

Restraining the Absolute: A Centennial Appraisal of the Tragic Experimentalism in Karel Čapek's 1922 Fiction *The Absolute at Large*

Beetoshok Singha

Abstract

The year 1922 witnessed the emergence of various ground breaking trends in the spheres of fine arts and literature. In the wake of the horrible devastation and carnage in the First Great War a section of the litterateurs like Wilfred Owen or Rupert Brooke chose to pen the prevailing contradictory sentiments of either 'No War' or 'Pax Britannica' by means of general goodwill and military might respectively. But a small section of writers dreamt of, obviously in their own imaginary realm, abolishing the war from the world by means of some great man-made catastrophe. The most prominent name to come to the readers' mind is that of H. G. Wells who in the novel *The World Set Free* (1914) actually made the catastrophe happen and seek the world leaders and the citizens a war free world. A still smaller section like St. John Greer Ervine sought to pit morality and the century old legacy of utilitarianism against the use of Ultimate Weapon in works like *Progress* (1931). The year 1922 also chronicled the debut of one such significant work of futurism — *The Absolute at Large* by the Czech writer Karel Čapek — which ultimately let the humanity prevail over the monstrous possession and chain production of weapons of mass destruction in the form of Absolute. The genius of Čapek lies in the fact that more than two decades before the first experimental atomic detonation in Los Alamos in 1945 he conceived of the annihilation of matter to produce abundant energy and reactor to facilitate and control the process. Čapek in this novel draws the readers' attention towards the moral dilemma that the leaders felt after possessing this Absolute Weapon. The present world on account of the accumulation of enormous quantity of lethal weapons faces the same kind of crisis and the present global leaders should have the kind of foresight to avert the crisis. This is how Čapek's novel, written in 1922 becomes eminently relevant in 2022.

Keywords: Science Fiction, Clash of Morality, Experimentalism



The year 1922 is a landmark in the history of literature with the publications of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* which collectively signify the high watermark of literary modernism. D. H. Lawrence in the same year came up with his collection of shorter works of fiction *England, My England and Other Stories* faithfully portraying the individual suffering against the background of the Great War. The year also witnessed the debut of another important Lawrence work — *Aaron's Rod* where the author put emphasis upon individualism with subtle yet strong insinuations of homosexuality under the garb of classical allusion. The readers of the Continent are equally enamoured of the profound contemplation on the human existence in post-War years as exemplified by Rainer Maria Rilke in *Duino Elegies* (1922). Across the Atlantic another gifted novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald published *Tales of the Jazz Age*, a critique of the contemporary American society that increasingly turned materialistic. Examples of other notable publications across disciplines in 1922 can easily be multiplied. Simultaneously the year 1922 is also remarkable in the genre of science fiction as the Czech author Karel Čapek published his seminal work *The Absolute at Large*¹. Although science fiction is still held by the average literati as outside the periphery of recognized or mainstream literature Čapek's fiction made an uncanny prophecy of the development of the nuclear weapons and subsequent conflicts way back in 1922. If we for a brief moment look at the historical development of atomic weapon we find that neutron, a subatomic particle and instrumental in conducting chain reaction, was not discovered before 1932. Therefore it can safely be assumed that in the early 1920s, let alone speaking of litterateurs, even the most distinguished physicists were not in a position to recognize the boundless energy that lay dormant in atom. Viewed from this perspective *The Absolute at Large* does not only bear the evidence of a rare imaginative mind characteristic of science fiction writers but manifests a Tiresias like foresight in predicting the Great War and holocaust that were to come within two decades after the publication of this work.

