian practicality, in the sense that people needed to continue thinking about their practical and immediate everyday interests, about how to make ends meet even if that meant hiring workers illegally, not paying taxes, forging company documents, or tipping doctors and officials in order to get decent assistance.

The hero in Western mythology typically involves 'someone who is guided by fundamental

principles ‘beyond the pleasure principle’ and not just by the search for pleasure and material gain’ (Žižek 1989: 27), someone with extraordinary powers and strong moral stand, such as William Wallace (‘Braveheart’) or Spiderman. East European historical realities destroyed the possibility of and belief in this kind of heroism. The desperate circumstances instead produced a different kind of heroic behaviour: Švejkism, a fundamentally non-ethical behaviour model characterised by bravery that lies in coping with tough circumstances, and focuses on staying safe and enjoying small pleasures in a world of constant danger and deprivation. On the level of cultural production, Švejkism goes further than just legitimising amoral behaviour; it presents such conduct as being not only acceptable but also laudable within the particular constraints of the East European reality. Ultimately, Švejkism stresses the idea that ethical and moral values are relative and historically determined. To put it in the words of the great absurdist, ‘what is the robbery of a bank compared to the founding of a new bank?’ (Bertold Brecht, *Threepenny Opera*; quoted in Žižek 1989: 30.)

ŠVEJK'S LITERARINESS AND LITERALISM

Švejkian existence is purposefully literal. Denying symbolic and hidden connotative spheres is part of a strategic use of idiocy and works as a gesture of resistance to the double-entendre of political discourses and overly intricate historical developments in the region. This aspect of the Švejkian language John Snyder calls ‘satiric literalism’ (Snyder 1991: 293), meaning that Švejk interprets language and carries out orders literally. His enthusiasm is not assisted by any independent judgement or common sense decision-making. Thus, for instance, when the very drunk chaplain asks Švejk to punch him, ‘Švejk immediately obliged him.’ (Hašek 1974: 113.) At certain times he does act independently, but only if this leads to the successful outcome of his schemes; invariably these actions end up in disaster. For instance, when the chaplain asks to borrow some money, Švejk decides to do a thorough job. He invents a story that proves to be very effective.

He considered it appropriate, in the presence of Captain Šnáběl, Captain Fišer and Lieutenant Mahler, not to say that the chaplain had to pay for his horse’s fodder, but to support his request for a loan by saying that the chaplain had to pay paternity alimony. He was given money at all three places. (Hašek 1974: 120.)

Obviously, borrowing money to pay paternity alimony does not shed a very favourable light on the chaplain. Švejk’s ‘good intention’ here turns into a satiric comment that exposes the chaplain’s drunk, corrupt, uncaring and completely incompetent character, which can easily take one more insult. Indeed, the chaplain keeps ‘clutching his head’ (Hašek 1974: 120) in horror but ultimately does not try to rectify the situation and is happy to take the money. Earlier, when Švejk undergoes a medical examination before entering the mental hospital, the doctor asks him if he ‘occasionally feel[s] run down, by any chance’ (Hašek 1974: 27). Švejk immediately denies this, claiming frankly that he ‘was only once nearly run down by a car on Charles Square but that was years ago.’ (Hašek 1974: 27.) Švejk’s resistance to understanding certain situations, his interpreting language as transparent, and his choice not to read between the lines all serve the same satiric purpose, that of revealing the world around him, which thrives precisely on multiple signification, double meanings and rhetorical deception. Ultimately, Švejk’s insistence on literal meaning and simple signification serves to unmask the semantic chaos that characterised the decaying Austria-Hungary.

