

On Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*

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*All quotations from and reference to *The Good Soldier Švejk* in the following text are from the translation by Cecil Parrott (London: Penguin, 1974)*

Introductions to the best known Czech novel, *The Good Soldier Švejk*, typically begin with a tribute to the life of its author, Jaroslav Hašek (1883-1923), not least of all because that life was so extraordinarily dissolute, adventurous, amusing, and sad. I will, however, resist the temptation to review what has already been gone over so frequently and simply urge those interested to consult one of the many sites on the internet which pay tribute to this internationally famous author and humorist (in his life and art). One such link is available here: [Hašek](#) (if you know nothing about the man or the astonishing popularity of the book, a visit to this site is well worthwhile, and the following link is a very interesting review of the continuing international appeal of the book: [Švejk](#)).

My central concern here is to explore the novel itself in order to promote a more informed discussion of what Hašek is up to in detailing the adventures of the most famous fictional soldier in the Austrian army in World War I. What can we point to in order to explain the astonishing and lasting success of this book?

SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS: THE PICARESQUE NOVEL

The Good Soldier Švejk is in many ways a very traditional work, written as picaresque novel, a story which tells the adventures of (usually) a low-born rogue (*picaro* is the Spanish for rascal) who uses his native wit to survive a series of adventures. The plot is commonly structured in a linear sequence of incidents which confronts the hero (and

his companion, if he has one) with various elements of a complex and often corrupt society. Frequently, the main character remains on the move throughout, so the story consists of the series of episodes he experiences on the road, the various adventures he must survive or obstacles he must overcome to keep going. And the story ends when the hero finishes his journeying (at least for the moment).

Sometimes a key element in creating and sustaining interest in the sequence of incidents is the development of this main character, the sense that the journey is educating him in some way, especially about his relationship to society (as, for example, in *Gulliver's Travels* or *Huckleberry Finn*). Where that occurs, often the main point of the work is the nature of that development, the extent to which his experiences have changed or failed to change the hero in significant ways (we shall consider later whether that is the case with Hašek's hero).

The picaresque novel is a genre well suited to satire because it enables the author, with a minimum of effort, to introduce a wide variety of social types in different and often incongruously funny situations in order to expose their hypocrisy, vanity, and stupidity. The form makes no complex demands for intricate plotting (as, for example, in a detective story) or, in many cases, detailed characterization (most of the characters are caricatures of social types). And the journey can (as in Hašek's novel) be temporarily halted and resumed again without a loss of narrative energy or logic.

What the style does demand, of course, is a sympathetic and interesting central character, a great deal of narrative inventiveness in the variety of episodes, and effectively witty satire to sustain the reader's interest in the journey from one episode to the next. Few things are more tedious in literature than a picaresque novel which has run out of steam and is becoming repetitive or has lost its satiric bite.

A frequent additional feature of a number of picaresque novels is the presence of a narrator who guides us through the adventures and typically delivers his own views on particular issues which the adventures of the hero are exploring or illustrating. In other forms of storytelling such repeated intrusions into the world of the represented fiction

by the narrator's editorial opinion can affect our response for the worse because we may well sense we are being pushed in directions we do not want to go or where the fiction is not taking us. The episodic nature of the picaresque, however, permits such encounters with the narrator with a minimum of dislocation (although there's always the risk that, if the narrator becomes a major presence throughout the novel, we may end up finding the narrator more engaging and interesting than the fictional characters, not an uncommon response among readers of Henry Fielding's novels, for example).

THE NARRATOR IN *THE GOOD SOLDIER ŠVEJK*

Hašek repeatedly confronts us with the didactic voice of the narrator, sometimes in casual asides and sometimes at considerable length (note, for example, the opening of Chapter 11 in Part 1, a two-page rant against religion: "Preparations for the slaughter of mankind have always been made in the name of God or some supposed higher being which men have devised and created in their own imagination. . . ." And so on). We learn that the narrator was himself a soldier in the 91st regiment when he interrupts the story of Švejk to deliver a small lecture on batmen in the army (162-165). And other details given directly to the reader reinforce the impression that whoever is telling us the story knows what is talking about, because he has been there. Hence, his frequently aggressive opinions arise out of his experience.

These intrusions contribute little directly to the story, since they tend merely to underscore emphatically something that is already evident enough in the satire (given what happens in the story, we certainly don't need to be reminded here of the hypocrisy of the Church or the incompetence and corruption of its priests or the stupidities of military justice, for example). What's remarkable about these intrusions, however, is the narrator's tone, which typically contrasts sharply with the typically more genial ironic satire in the fiction:

They were now going back to the front to get new wounds, mutilations and pains and to earn the reward of a simple wooden cross over their graves. Years after on the mournful plains of East

Galicia a faded Austrian soldier's cap with a rusty Imperial badge would flutter over it in wind and rain. From time to time a miserable old carrion crow would perch on it, recalling fat feasts of bygone days when there used to be spread for him an unending table of human corpses and horse carcasses, when just under the cap on which he perched there lay the daintiest morsels of all—human eyes. (230)

Throughout the novel the continual presence of the narrator consistently injects a grim and unrelenting irony, as he does in the above passage, particularly against the hypocrisy of the church, the stupidity of the army and the police, and the destructiveness of war (these contributions get more frequent the closer the story moves toward the front lines).