As this novel and its author are not very well known in the reading circle it would be advisable to draw the storyline in a nutshell. The protagonist G. H. Bondy, the Chairman of a Metallo-Electrical enterprise, came across an advertisement to the effect of immediate selling of a Karburator, a reactor like device that can perform atomic disintegration of combustible element that is inserted into it and can transform the whole combustible material into power after total combustion. This power, in turn, can be applied to any machinery for the near inexhaustible performance of the latter. The only drawback of this system is that in the process of total combustion or annihilation of the matter a by-product, namely Absolute, is generated. The owner of the new invention, Rudolph Marek, a schoolmate of Bondy, explains at length by using the idea of Pantheism as preached by Baruch Spinoza, that this Absolute is nothing but a manifestation of God himself. When at the behest of Marek, Bondy visits the underground chamber to examine the Karburator the latter confronts a tremendous flow of energy before which it is nearly impossible to remain level-headed for long. To clarify the bewildered situation of Bondy it would suffice to state that the flow of energy from this Karburator retains the potential to make revolutionary and permanent changes in the physical and psychical world of humankind. Both of them were fully aware of the fact that if Karburators are mass produced and installed in various industrial, financial and domestic spaces the people would not simply be able to withstand the adverse effect of the Absolute. Yet, a businessman at heart, Bondy decides to strike a deal by purchasing the right to mass produce and sell the Karburators. Soon the world confronts chaos into every sphere of life — religious, social, economic and



political. Economic crisis emerges out of over production and the subsequent failure to distribute the produced goods nationwide. Because of its tremendous psychological impact a great number of people turned suddenly dogmatic. Curiously enough this newly developed allegiance of people to religion depends upon the nature and shape of the Karburators placed in their vicinity. In short, different shapes and forms of Karburators came to be regarded as gods by the particular group/sect of people associated with it and the idea of supremacy of their respective gods soon occupy their hearts. Eventually, this leads to a Great War effecting the death of hundreds and thousands of people. At the end the author found peace with a handful of characters waiting upon sausages and sauerkraut at a local inn.

The storyline, beyond any scope of doubt, suggests the inevitable fallout of the human civilization. The few human beings, who managed to evade the great catastrophe, are an insignificant lot who have neither the will nor the capacity to make up for the loss the world had incurred. This physical destruction of civilization follows the mental instability of human beings which the Karburators had brought about. As the title of this article focusses on harnessing the unlimited power of the Absolute the reader is expected to understand that this act of harnessing/restraining is as much physical as it is psychological. In his first encounter with the Karburator, Bondy almost visualized the whole cosmos in motion in which his own insignificant existence creates no greater impression than that of a fleeting object:

...Mr. Bondy felt a peculiar breeze upon his brow, and an eerie sensation as though his hair were standing on end; and then it seemed as if he were being borne through boundless space; and then as though he were floating in the air without any sensation of his own weight. G. H. Bondy fell on his knees, lost in a bewildering, shining ecstasy (Čapek 15).

The reason for the author's waxing poetic in the above excerpt is that he is attempting to describe the effect of boundless energy/Absolute upon human being. As the cause precedes effect Marek is quick to explain to his friend why and how the Absolute is released:

...all matter contains the Absolute in some state of confinement...you utterly destroy a piece of matter, apparently leaving not the slightest residue. Then, since all matter is really Matter plus Absolute, what you have destroyed is *only* the matter...You're left with the chemically unanalysable, immaterial residue, which shows no spectrum lines, neither atomic weight nor chemical affinity,...none...of the properties of matter. What is left behind is pure God (23).

If we only substitute the word 'Absolute' with 'energy' we will understand that Čapek was well aware of Einstein's theory of mass-energy equivalence. However, the 1920s was too early to predict the enormous destructive power of an atomic weapon the making of which was possible by preserving the emitted energy and then weaponizing it. Denied this option, Čapek, quite naturally, thinks of supernatural phenomena in every sphere of life as a result of the emission of energy/Absolute.

These occasional bouts of supernaturalism, the most prominent sign of which is people's getting affected with sudden religious frenzy, casts a deep thrall of anxiety and fear in Marek's mind regarding the future use of the Karburators. Marek, whose intention was to exponentially increase the industrial output with minimum input of fuel, is quite



frank to acknowledge the machine's terrible impact upon him and how he is at pains to restrain himself:

The symptoms were terrible. I could read people's thoughts, light emanated from me, I had a desperate struggle not to become absorbed in prayer and preach belief in God...That machine won't let anything stop it. I don't sleep at home nowadays. Even in the factory there have been several serious cases of illumination among the workmen. I don't know where to turn... (29).