Pelikán also falls short in interpreting and reinterpreting the commands he has to follow in his jobs. During his very brief career as the director of a swimming pool, he fails to recognise the unwritten, corrupt guest policy. He

7 János Kádár played an important role in the suppression of the 1956 revolution in Hungary and became the leader of the country the same year. He stayed in power until 1988, when the democratisation and liberalisation of the country became inevitable. The Kádár era was characterised by heavy Soviet influence (and military presence), but also by political and economic compromises, relatively high living standards and loose governing. Kádár’s principle was consolidation, and to avoid upsetting any parties.

lets the common people in because they have bought tickets, while commanding General Bástya, who is swimming by himself, to leave the pool, since he does not have a ticket. This straightforward application of the swimming pool rules to an obviously tricky situation lands him back in prison. His second position, the director of the amusement park, does not bring any more luck. In a truly socialist spirit, Pelikán proposes to turn the imperialist sounding 'English park' into an 'amusement park', and the simple 'ghost train-ride' into a ride of the 'true soul of socialism'.⁸ His ideas receive a warm welcome in bureaucratic circles. However, when the general takes the first ceremonial train ride in the new cave, he is horrified to see Marx, Lenin and his own picture accompanied by typical communist catch-phrases and visual icons emerging scarily from the dark. It turns out that Pelikán has left everything intact, only exchanging the 'symbols of darkness', such as skeletons and monsters, for the symbols of communist ideology (images of Marx and Lenin, the hammer and sickle, and a portrait of General Bástya himself as the climatic end to the ride). This plain conversion of the original 'ghost train' into the 'socialist soul train' costs him the job and results in yet another imprisonment.

Pelikán's failure to recognise the duplicity of standards, the double meaning of words, and his inability to interpret his position within the multi-layered world of communist signification are the main causes of his misfortune. His naïve and literal execution of different directives is rooted in a simple and transparent understanding of communist ideology, or more precisely, in the lack thereof. However, such persistent literalism ultimately reveals the duplicities and the deceptions that dominate communist reality. While Švejk unmasks the monarchic absolutism's irrationality by pushing it to the extreme, Pelikán's strategy is that of contrasting his own simple(minded) reasoning with the totalitarian irrationality surrounding him. Through their 'satiric literalism', both characters disclose the absurd incongruity between language and what it is supposed to describe, material reality. By following orders and carrying out tasks literally, the Švejkian character ultimately re-establishes the long lost connection between signifier and

signified. By insisting on verbatim interpretations and a transparency between language and the world, the Švejkian hero shows how political systems generate deception and uncertainty through opaque and equivocal language.

The fictional element in *The Corporal and Others* manifests itself somewhat differently. Instead of hearing stories told by different characters, the viewer mostly witnesses these stories as staged theatrical acts. The oral fables are replaced by drama. Molnár, besides his merciless logical egoism, capitalises on the capability of quickly responding to unexpected situations. He and his companions wear women's clothing, wear masks, stage little dramatic acts, and produce deceiving stories for the different (military) audiences. They become a theatre company, using the castle as a changing room.

The characters perform different dramas, with the sole purpose of deceiving their multiple enemies. Two soldiers pretend to be hunters when Molnár finds them first; later the group sets up a fictional headquarters when Szijjártó arrives. The lieutenant plays the part of a nobleman to distract the Germans, but before, when they think that the Russians are coming, they also perform a still-life act dressed as peasants, with the crippled Soviet soldier sitting in the middle. They act as if they are fighting the Russians when they accidentally meet the German army. Later, when facing the Arrow Cross officer, Molnár pretends to be a lost courier. These performances prove to be lifesavers for the corporal and the rest. They hide their true feelings (fed up with the war) behind these fictional masks, in order to avoid being drawn back to the reality of the hopeless military crisis in Hungary at the end of World War II. The fictional acts that the Corporal invents in the chaotic, unpredictable circumstances work as a shelter, because all participants in the 'game' experience the reality of the war as fiction, a world devoid of reason and order, where anyone can be a potential ally or enemy, a world wide open to the imagination.

The effect of satiric literalism is that 'We cannot read behind or underneath Švejk's talk, figuring intentions and hypothesizing motives according to some subtext. [---] As readers we must, instead, emulate Švejk the literal speaker

by taking his words literally. Then we can see what these words *do*—they satirize.’ (Snyder 1991: 294.) With his non-metaphorical language, Švejkism insists on a minimal, yet stable denotation in a world that is characterised by a surplus of connotative meanings, a world that thrives on obscure symbolism. The Švejkian hero gets into trouble because he refuses to decode the multiple coded message systems, complex metaphors or double-talk. His insistence on the transparency of language works as a criticism of the over-abundance and ambiguity of discourse in the chaotic and confusing world of the decaying Austro-Hungarian Empire, as well as the fascist, and later communist, Hungary.