Thus, the comedy of Švejk's adventures is played out against a backdrop of sharp and often bitter narrative commentary, a presence which is always reminding us that, however fanciful some episodes may be and however much we may chuckle at a particular incident, the actions arise out of a real experience. There's a black edge to the humour here, and we are not allowed to forget that the genesis of this classic of modern humour involves a fierce anger or, more appropriately perhaps, a "savage indignation" (the phrase associated with Jonathan Swift) against the absurd cruelty human beings typically inflict on each other when they forget their common humanity and delude themselves with dreams of greatness and pride.

This feature of Hašek's style creates a curious tension in places between the harsh tone of the narrator and the more amusingly ironic presence of Švejk, as if we are witnessing an often implausibly funny comedy in front of an ominously real and graphic backdrop of atrocity. As I shall be discussing later, this tension qualifies the comedy in some complex ways and encourages us to respond to it not necessarily as the affirmation of a healthy alternative vision of life but as something potentially more absurd, much darker than conventional comic satire might suggest. It also prevents us from sentimentalizing Švejk, for we are constantly reminded that the situations he has to deal with, the routine cruelties and abuse he has to confront, are not

merely exaggerated fictions, caricatures of real life (although they frequently are that as well).

THE SATIRIC TARGET

And what specifically is the target of Hašek's indignation? A common observation in answer to this question is that this is a great anti-war novel, written in response to the absurd situations the author himself experienced during World War I. That war is obviously an essential element in the novel, since virtually every character in the book is associated with the war in some way and almost all the action takes place within the context of a military unit.

And yet in some ways this novel is obviously about a good deal more than war. After all, while there are a great many caustic comments and satirical moments when the inhumanity of modern military life is exposed for the idiotic folly it is, there are no combat scenes in the novel, and we are never given a detailed and sustained glimpse of soldiers killing and being killed. There is very little attention paid to weapons or training or conduct which is unique to military experience. In addition, a great deal of the satire of what goes on in the army has little to do with its existence of the army *per se* and is much more focused on the military as an organization with a complex chain of command, complicated procedures, and a system of authority, whose major function, it seems, is to order people around in ways they never fully understand (perhaps because they are beyond anyone's comprehension).

Hence, we would be closer to the heart of the novel, I think, to claim that the real target here is the army as a structured bureaucracy designed to organize human effort, and, beyond that, of all forms of social bureaucracy claiming authority over the common folk in the name of some greater good—religious, imperial, judicial, or whatever. *The Good Soldier Švejk*, in fact, is a truly great satire (perhaps the greatest of them all) on the most central feature of social life in the past century and a half (at least) in most modern industrialized countries—the ubiquitous presence of huge, labyrinthine bureaucratic structures ostensibly set in place to make modern society more efficient, equal, and fair, but, in fact, reducing life for those who have to deal with them to what often amounts to an incomprehensible and out-of-

control game whose major players never tire of announcing in noble-sounding prose and stirring poetry the importance of the structure and its alleged purpose but who, in their daily practice, show no signs of any significant humanity in dealing with subordinates or those whom the bureaucracy is supposed to serve. That target is something we all understand (because we have to deal with it, no matter where we live), and thus the impact of this satire extends well beyond the particular social and political realities of the world it depicts.

Before going into more detail on this point, it's important to notice the Central European nature of this bureaucracy. It is all-encompassing and powerful—with agents in every pub, judicial panels to pass sentence on mere suspicion, prisons and lunatic asylums to take care of trouble makers, and the authority to send people off to war. The opening scene in the pub may be humorous enough, but we learn later, almost casually, that the trivial incident has sent the landlord to jail for ten years on the accusations of a police informer. We are not dealing here with some variety of genial incompetence which we can turn our back on much of the time if we find it frustrating or which we can fight against with a meaningful legal apparatus (as is possible, for example, in some Western countries, at least in fiction). This bureaucracy reaches into all aspects of life, ready to seize the powerless citizen at any moment and consign him to some rubric determined by the incomprehensible machinery by which it works, and individuals are powerless to change or even to challenge it (Hašek is a very different writer from his contemporary Kafka, but in this respect their fictional worlds are recognizably similar). Hence, the army and its activities behind the lines symbolize a good deal more than simply military procedures in the initial stages of combat. The military structure of authority and its characteristic way of acting here are a manifestation of modern social authority itself—and Hašek's attack on the idiocy of what's going on has set in its sights a great deal more than simply the officious fools of 1914.

Those people who wanted the novel banned in the newly independent Czechoslovakia (after World War I) and elsewhere, some of whom succeeded, were quite correct to see it as more than a satire on war and militarism (although it is that, as well, of course)—the book is a very funny but

unrelentingly savage assault on the very idea of bureaucratic officialdom as a human enterprise conferring benefits on those who live under its control and, equally important, on the various justifications such bureaucracies offer for their own existence. What Hašek is ridiculing here lies close to the heart of any complex modern institution. It's not difficult to see why it should create such resentment and alarm in a state whose major concern was to foster among its citizens a new sense of their collective Czechoslovak identity and cooperation with the new government.

Hašek's satire on the bureaucracy is, for the most part, energetic and relatively simple. He pictures almost all of its practitioners, from the emperor, to the clergy, to the lowest of petty officials, as stupid incompetents, drunks, full of their own importance, often explicitly racist in their dealings with particular ethnic groups, and hopelessly venal. Their major concern appears to be to protect and personally benefit from their positions, and to do that they will play by the rules of the game whose larger purpose (if it has one at all) they can only articulate with various versions of the official line. To this enterprise they bring no special talents and no wider vision whatsoever. In many cases, they cope with any challenge or obstacle to their authority with mere aggression (there is a great deal of causal verbal and physical abuse in the treatment of subordinates and the general public here) and repetitive formulations of rhetorical slogans or official procedures (there's a strong sense here that the officials simply cannot think beyond such aggressively asserted formulaic defences of their own positions).