Yet it is Marek's devastated state in body and spirit coupled with an indomitable will not to give up is the answer to this threatening omnipresence. Bondy, too, was troubled by the same experience himself but only at a later stage of the novel. Like Marek, Bondy too, will become a shadow of his own former self in his wholehearted attempt to resist the psychological onslaught of the Absolute. However, for the present Marek is only anxious to sell the Karburator along with its patent and Bondy appears no less than a Marlovian overreacher at the prospect of being the sole proprietor of this miraculous machine. Both of them were warned with the same advice of Bishop Linda, a somewhat comic character in this fiction, before embarking on this venture. Like the Good Angel in *Doctor Faustus*, Bishop Linda too, advises Bondy to refrain from purchasing the ownership of producing and selling the Karburators in lieu of announcing No. 1651 Brenov (i.e. the factory of Marek where the Karburator is kept) a holy shrine for Catholics. Whether this blatant hypocrisy on the part of a clergyman augurs well for retaining the supremacy of the Catholic world is a matter of dispute but the author leaves no room for doubt that Bondy's vehement refusal unleashes a string of incidents that are tenfold worse, both morally and physically. In the face of Bondy's repeated refusal to his proposal, Bishop Linda utters almost prophetic warning about the terrible aftermath of installing the Karburators, thereby once again mimicking the role of the Good Angel in the Faustian play:

In a year's time you will stop the manufacture of the Absolute of your own accord. But, oh, the damage, the devastation it will bring to pass in the meantime!...do not imagine that the Church brings God into the world. The Church merely confines Him and controls Him. And you two unbelievers are loosing Him upon the earth like a flood...your modern society...will pay the price! (43-44).

From his very attitude and thinking it is more than clear that Bondy cares neither for science nor for the progress of mankind. The only thing he apparently cares for is money and is presumably ready to go to any length to earn it. Yet for all his loathing for 'pettiness' and 'average lifestyle' his racial identity as a Jew, thinks Robert B. Pynsent, lays bare Čapek's unwise expression of anti-semitism (349). This revelation in spite of bothering least the readers of today, had immense socio-cultural connotation in the 1920s — a decade which preceded Hitler's Chancellorship in 1933. Even Bondy's being instrumental in bringing about the chaos in the world could not make our mind averse to him. Rather it is Bondy's steadfastness in his work, a great will power and a broad cosmopolitan worldview which make him a versatile genius with a touch of enigma.

It is this versatility and enigma which did not allow Bondy to breakdown in the face of overwhelming economic and industrial calamity prior to the Great War among world powers and seek forgiveness from the Almighty. Rather he chose to bear all the personal and professional grievances the Karburators brought about in his life with stoic fortitude. Whether it comes to his fiancée Ellen whose increasingly ethereal temperament



and concern forced Bondy to renounce all thoughts of marriage or the radical psychological change of his co-workers in whose midst he came to be known as 'Worshipful Master', Bondy always strove within his limited power to bring back normalcy. For a twentieth century hero like G. H. Bondy the reader cannot certainly expect the Faustian repentance for the collapse of all his monumental ambitions but no small amount of will power, perseverance and stoicism are required to build up this huge business establishment and yet he calmly bears the tragic end of everything.

If we study the nature of this general collapse of industry, trade and commerce we come across yet another phenomenal example of Čapek's foresight — his anticipation of the future clash of human and artificial intelligence, a theme popular with the science fiction writers since 1960s with notable works like *Colossus* (1966), *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966) and the likes. As there still is the huge scope of development in the field of artificial intelligence we have as late a television series as in 2019 entitled *Kamen Rider Zero-One* highlighting this clash. In the present context the crisis, as has already been mentioned while narrating the events, is set in motion by the Karburators in every industrial enterprise by producing things on their own without any human intervention and even without the use of raw materials. The author presents the whole weird chain of events with the example of a tack factory in the following words:

...some factory...where tacks were manufactured, had installed a Perfect Karburator...The Absolute constantly emanating from the atomic motor learnt the whole process of manufacture in a single day, *by virtue of its innate intelligence*, and flung itself with all its uncontrollable energy...into this occupation. Once it started, nothing could stop it. Without anyone in control of it, the machine vomited forth tacks...When [raw material] supplies were exhausted, iron sprouted out of the earth... (Čapek 114, italics mine).