The thriving of fictionality, placed in highly intense historical contexts, seamlessly folds into the post-world war communist reality, reflecting back on its own surreal, absurd nature, in which fiction and material reality become inseparable. Stories are important in the Švejkian world because they affect and validate the narrative reality, but at the same time they also unmask the fundamentally fantastic quality of the historical reality. The ‘freedom of fantasy’ (Bakhtin 1984: 49), which is also a characteristic of the grotesque, liberates the Švejkian hero from being bound by morality, rationality and logic, as the world around him also seems to be driven by a total ‘freedom of fantasy’. The interweaving of fiction and reality, of discourse and materiality in the 20th century history of Eastern Europe cannot be overestimated.

ŠVEJKISM—AN ENDURING STRATEGY OF SURVIVAL

East European history in the 19th and 20th centuries was repeatedly ‘derailed’ (Berend 2003) by decaying imperialism, two world wars, economic depression, totalitarian communism and wild capitalism. The decades of ongoing political, social and economic crises finally solidified into a permanent existential condition, where instability, irrationality and the absurd became the ‘nature of things’ for the general population. East European society has constantly found itself in reconstruction, transition or a ‘state of exception’. As World War I brought about the demise of Austria-Hungary,

the small powerless successor states struggled to build national institutions, strong, independent economies and political unity in the vacuum created by the war. The unsuccessful project led to extreme nationalist fundamentalism, which pushed most of these countries into a fascist alliance with, or into being a helpless prey of, Germany. World War II brought the most severe devastation to the region, ending in a fifty-year artificial political experiment of top-down, mandatory socialism. After the fall of communism, the arrival of brutal free market capitalism only reconfirmed that the ‘normal state of things’ in Eastern Europe was still deviation and idiosyncrasy. Under these circumstances, a special state of mind, an inclination towards scepticism, distrust and practicality developed in the population, as a defensive response to the politico-economic turmoil. I see Švejkism as an imaginary articulation of this very real collective response to the relentlessness of absurdity.

Švejkian practicality resonated well with viewers in the political chaos of the post-communist era. The vacuum created in the political arena after the fall of the one-party system was filled by a carnivalesque amalgam of innumerable, small, ‘personal parties’. As the popular joke went, everyone seemed to have a party of their own in the early 1990s in Eastern Europe. At the same time, most of those in the old communist bureaucratic *nomenklatura* managed to benefit from this chaos by obtaining powerful positions in the new parliamentary politics and by jumping at the fresh opportunities offered by the free market economy. The old communist elite successfully turned itself into the privileged class of *nouveau riche* and political/governmental executives of the present. The well-known, impressive resurrection of communist successor parties in the region also proves the often not so subtle continuities between the pre- and post-1989 political systems.⁹ Witnessing the uncanny reincarnation of their old-new officials and representatives, being well aware

8 The Hungarian term for ‘ghost train’ is *szellemvasút*, which can also be translated as ‘soul train’, because *szellem* means ‘soul’.

9 For a comprehensive discussion on the topic see Bozók, Ishiyama 2002.

of the ongoing corruption and non-democratic legislative methods that supported it, the once euphoric population again adopted a Švejkian sceptical and critical attitude towards the disheartening realities of the ongoing political and economic developments. When Molnár refuses any ideological commitment, or Pelikán finds communist politics just as rotten as fascist politics, or when Švejk ironically connects his enemies with the high cause of the empire, they speak to the experience of a long historical period in Eastern Europe that continues today. Their practical, sceptical and critical position, often masked by strategic idiocy, corresponds to the general atmosphere of the people who, after 1989, still found themselves in the same chaotic, corrupt and unending political and economic carnival as their ancestors did in the 1920s, 1940s and 1960s.