So thoroughgoing is this satirical critique that it seems clear Hašek is not attacking a particular version of state bureaucracy nor seeking to correct its defects with some alternative vision of how things should be organized more effectively: this book is taking aim at bureaucracy itself—at the very idea that such a way of doing things confers any benefits whatsoever. We are not dealing here with a foolish state of affairs created by the outbreak of war; rather, the war is simply an extension of what always exists in a complex modern state (perhaps the war is simply one more manifestation of that way of thinking). The condition of war simply makes the system's cruel absurdities more obvious.

This idea is reinforced by the sense we get of Hašek's intense dislike of any of the traditional justifications for organized control of human beings, whether judicial, religious, political, or military (and, perhaps more importantly, his assault on people's faith in such justifications). His narrative is constantly mocking symbols for such control—everything from crucifixes and prayers to official images and law books (the novel begins with a discussion about a fly shitting on a portrait of the emperor). These signs of authority are all officially sanctioned, but no one believes in them; people simply use them as instruments of their own authority in a system which reinforces itself by reflex appeals to such traditions. This point is obvious enough in the lengthy treatment of Otto Katz in Part I, where the drunken Catholic priest (an ex-Jew) desperately scrambles for anything at all to use as the holy symbols necessary for the religious service over which he has to preside—a sporting cup for the chalice, machine oil for the last rites, and so on—these are essential to what he does, but fake materials will do just as well as the real thing because what matters is the bureaucratic public ritual and people's faith in it—any genuine spiritual or ideal meaning has long since disappeared.

This continued mocking of official symbols emerges time and again in particular moments. Here, for example, is the description of Judge Advocate Ruller's office:

A volume of the legal code lay before him, and a half-consumed glass of tea stood on top of it. On the table on the right stood a crucifix made out of imitation ivory with a dusty Christ, who looked despairingly at the pedestal of his cross, on which there were ashes and cigarette stubs.

To the renewed regret of the crucified Jesus Judge Advocate Ruller was at this very moment flicking the ash from another cigarette on to the pedestal of the crucifix. With his other hand he was raising the glass of tea, which had got stuck to the legal code. (388-9)

Here Jesus is once again before the judge—but there's no drama in the confrontation, because Jesus has become

nothing more than a dusty accessory of a soulless bureaucracy. If the statue is part of the official trappings, it might as well serve as an ashtray, since whatever sense of religious commitment or social justice it once communicated (if it ever did) has long disappeared from this environment. For the same reason, the legal code might as well be a coaster—if it is now incapable of protecting people in a world of bureaucratic directives, at least it can protect the table top from stains. Interestingly enough, the book which really interests the judge at this point is one full of pictures of male and female sexual organs “with appropriate rhymes which the scholar Franz S. Krause discovered on the walls of the W.C.s of the West Berlin railway station” (389).

[Incidentally, the number of references to the story of Jesus in the novel is interesting and significant. There’s no doubt that Hašek is extremely hostile to organized religion, particular to Roman Catholicism, which he never tires of attacking as hopelessly corrupt, and, at times to the very idea of religious belief. But the network of references to Jesus (and to Pontius Pilate) suggests that his attitude to Christianity as exemplified in the story of Jesus might be quite different].

THE ATTACK ON OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

What’s particularly intriguing about this sustained attack on the ways in which the state apparatus controls the common people is Hašek’s attention to language itself, the official use of words to impose on the people a false idea of what’s going on and of themselves. This point is obvious enough in the ridiculous details of army directives, the mockery of the systems of classification, the artificial, strained rhetoric of heroism used by the newspapers and army dispatches to “glorify” the enterprise and justify the deaths, and so on—all standard fare in any satire of warfare.

This aspect of official narratives is satirized throughout the book, especially in the newspaper reports of heroic valour and, above all, in the figure of the volunteer soldier Marek, who has been assigned the official role of battalion historian. He spends his time “writing up in advance the heroic deeds of the battalion” (581). His work can impose on the chaotically absurd flux of events a “systemized

systematic system of writing the battalion's history" which exemplifies the highest virtues of traditional military heroism, but only because he's writing the narratives as hyperbolic fictions, composed in advance of the events, without regard to any of the realities of war. He can do that, of course, because what matters in such history is that the rhetoric be consistently celebratory. The facts of the case are irrelevant. Once history gets divorced from what really goes on, it might as well be written in advance of the events:

"Give me the name of a sergeant major of the 12th company.—Houska? Good. Houska now will have his head blown off by that mine. His head flies off, but his body still marches one or two steps forwards, takes aim and shoots down an enemy plane. It's quite obvious that in the future these victories and their repercussions will have to be celebrated within the family circle at Schönbrunn [the residence of the imperial family]." (581)

"These virtues, in which the battalion excels, will lead it on to glorious deeds for the victory and blest happiness of our Empire. May all follow its example!" (584)

Hašek's, however, is concerned with more than simply army prose. He's attempting to undermine any official narrative whatsoever, that is, any use of language handed down from above which is designed to get people to accept a particular vision of their own identity.