This indiscriminate overproduction of nearly all essential commodities, with the existing system of transport, distribution and consumption that was simply inadequate to cope with the soaring statistics, soon ushered in economic disaster. But what strikes the readers of late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is the horrible prospect of the artificial intelligence of the Karburators prevailing over all human plans, endeavours and enterprises. In his science-fiction play *Rossum's Universal Robots* (1920), better known as *R. U. R.*, Čapek focussed on the clash between human beings and robots which led to the near extinction of the former. A brief glimpse of the history of robotics and artificial intelligence informs the readers that the earliest known robot was created by the Kentucky based inventor George C. Devol in the early 1950s and its first successful industrial use took place in the late 1960s after the necessary modification done on the earlier model by the engineer and entrepreneur Joseph Engleberger ("Robotics: A Brief History"). Taking all these historical facts into account it may safely be assumed that Čapek's depiction of the clash between automatons and human beings in works like *R. U. R.* (1920) or *The Absolute at Large* (1922) fell nothing short of prophecies for future generations whose use and dependence on artificial intelligence would only increase over time. In doing this Karel Čapek achieved two significant goals of literary modernism, that of experimentation and individualism. All these novel imaginings and depictions of self-performing machines and humanoids significantly break away from the tradition set by Jules Verne or H. G. Wells where the focus was on adventure rather than upon the effects of scientific innovation on society. So far as individualism is concerned in the fifth paragraph of the



present article I have endeavoured to show Bondy's attempt to cope with the rapidly changing circumstances around him which in turn marks the development of a modern hero. Besides these two important characteristics of Modernist Movement in literature a keen reader of Čapek will not fail to observe the apparent purposelessness of the surviving soldiers in the penultimate chapter and that of the civilians in the last chapter. This purposelessness may well be attributed to the senseless atrocities and massacres which were narrated in previous chapters depicting the War. Obviously the survivors of the carnage could no longer put their trust in the contemporary social, political and religious institutions which failed to take reliable measure against War. The hollowness of existence which they perceive in the post-War society is a recurrent motif of all significant literary output of 1922 and thereafter.

The next important aspect of the novel is the dilemma of the world powers as to what could be done with the Absolute which by the middle of the novel has firmly established itself as an inescapable phenomenon in nearly every public and private sector resulting in factionalism in the society. This sectarianism makes one group of people, who were influenced by the shape and purpose of a particular Karburator placed in their vicinity, claim superiority over other groups who came into contact with other shapes and forms of the same contrivance. Soon after society was split into many factions each of which vied for superiority over the other. As Bondy's business ambition made the use of Karburators not restricted within the periphery of a single state the world leaders soon found themselves in an impasse of conflicting national interests and their subsequent attempt to solve it came to naught. The nature of this sectarian conflict is brilliantly summed up by Bondy on the eve of the Great War:

[Absolute] is infinite. That's just where the trouble lies...everyone measures off a certain amount of Him and then thinks it is the entire God. Each one appropriates a little fringe of fragment of Him and then thinks he possesses the whole of Him...In order to convince...that God is wholly [a certain group's], [it] has to go and kill all the others...*it means so much to him to have the whole of God and the whole of the truth* (Čapek 220, italics mine).

This logic amply justifies all these sectarian violences and the ensuing Great War, which Čapek anticipates to take place in 1953 obliterating the whole of warring factions from the face of the earth. But the root cause of hostilities across the continents, as it appears, is the human incomprehensibility of the whole of God/Truth. The said cause is also the root of innumerable religious strifes across the nations since antiquity. However the key to restrain the enormous psychological impact of the Absolute, which is also the title of this article, lies in fully understanding the nature and scope of the same. Except for Rudolph Marek and G. H. Bondy, the creator and propagator of the Absolute, every other character/group/country fails to understand the nature of the Absolute and consequently took no effective measure to restrain it. This failure, in turn, can easily be attributed to common human nature of accepting or worshipping God/Absolute in a single form and assuming all other forms or lines of thought as heretical. However, if this Absolute/God can be made to appear with all His cosmic energy and every conceivable form before the naked eyes of mankind then only the latter could have a glimpse of the infinity of the Absolute and realize that its own myopic vision/line of thought is simply insufficient to grasp "the whole of the truth". Such a vision of the whole of Absolute/God is possible if we equate this Absolute/God with the ultimate weapon of today, i.e. atom bomb.