Bakhtin's description of the Rabelaisian carnival and the incongruous historical developments in Eastern Europe, although different in many ways, share some fundamental characteristics. Bakhtin understands carnival as part of a 'two-world condition' in which temporarily hierarchical relationships and prohibitions are suspended, and the serious, official forms of ideology give way to subversive, liberating laughter and transgression. Thus, for Bakhtin, carnival is important for reinvigorating and refreshing social conditions, but ultimately it confirms the existing order by offering a safe and temporary way of releasing social tension. East European countries in the last two centuries have also aspired to a 'two-world condition'—hoping to reach some kind of 'normalcy' by vanquishing the anomalous. However, an important element of Bakhtin's concept of the revitalising, 'gay carnival' is missing from the region's history, as well as from its Švejkian distillation in the popular imaginary. The essentially utopian presumption that the carnival means a 'moving toward a better future that changes and renews everything in its path' (Bakhtin 1984: 302) is not part of the definition of East European history. The moment of carnival, instead of regenerating the social sphere, then passing and giving way to new, better social formations, continues to persist in East European reality. The two-world condition was never fully achieved; instead, it became

reduced to a one-world condition, where it is impossible to separate the improved, better, normal world from its travesty and deviance. Bakhtin's counter-hegemonic, reinvigorating carnival thus freezes into a macabre-grotesque prison of permanently absurd, upside-down structures that characterise the East European carnival.

The 20th century history of the region was also carnivalesque in that it presented the 'world inside out' (Bakhtin 1984: 11), its most permanent attribute being the instability of political powers, bureaucratic chaos and disrupted hegemonic relations; in other words, 'a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear' (Bakhtin 1984: 11). These conditions, however, differently from Bakhtin's temporary, revitalising carnival, became the norm. The continuous historical carnival in Eastern Europe solidified into everyday reality, turning from an alternative world into the official world itself. The reason for this is to be found in the primary condition of the carnival, which links it to 'moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man' (Bakhtin 1984: 9). A permanent repetition of historical disasters and socio-economic crises replaced the cyclical momentary structure that Bakhtin describes. Therefore, in Eastern Europe Bakhtin's positive understanding of the carnival was reinterpreted in a much gloomier manner. Instead of a vitalising energy, the carnival became an exhausting permanent condition, in which the perpetual random changes in political and social hierarchies, lawlessness, military chaos and bureaucratic authoritarianism folded into a fundamental existential instability.

As Renate Lachmann observes about Bakhtin's work: 'when [carnival] gains its free time and space in the annual cycle, it unfolds not as destructive, but as a regenerative force' (Lachmann 1987: 13). However, the upside-down world of Eastern Europe is devoid of the Bakhtinian carnival's reinvigorating and temporary character; there is no return to any condition of normality, much less to a better, purified life. In other words, the utopian state of the carnivalesque gives way to an absurd constancy, where the lower bodily stratum continues to dominate, amorality is essential and the

discursive superstructure has been definitively detached from the material base. Such an experience of reality in permanent disarray gave birth to Švejkian practicality, the only survival strategy in the chaos of political and ideological experimentation in East European history. Furthermore, since the ‘state of exception’ slowly froze into a permanent condition, including the arrival of the free market, capitalist democracy, Švejk’s practicality and critical irony retained their relevance.

Bakhtin’s claim of the crucial role of the ‘grotesque historical world’ in ‘becoming and renewal’ (Bakhtin 1984: 435), in other words, that comedy is the last, overripe form of historical time and a symptom of unavoidable change, resonates *ironically* with Marx’s quote at the very end of *The Witness*, ‘Why such a march of history? This is necessary in order that mankind can say a gay farewell to its past.’ I referred to irony, because, it seems that East European history has been caught in this overripe moment of grotesque laughter for over a century now. The carnival continues, and so does Švejk’s popularity, and there is no ‘gay farewell to the past’. As long as clowns are kings and the king is a ridiculous clown, and violating essential ethical codes continues to be fashionable, as long as lies and truth are inseparable, the Švejkian character, his adventures and his survival will continue to resonate in the popular imagination, offering a successful strategy of critical, but also gay, participation in the East European ‘grotesque historical world’. However, comedy and laughter became crucial indications of survival in the East European permanent carnival because ‘the stuff of comedy is precisely this repetitive, resourceful popping-up of life—whatever the catastrophe, no matter how dark the predicament, we can be sure in advance that the little fellow will find a way out’ (Žižek 2001: 85).