We know from the "Epilogue to Part I" that one of Hašek's intentions in this novel is to make sure that the Czech colloquial vernacular—warts and all—gains a foothold in modern Czech prose, so that the language of the people does not somehow get relegated to an inferior position by those who wish the development of modern Czech culture (an urgent political priority at the time in the newly independent state) to adopt an exclusively polite and well-

educated tone.

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

Hašek is determined that in the literature of the new republic the people's voice, even at its most colloquial, ungrammatical, vituperative, scatological, and shocking, will be heard in their own idiom and will not be ignored or sidelined by an national agenda dominated by intellectuals and modernist artists publishing manifestoes in lofty prose.

[In this respect I'm reminded of certain arguments in French-Canadian culture in decades past about the relative importance of official French and the language of the common people in Quebec, *joual*. These arguments were decisively affected (in some places put to rest) by the work of Michel Tremblay, whose plays not only celebrated *joual* but (in translation) became internationally famous and popular (particularly in Scotland, interestingly enough).]

But Hašek's assault on the "salon" he refers to involves more than bringing the expressive idioms of the streets to the centre of human interactions. It also means going after many of the hallowed Czech myths so zealously promoted in the language of high culture in the previous fifty years (at least) by those hoping to create a "lofty" historical identity for the emerging Czech nation. It's as if he deliberately intends to mock those traditions as completely meaningless to the modern realities of Czech working-class life.

For example, putting invocations to St John of Nepomuck, the Catholic saint whose cult worship was a major element in Czech Catholicism (especially among the peasants), in the mouth of a drunken venal priest, an ethnic German who was once a Jew and whom Švejk is trying to beat into compliance (114) or calling a Czech patron saint a "robber" who spent his time "murdering and exterminating the Baltic

Slavs” (126) or comparing Švejk’s actions favourably against those of a fairy tale by the beloved nineteenth-century writer Božena Němcová (142) or having someone mistake a piss pot for the helmet of St. Wenceslas (602)—moments like these have the effect of savagely ridiculing some cherished traditions of the “high” culture at the heart of the National Revival (the official attempt to forge a distinctly Czech identity). Hašek wants to expose and mock such national stories (all of which were expressly created or interpreted to serve a political agenda, some more than others).

In pursuit of this aim, Hašek can be truly disgusting and amusing, nowhere more so than when he denigrates the most important legend of all, the story of Princess Libuše, allegedly the first ruler of the Czechs, who in a sacred vision foretold the greatness of Prague and chose the first dynastic king of Bohemia (Libuše is celebrated in Smetana’s opera named after her, a highpoint of the National Revival):

“At Na Bojišti there lived in a cellar apartment a crossing-sweeper called Macháček. He used to blow his nose on the window and smear it round so cleverly that he made out of it a picture of Libuše prophesying Prague’s glory. For every picture like that his wife gave him such an honorarium that he had a mug like a barn door. But he wouldn’t give it up and went on perfecting himself in it. It was the only pleasure he had, you see.” (719)

The most beloved figures of the official versions of Czech history serve to bring joy into the man’s life only because he can turn them into snot sketches on glass—an “artistic” process that gives him so much pleasure he’s prepared to undergo repeated beatings rather than give it up. The humour here may be coarse, but it’s brutally effective. After laughing at this, who can hear Libuše’s name or see an “official” picture of her without recalling what this working man did with her image? So much for the high cultural road to nationhood.

In his introduction to the Penguin edition of Hašek’s novel, the translator, Cecil Parrott, calls attention to the way in which the famous illustrations by Josef Lada also serve this

purpose, combining "the primitive and the popular" in a "revolt against the glorification of Czech history and legend" (xix). Like Švejk's stories, the pictures constantly insist on the merits of a simple, bold, and unpretentious style illustrating everyday incidents. They also, of course, are masterpieces of satiric caricature (particularly of bureaucratic officials and dissolute priests, among others).

So there's a great deal in this novel subverting the idea not just of any "official" or "lofty" language or symbolism in Czech literature and art, but of any authoritative images of national identity anywhere. The specifically Czech references, like those mentioned above, may well escape the non-Czech reader, but Hašek's comic inventiveness is by no means confined to those, so that this part of his purpose quickly and continuously transcends the specific Czech environment in which and for which it was written.

[It may be worth noting here that Hašek's attitude to the lofty official prose of the modern bureaucracy is part of a widespread and significant phenomenon, the way in which after brutal modern wars many people are very suspicious of language itself, the vehicle by which they were deceived into thinking the brutality they now have to come to grips with was a "worthy" chapter in a "noble" enterprise. In the context of central Europe, this point may help to explain some of the appeal of Communism between the wars. That belief system offered a vocabulary which had not been corrupted by World War I, since the Russian Revolution had led to the quick withdrawal of Russia from the war.]

THE BODY POLITIC

One of Hašek's most characteristic ways of highlighting the satiric follies of bureaucratic officialdom is to constantly confront us with its most obvious counter-force, the physical demands of life itself, as these are manifested by food, drink, and the body's response to its basic needs—particularly vomiting and shitting. There are few (if any) great novels where the latter two activities are featured so prominently.