Immediately after the first experimental detonation of atom bomb Julius Robert Oppenheimer², the Head of the Manhattan Project, famously uttered the following citation from *The Gita*: “I am become death, the destroyer of worlds” (qtd. in Hijjiya 123). *The Gita* itself recounts the infiniteness and power of the Supreme Being, whose job in this context, is only to usher in death and destruction in these lines:

A thousand simultaneous suns
Arising in the sky
Might equal that great radiance,
With that great glory vie (11:12).

Obviously, Oppenheimer could have drawn no more suitable analogy to depict the real-life manifestation of ‘the destroyer of worlds’. A momentary glimpse of this Absolute/Infinite or even a superficial understanding of its destructive power would have been enough for the belligerent groups in the present novel to stop their animosity and make truce with each other. It is precisely the experience and knowledge of the havoc created by nuclear weapon that the United Nations adopted several measures towards the goal of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

In fine, one can recollect the veiled warning of Albert Einstein about the future of the world had there been any Third World War. In an interview with Alfred Werner, Einstein made the famous statement: “I don’t know [what weapons will be used in the Third World War]. But I can tell...what they’ll use in the Fourth — rocks!” (qtd. in Calaprice 280). The last chapter of the present novel “The End of Everything” beckons to that grim future after millions of people perished in the War and the competing nation states are drained of their resources. The surviving characters, although apparently have no serious business at hand than to carry on arguments on palatable dishes, learnt the bitter lesson of restraint and tolerance as essential for survival in future. Mr. Binder, a survivor of the War and once a factionist himself, pronounces this post-War realization thus:

Everyone believes in his own superior God, but he doesn’t believe in another man, or credit him with believing in something good. People should first of all believe in other people, and the rest would soon follow (Čapek 240).

The fundamental mistake which one usually makes in this biased approach to the Almighty is attempting to confine all the divine grace and charm to serve his own selfish or parochial objectives. The Almighty, however, who has no reason to be dictated by any sectarian preference or prejudice, easily spills over his bowl of boon upon the unwanted people/groups thereby undermining the hope and aspiration of the faction that sought to invoke divine assistance exclusively for the latter through scientific or scriptural methods. Throughout the novel whenever a person, or an organization, or any state makes use of Karburators for purposes other than the universal, it results in disaster. The sheer fact of denying the existence of God in other faiths and activities makes all the collective belief and activities of the users of the Karburator appear godless. The only hope for belligerent mankind, split into various creeds and beliefs, lies in fulfilment or materialization of the common human interest in making use of the benediction of science. The acceptance of the followers of other faiths as equal to us and the acknowledgement of their interest as our own are perfectly in keeping with the teaching of *The Gita* where the Lord pronounces salvation for every other faith and creed:

Whatever form divine appeals



To choice and faith and love,
I fix in each a faith therein
That naught can shake or move (7:21).

To champion this idea of tolerance and love, ideas which used to exist in human society more than several millennia ago, Karel Čapek uses a whole new form of science fiction thereby fulfilling the modernist maxim: 'Make It New'³.

Notes

¹Originally titled as *Továrna na absolutno* (1922) and alternatively translated as *The Factory for the Absolute* the first English edition of the novel came out in 1927 by Thomas Mark (Klíma 260). I have followed the 2005 edition published by U of Nebraska Press and translated anonymously.

²Julius Robert Oppenheimer (1904-1967) was also the Head of the Los Alamos Laboratory in the course of the Second World War. The actual detonation was done inside the New Mexico desert. For a detailed analysis see "The "Gita" of J. Robert Oppenheimer" (2000) by James A. Hijjiya.

³The slogan 'Make It New' is widely attributed to Ezra Pound (1885-1972) whose collection of essays of the same name was published in 1934. Following Pound's idea of newness and innovation Modernist works, like the present novel of Čapek, foreground the aesthetic and humanitarian values of the past in the context of twentieth century.

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