The Švejkian world can be interpreted as an imaginary reconstruction of this *permanent carnivalesque*. But Švejkism itself involves an active participation in the carnival, a critical involvement with the clear goal of getting by. Švejkian practicality, contrary to what has been argued,¹⁰ is ‘far removed from cynical nihilism’ (Bakhtin 1984: 378)—instead it is a productive

strategy of participation and survival. ‘We muddle along as we can’, says Švejk at some point (Hašek 1974: 131), and the plural ‘we’ in the assertion is perfectly justified because his character is not a lonely, romantic individual, not ‘the “existential” and “alienated” hero’ (Stern 1992: 108), but a communal-folk figure, the fictional representation of the universal critical interpretative strategy of East European communities trapped in an ongoing historical carnival. If special times require special conduct, Švejkian practicality is a collective condition of the mind, ready to conform to all ‘states of exception’.

CONCLUSIONS

If, as Bakhtin argues, the regenerating power of the medieval grotesque disappeared in romanticism with Nietzsche’s tragic laughter, it returned again in 20th century grotesque realism (Bakhtin 1984: 46). Švejk’s participatory existence discloses an intimate connection to the absurdity of living, while at the same time it finds joy in the anarchic carnival and provokes sympathetic communal laughter. Švejkian mockery brings an essential positive element to the otherwise ghastly carnivalesque spirit in Eastern Europe. Such bodily, materialist participation in history is productive because it ‘destroy[s] and suspend[s] all alienation; it draw[s] the world closer to man, to his body, permit[s] him to touch and test every object, examine it from all sides, enter into it, turn it inside out, compare it to every phenomenon, however exalted and holy, analyze, weigh, measure and try it on.’ (Bakhtin 1984: 381.) Švejkism, in this sense, is a true manifestation of the ‘comic aspect of survivalism’; the hearty laughter he provokes is a sign of the ‘triumph of life over the constraints of symbolic prohibitions and regulations’ (Žižek 2001: 83).

The Švejkian hero’s strategic dumbness ultimately comments on the absurdly complex and incomprehensible political games and political experimentations that have continued to characterise the region since the end of the

10 See especially Snyder 1991 and Steiner 2000.

19th century. His figure is as persistent in the cultural production of Eastern Europe as is the absurdity of his world, when history, like ‘a tank that comes through the wall’ (Petković 2006: 380), cannot be ignored any more, because it shatters people’s lives. They often find themselves in situations ‘in which they were heroes in spite of themselves, heroes in the Švejkian sense’ (Petković 2006: 380). Sloterdijk’s concept of ‘kynicism’, defined as a ‘plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm’ (Žižek 1989: 29), fits perfectly with Švejkism as a counter-cultural representation and as an unruly reaction to the hegemony of the institutionalised carnivalesque. Cynical Švejkian heroes, observed by just as cynical audiences, react with hearty laughter to the ‘irrational, incomprehensible, absurd experience’ of East European carnival that they ‘cannot treat otherwise’ (Heller 2005: 16). Švejk’s personal adventure ‘finds its place over and over again within a collective experience in which the medley of individualities forms an irreducibly composite and heterogeneous portrait’ (Gatt-Rutter 1991: 10) of the entire East European population. His *topos* provides an alternative, although twisted, comic ideal for a behavioural model that matches perfectly the upside-down, twisted history of the region. Through a comparative analysis of Jaroslav Hašek’s *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World War*, *The Corporal and Others*, and *The Witness*, I have argued that the Švejkian character serves as an imaginary and collective cultural legitimisation of a specific survival strategy that leaves behind ingenuousness, physical strength and moral righteousness, and turns instead to astute pragmatism and practicality as true, genuine forms of heroism.

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