The most basic bodily functions have always been the stuff of effective hard-hitting satire (at least since Aristophanes) for there are few more graphic (and shockingly amusing)

ways of alerting an audience to the importance of unmasking human vanity than by confronting us with the activities which, for all our delusions of grandeur, are common to us all and which we may like to hide but can never eliminate. And there is thus no more immediate way to alert us to the absurd pretensions of those who would subordinate what human beings truly are to the language of their official systems than by juxtaposing the neat language of official prose to the messy realities of the human body. When, for example, the disgustingly drunk (and vomiting) Otto Katz mutters his prayers and giggles or the officious Lieutenant Dub gives a rousing military speech to the dirt on the road while lying in a cart because he has to throw up after too much drink (632) or Cadet Biegler shits his pants while dreaming of himself as a general in heaven confronting the Lord (498-499) or when the drunken cook Jurajda proclaims his faith in the harmony of the universe from the ditch he has fallen into (653), the satiric point is clear enough. Whatever the realities of life may be, they simply cannot be contained or defined by rhetorically pious formulations handed down from on high. One of the most amusingly ridiculous attempts of the military hierarchy to impose order is the emphasis on repeated enemas or the demand from a visiting general that the troops all shit on schedule—the victory over the Italians depends on that more than on anything else.

The novel makes clear that the need to shit is something that truly unites human beings, linking the Emperor, “whom they can’t let out of the rears [the latrine] in case he should shit up the whole of Schönbrunn [the royal palace],” to the officers and ordinary soldiers, even to the dying and the dead:

“There’s a lot of shitting in every battle,” the man from the escort chimed in again. “Not long ago one of the chaps who was wounded told us in Budějovice that when they were advancing he shitted three times in succession. . . . And a dead man, who lay on top of the cover with his legs hanging down and half of whose head had been torn off by shrapnel, just as though he’d been cut in half, he too in the last moment shitted so much that it ran from his trousers over his boots into the trenches mixed with blood. And half his skull

together with his brains lay right underneath. A chap doesn't even notice how it happens to him." (346)

And as the troops passed through and camped in the neighbourhood there could be seen everywhere little heaps of human excrement of international extraction belonging to all peoples of Austria, Germany and Russia. The excrement of soldiers of all nationalities and of confessions lay side by side or heaped on top of one another without quarrelling among themselves. (598)

Such an emphasis, it should be clear, is not seeking to reduce life to some scatological lowest common denominator but rather to insist that life is essentially a shared physical experience which transcends rank, nationality, religion, and any dogmatic attempt to impose artificial differences on people with arbitrary classifications (the essence of bureaucratic thinking). The physical reality of life (symbolized most graphically by shit and shitting) is what unites us—all other verbal definitions, especially those from some official history or myth are simply lies.

That may well be the reason why in this book the moments which register as the most relaxed and most truly human interactions tend to take place when people are enjoying the most basic physical pleasures—drinking, preparing food, eating together, or sharing a cigarette. At such times, for example, a Czech and a Hungarian can forget their ethnic and political differences and share their resources to prolong the moment which, for all the language differences that make any normal conversation impossible, insists upon their common situation and nature. And if that means they miss several trains they are supposed to catch in order to carry out the instructions of superiors, well, too bad.

Even the comradeship of the prison cell arises from the inescapable sense of each other's physical intimacy, an unavoidable recognition of a shared humanity which in this place, permeated by the sights and smells of physical life, cannot be concealed behind the customary labels or uniforms people are given to distinguish them from one another, making some more important than others:

Above the doors in an aperture in the wall a paraffin lamp, fitted with a protective grille, emitted a feeble light and smoked. The smell of paraffin mingled with the natural exhalations of unwashed human bodies and the stench of the bucket, which every time it was used had its surface stirred up and added a new wave of stink to no. 16.

The bad food made the digestive process difficult for everyone, and the majority suffered from wind, which they released into the stillness of the night, answering each other with these signals to the accompaniment of various witticisms. (95)

Translating bad food to farts and then to shared jokes can happen, but only if we are fully human and not overwhelmed by a sense of our own importance. The jail may stink of the shit bucket, but perhaps that odour is associated with the sense of a great communal equality and humanity only available where no one can pretend to be more important than he, in fact, is. That may be why it is typical of inmates in the jail to share experiences and to sing—not doleful tunes of their common misery but all sorts of energetic songs which celebrate their moment of companionship.

[Incidentally, the above passage is a useful place to insert the parenthetical observation that while Hašek's style is not noted for its descriptive power, there are moments when the particular details of a setting are especially evocative—there's a sense that the narrator has been there and seen what he is writing about (as in the details of the lamp and the bucket in the above quotation)]

THE GOOD SOLDIER

But for all the above-mentioned features of the satirical style, the fame of this novel undoubtedly arises most obviously from the central character himself. Švejk is one of those rare characters in fiction who acquire cultural status as heroes of folklore, above and beyond their own stories (in English literature, for example, the supreme example is Shakespeare's Falstaff), largely because, however convincing they may or may not be as consistent characters in the text,

they come to symbolize something about the life of a people (or people in general).

It's possible to spend a great deal of time unnecessarily worrying about Švejk as a particular character. Is he an idiot or only pretending to be an idiot? Is he an educated man or not? Has he a deliberately contrived scheme for thwarting the military bureaucracy or is he really a credulous and enthusiastic supporter of authority? Is he merely lucky or an expert manipulator of situations? And so on. These questions legitimately arise from the novel, since the portrayal of Švejk alters our perception of him from one incident to the next, and, if we wish to form a coherent picture of a complex and consistent character, we may well have some difficulty deciding (as we do with Falstaff as well, of course, and many other great fictional characters). How can we reconcile someone who, on his own, seems to be incapable of walking a few kilometres without getting lost or caring about getting lost, even on a road he's already travelled (as in Part II) with the apparently much shrewder and decisive man in certain adventures in Part I and later?

