

INTRODUCTION

Karel Čapek has remained, over the decades since his death in 1938, the great national writer of his Czech people. At the same time, he has also enjoyed special favor in the English-speaking world, to the extent that all of his major works are available in English translations.

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If we are to understand the secret of such popularity, an answer is not easy to give. Čapek turns out to have written many types of literature and to have meant many things to many people. One thinks first of his utopian or, to use today's terminology, dystopian works (a dystopia is a utopia gone bad): *Rossum's Universal Robots* (1920), the novel *The Brothers or Large* (1922), or the somewhat later *The Newts* (1936). These works, for all their penetrating insight into how human progress can be our own worst enemy, are also admirable for other qualities: the dramatic expressionism of *R.U.R.*, with its robots marching in step to epitomize the dangers of mechanization; the trenchant satire and parody of the two novels, the first burlesquing a world of technological overproduction, the second describing man's subjugation by a species of giant, intelligent newts which mankind had previously subjugated for its own industrial and military purposes. In a Swiftian vein, these novels mock the seeming achievement of our modern, civilized and technological world.

Standing next to this theme of the disasters facing our modern civilization is the theme of war. It first appears in