The narrator doesn't give us much help here, since we are very rarely offered a glimpse into what's going on in Švejk's head. We hear what he says and see what he does, but the motives are rarely clear. Early on, we get some sense that he is a simpleton—as, for example, in his patriotic outbursts on the way to the recruiting station in a wheelchair or in the narrator's comments like the following: "His simple face, smiling like a full moon, beamed with enthusiasm. Everything was so clear to him" (13). However, at times the narrator suggests there's a hint of some strategy at work behind the apparent artlessness of his answers: " 'Humbly report, sir,' said Švejk deliberately, *staking everything on a single card. . .* " (88, italics added). The novel even calls attention to this apparent discrepancy:

Half of them insisted that Švejk was 'a half-wit',
while the other half insisted that he was a
scoundrel who was trying to make fun of the war.
(76)

Unlike other heroes of similar novels (e.g., Huckleberry Finn or Gulliver) there is no sense that Švejk is learning anything as he goes or is developing a new understanding of himself

or his surroundings (growing more aware of particular problems or developing a sharper critical faculty or developing new strategies for coping or even reflecting very much about what's going on in his life). In fact, Švejk's inner life, how he really feels about his experiences or what he is learning about himself or others or his real opinions of the bigger picture, is largely irrelevant. In the same way we learn very little of his past, so little, in fact, that when we do get a clear detail very late in the novel, the post card written to him by an old girl friend (who wrote the note, interestingly enough, while sitting in the outhouse), the information comes as rather a surprise.

The closest Švejk comes to offering something like a “philosophy of life” is the following remark:

‘Jesus Christ was innocent too,’ said Švejk, ‘and all the same they crucified him. No one anywhere has ever worried about a man being innocent. *Maul halten und weiter dienen!* [Keep quiet and continue to serve]—as they used to tell us in the army. That’s the best and finest thing of all.’ (19, my translation of the German)

But there’s little indication that this amounts to anything more than a casual remark in a particular conversation, and certainly that notion of keeping one’s mouth shut is hardly characteristic of the man (unless he means that one should never proclaim one's innocence or complain about injustice). The sense of resentment conveyed by the comparison with Jesus Christ hardly squares with the character who, for the most part, cheerfully accepts whatever situation he is thrown into. So the idea that Švejk has something as coherent as a “philosophy of life” which he brings to each adventure is elusive and ambiguous.

That very ambiguity, in fact, may well be an important ingredient in the character’s fame. Rather than being a sharply delineated, particular character, Švejk is an Everyman, a composite of very ordinary characteristics, bringing to each situation a range of responses from shrewdness to stupidity (real and apparent), from enthusiastic compliance to genial indifference. The sum total of his attributes may not add up to a harmonious and convincing whole—a coherent and particular individual

identity—but it symbolizes the resources ordinary human beings bring to what is, in effect, repeated confrontations with something cruel, oppressive, and absurd. Perhaps that's why he's acquired legendary status.

It's important to notice that Švejk spends almost the entire novel carrying out orders or being told what to do by people who have official authority to compel and to punish. If they want to sell him to someone else in a game of cards, there's nothing he can do about it. He has no real freedom to make decisions about any of the most important issues of his life. In fact, apart from the opening scenes, he has no life of his own: he has to participate in the life other people have determined for him. There are some options within that life, of course (especially the option about how to respond to compulsion), but the basic conditions are set. He has no private sphere of operation, no home, and no set of intimate relationships he is trying to protect or get back to or even think about. Hence, his entire life, as the novel depicts it, is determined by others, by his superiors, by the system.

Even Švejk's social identity, like that of other working-class people in the novel, is determined by the bureaucracy. He is some official's batman or a regimental orderly, without the freedom to choose. His function is to accept the label pinned on him by others, to obey orders without question, to carry out duties for other people, and to go where they tell him. That is a fate he shares with all other lower ranks in the book. The only real freedom he experiences as an observer of people making choices about who they are or want to be occurs, ironically enough, in the lunatic asylum:

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

And, of course, why not? In a world ruled by an absurd bureaucracy in control of everyone, those who insist on the

freedom to be whoever they want to be and to say whatever they want to say are obviously “insane.”

But while Švejk willingly accepts the labels the system places on him, he is impervious to what they mean. He doesn't allow the way he is classified to alter how he goes about his work or his attitude toward others. He'll accept that he's now a batman or a prisoner or a certified lunatic or an orderly or whatever—he'll even boast about it—and he'll follow the orders he's given. But the position has no effect on how he thinks of himself or how he interacts with his superiors or his fellow soldiers. He will carry out orders in his own manner, and if things go wrong, well, that's just how it is. Hence, he's always in difficulty when he has to deal with the life blood of the bureaucracy—paperwork or phone calls or precise timetables, things which demand that he pay close attention and care about a particular outcome for the sake of a larger enterprise. In that sense, he ironically subverts the bureaucracy by accepting its authority, sometimes enthusiastically, and continuing to be himself within the limits imposed. So he is both a willing servant and a subversive agent.

That point is made clear enough in the continuing attacks throughout the novel on the major tool of bureaucratic control—the language of official business as manifested in the various rules and regulations and the endless flow of instructions from higher up the structure. The function of this language is to impose order and standardize procedures, in order to reduce human activity to a coordinated and efficient response in obedience to a superficially rational system. As the captain of the gendarmerie at Pisek explains: “If we want to win the war . . . ‘a’ must be ‘a’, ‘b’ ‘b’; and everywhere there must be a dot on the ‘i’” (279). But the attempt always fails, at least with Švejk, in part because the bureaucratic instructions are often incomprehensibly complex (as with the system of codes) and in part because his very human nature simply ignores them or is too involved with something else to pay sufficient attention or else because he takes the instructions so literally that the result is counter-productive (for example, when he eagerly provides so many dogs to the police spy that the man ends up being eaten by them).

Because Švejk complies so enthusiastically with the system (even when he's imprisoned or committed into an asylum) and candidly confesses to everything he's done, showing no trace of guile or hostility, he constantly frustrates the bureaucrats who have to deal with him. Again and again, they simply don't know what to do about him. The bureaucracy, of course, deals with people by categorizing them. Švejk has been certified as an idiot (20), but he doesn't seem to fit that category, so he must be "traitor" or a "malingerer." But no one is more openly keen about participating in the army than Švejk, a response which the officials find incomprehensible (since they characteristically adopt the attitude that the ordinary people they are supposed to serve are all liars, cheats, or hostile to their efforts). So the bureaucracy is always interrogating Švejk, trying to determine how to classify him. But interrogating Švejk simply leads to confusion because he agrees with everything the interrogator says and willingly signs his confession without even reading it. So that means he must be a "lunatic" beyond medical help or an extremely effective and clever spy. The police try probing him—accusing him of being "ironic" in his patriotic enthusiasm (45)—but that label simply does not hold up because Švejk maintains such a totally innocent appearance and such unambiguously candid enthusiasm for the Emperor that no one can conceive of his harbouring a secret agenda (and we get little sense that that is the case).

This habit of overeager enthusiastic compliance with the system, as Joseph Skvorecky points out, is the crucial part of Švejk's character, and it serves to highlight "the absurdity of ideological orthodoxy" (42). To display the sort of physical and verbal cooperation Švejk routinely displays and to bring about the usually counterproductive results such a response generates (from the point of view of the bureaucrats) repeatedly reminds us of the insanity at the heart of the entire bureaucratic structure. This may even be something the bureaucrats themselves sense. Their constant baffled frustration and impotence when confronted with Švejk suggest that they, too, sense how impossible such a response is to the world they serve. They can't process him because they can only deal with normal human beings, who are inherently hostile or indifferent to the larger system (a response which is natural enough, given that the system, as

Hašek presents it, acts to warp, suppress, and deny common humanity).

Švejk, of course, is forced to deal with many uncomfortable situations—notably his frequent visits to various jails. He endures them all, but not with Stoic passivity or resentment or dreams of freedom. He brings to each encounter an unflinching vitality and interest. Jail for him is another unique experience, and if the wood on the bed this time has been planed, well, that’s something to celebrate (37). He needs very little to feel content, free of anxiety, and interested in his surroundings, particularly if there are other people there with whom he can share a conversation or a song. Švejk’s immediate physical surroundings are always a source of immense interest to him (no wonder he cannot help pulling the emergency alarm on the train).

The most obvious means Švejk uses to cope is to talk—he loves engaging in conversation with anyone and always has ready his amazing store of narratives about people he has known or heard about or invented. Given the chance, he can simply overwhelm listeners in a hurry and reduce them to frustration. Here again there’s something of an ambiguity surrounding this habit of impromptu story telling: Is it just his natural predisposition or something more subtle, a deliberate tactic to get his own way—as Švejk tells Lieutenant Lukáš, “you must talk to people, sir, and go on talking to them until the customer gets completely crazy”?

There may even be a sense here, especially in the above remark, that Švejk is able to deal with the official lies which prop up the bureaucracy (and even declare his faith in them) because in his civilian life he was such a successful liar himself. He invented genealogies designed to dress up canine mutts in the finery of some noble pedigree and spent his time trying to persuade people to accept ugly mongrels as thoroughbred prizes. Smothering them with his narratives is for him a sales tactic. So he understands better than anyone the deceptive power of stories and is not going to be fooled. He loves to tell stories, and he has to take part in enterprises in the service of someone else’s story, but he’s not going to derive a sense of who he is from any narrative. Early on a doctor asks him if he believes in the end of the world. Švejk responds, “I’d have to see that end first. . . .

But certainly I shan't see it tomorrow" (29). That indicates as clearly as anything an underlying scepticism, not just about official versions of history, but about written accounts about anything. Švejk lives too much in the moment to anchor his faith on any coherent accounts of the past or the future.

But Švejk's stories have a wider significance. In a sense, they are reminders of something linked to the point I made about the various attempts to construct official narratives of imperial greatness or military heroism or Czech ethnic identity. Švejk's inexhaustible collection of tales about ordinary people keeps reminding the reader that the realities of life cannot be reduced to a single narrative uniting all people, because life consists of an infinite number of unique narratives, each of which is more persuasive and interesting than any bureaucratic propaganda. Cumulatively, Švejk's stories (whether true or not) reinforce an impression of the complex anarchic realities of life—anarchic in the sense that the simplest details of ordinary experience are always escaping out from under the desire of official narratives to shape, define, and classify life in simpler unambiguous terms. And there is an infinite number of such stories, which are not sentimental reflections or illustrations or parables celebrating the virtues of the simple life but rather straightforward accounts of generally very mundane details of how people really live. Many of them (whether true or not) arise out of often painful realities. Perhaps that's what compels the attention of the listeners (including eventually Lieutenant Lukáš)—in the entirely artificial and apparently ordered world created by the official prose of bureaucratic departments (where one has to live for a lie) there is a fascination with the unruly details of ordinary human experience.

AN ANARCHIST VISION OR BLACK COMEDY?

Traditional satire, even the harshest, generally arises out of a firm conviction of a moral alternative or a moral standard against which the folly of the satiric targets is measured. The presence of this standard offers a vision of how we ought to live our lives and, in the midst of a work which is always attacking and tearing down human pride, pictures a more meaningful alternative. In that sense, attempting to

destroy or correct old ways can be a way of encouraging us to create something better.

However, if we ask what creative moral vision underlies *The Good Soldier Švejk*, we cannot arrive at an answer as readily as we can with, say, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or Aristophanes' *Frogs* (not that these works are entirely unambiguous, of course). For in Hašek's novel, we are not given any very clear direction on how we ought to live our lives. There is certainly a very strong sense of human folly, greed, and cruelty, but is there anything in the novel beyond that?

Švejk himself is not too much help here, since (as mentioned) he brings no "philosophy" or faith in anything to his experience. Nor, it seems clear, does he change in any significant way. In this picaresque novel, the hero is not learning as he goes or developing a more critical awareness of himself or society or even displaying a desire for anything very different. He's coping as he has always done, moment by moment, and is surviving with his sense of himself and his interest in life intact.

In fact, it is possible to see in Švejk one of the most famous examples of a very modern form of comedy, what has come to be called "black humour," a sense of the hilarity deployed in the face of a world which is basically absurd. This form of satiric humour arises, not from the discrepancy between how we ought to behave and the way we do behave, but from a pervading sense of the ridiculousness of everything. It's a response to life which affirms no coherent moral alternative simply because there is no such thing: the very faith in such a possibility is as absurd as everything else. The laughter we share is simply a way of imposing some human awareness on the total absence lasting values. It's a way of "retreating with style from the chaos" (a phrase Tom Stoppard, interestingly enough another writer with a Czech ancestry, uses to describe some of his work).

In his remarkable book *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell discusses the origins of black humour in the trenches of World War I. He describes how observers visiting the front and expecting to see a vision worthy of hell were often astounded to discover that the soldiers were howling with laughter. But the humour was something

different from traditional sources of amusement. Here everything was equally ridiculous (the war, king, country, officialdom, concepts of duty and patriotism, and so on). The laughter, in a sense, was the last-ditch antidote to despair, a human response to something that simply could not be confronted directly or even understood (not unlike whistling in the dark). The theatre of the absurd and a lot of modern humour (from *Monty Python* to *Saturday Night Live*) stem directly from this very new sense of the ultimate absurdity of any system of meaning, any inherited values. There is no exit from the absurdity (of the sort, for example, that Yossarian finds in *Catch-22* or Gulliver discovers at the end of his voyages), so the laughter is not taking us anywhere. But it does serve to pass the time and affirm something momentarily shared (like the humour in *Waiting for Godot*).

Much of Hašek's novel would seem to fit into this tradition. Certainly, if we look for alternatives in the story to this pervasive sense of absurdity, there's not much to build on. From time to time we do derive a sense that among themselves the common people have a way of dealing with each other which is much more human than anything that goes on in the bureaucratic system. Ordinary people here share food, drink, money, tobacco, and each other's company freely, often under difficult circumstances. There's a spontaneous generosity at work, and on at least one occasion we hear about an informal network of peasants helping those who have run foul of the system (243). We are told that Lieutenant Lukáš, one of the very few officials who is not entirely ridiculous, is a "decent" man because he's originally a peasant. And so on. Thus, there may be a sense from time to time that the problem lies with the bureaucracy rather than with human nature and that if we could only live in a much more anarchic way, letting ordinary people be themselves, human beings could get along. Perhaps there's a hint of some corrigible historical reasons for the present situation in the title of the book used as the basis for military codes, *The Sins of the Father* (466).

There is, however, very little sense that such a freedom from the system is possible. For there is no underground exit from the bureaucratic labyrinth. It's there to stay, in one form or another, and the novel has nothing to suggest or

point to by way of an alternative. So the absurdity which governs human society is a permanent feature of existence. Humour is a way of coping moment by moment, but it has nothing to offer as an alternative vision. Life remains as cruel and absurd after the joke or the story as it was before (a point which the movement back and forth between Švejk's adventures and the grimmer tones of the narrator emphasizes for us).

Perhaps that is the reason why we don't feel so disappointed that Hašek didn't live to complete his novel. Given what we have, it's difficult to imagine that it can lead to any definite conclusion beyond the tragic-comic sense that life simply goes on (and on) in the same way it has always done. Švejk has no home to return to, and he is not changing in any way that indicates he will at some point come to a fuller understanding of how things could and should be better and what he might do about the control the system exerts over him and others (such understanding simply does not exist, except as an illusion).

Parrott observes in his introduction that Švejk's response to experience has a particular relevance to the Czech people's sense of themselves, so much so that the term *Švejkism* has been widely applied to the national character (xv). For their history has made them (until very recently) the subjects of complex and oppressive bureaucratic systems of various political stripes (Austrian imperialism, Fascism, Communism), and their traditional response has generally been compliance rather than overt rebellion, a response generously larded with humour and passive resistance. How true this is may well be open to debate, but the fact that the term exists and that the book continues to be celebrated as the great Czech novel would seem to indicate that Hašek has indeed tapped into something close to the heart of his people.