There are times when, after a work has entered first into a national canon and then into World Literature, its later influence masks both its unique brilliance and the manner in which it develops an aesthetic as a response to the tradition out of which it emerges. This is especially true in the case of Jaroslav Hašek’s comic novel Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války (The Fortunes of the Good Soldier Švejk during the World War, hereafter Osudy). Although Hašek’s novel has been situated, predictably and properly enough, within the twentieth-century Czech literary and political context, there has been almost no corresponding effort to situate it within the broader Czech literary tradition. The seemingly peripheral but critical result of this neglect is that the aesthetic value of Hašek’s novel has been overlooked. Therefore, I want to situate Osudy in relation to the Czech prose tradition inaugurated by Božena Němcová’s novel Babička (Granny). My contention is that a recontextualization of Hašek’s novel within this tradition will reveal its formal concern as the relation of irony to the prosaic, which I call prosaic irony. Occurring in the divide between linguistic meaning developed through everyday use and meaning imposed by a dominant ideological metanarrative, prosaic irony is simultaneously a structuring principle, a narrative mode, and a means of subversion in Hašek’s novel. This examination will lead to a re-reading of the novel that suggests an overlooked element; in short, Osudy critiques and resists ideology embedded in familiar narrative structures and discloses the inability of these hegemonic narrative structures and discourse ever to become fully totalizing.

Three factors obscure Osudy’s position in the broader Czech literary tradition. First, the apparent influence of the Švejk archetype in twentieth-century Czech literature and cinema tends to preclude recognition of Osudy’s response to the tradition of the Czech novel. Second, the vulgar language of the characters makes it easy to dismiss the novel’s aesthetic merit; none other than René Wellek, a native Czech who helped found Comparative Literature in the United States, has described the novel as “not much of a work of art, [and] full of low humour and cheap propaganda” (41). Finally, in its twentieth-century reception, the novel was often cited by the politically committed who tried to interpret the actions of the protagonist via their particular political ideologies. In re-situating Osudy within its national
context, I shall show that it is much more than a profane parody of the Austrian military apparatus. Instead, I argue, it is a novel that performs its subversion of hegemonic histories, nationalist obligations, and narrative conventions by means of prosaic irony.

My conception of prosaic irony derives from Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson’s coining of the term “prosaics,” which they define as both “a theory of literature that privileges prose in general and the novel in particular” and “a form of thinking that presumes the importance of the everyday” (15). For this reason, my use of the term prosaic irony rests on two important assumptions. First, in opposition to poetry, which is situated more heavily on the metaphoric axis of language, prosaic meaning in both the novel and everyday life rests on an interplay between the numerous, sometimes contradictory significations that occur in the metonymy of language. In Bakhtinian terms, every prosaic utterance occurs within a surplus of contextual signification without which meaning is impossible. Second, prosaic speech occurs in everyday life. The meanings of words and their combinatory possibilities have developed from their everyday use within a particular lived sociolinguistic context; meaning breaks down and nonsense occurs when these contextual premises, whether explicit or implicit, are ignored. This speech is inherently ironic and open to mis- and re-interpretation insofar as we use words not to communicate perfectly, but adequately. For these reasons, prosaic irony acts as a structuring principle because Hašek employs it to comment metatextually and ironically on the nature and style of the novel itself, marking the arbitrary and mediated nature of both the prose utterance and the historical narrative. At the same time, it is a mode that continually generates ironic moments within the text, alternately driving and frustrating its plot. Prosaic irony also acts as an ethical position, insisting on the prosaic as the primary meaning-generating context even in the most catastrophic of situations. Finally, prosaic irony is a tactic for subversion. That is to say, it is an ideological preference and mode of critique reflected on the level of structure. This ideological position—that of the Everyman trapped within the hegemonic network, lacking the wherewithal to escape—is represented by vernacular language and typically expressed through the trope of storytelling.

It is this emphasis on both storytelling and the vernacular that situates Osudy within the larger tradition of Czech literature. Nineteenth-century Czech literature is intimately bound up with the question of nationalism because the latter’s modern form was initially a linguistic phenomenon. After the defeat of the Bohemian Estates by the Habsburgs at the Battle of White Mountain in 1620, the ethnic Czech nobility faced either emigration or execution and were shortly replaced by German-speaking nobility approved by the Habsburgs. The next century and a half marked a long decline for the Czech language, which was, as the historian Hugh Agnew writes, “practically driven from use in the public sphere and was viewed in
most cultured circles as a debased peasants’ jargon” (52). “By the later eighteenth century,” Agnew comments, “faced with a newly flourishing German language and culture in Bohemia, Czech seemed to be on its way to oblivion” (51). In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, however, a small group of Czech intellectuals revived the study of Czech history and language, which led to the first generation of poets writing in Czech in the early nineteenth century and a revived interest in the collection and preservation of Czech folklore that lasted throughout the century.

Because of this interest in folklore, both storytelling and the Czech vernacular are two of the key tropes of the Czech novel at its inception. Less than three decades old by the time of Hašek’s birth, the Czech prose tradition is inaugurated by Božena Němcová’s 1855 novel Babička. Němcová had spent the better part of the decade preceding its creation traveling the Czech and Slovak lands cataloguing the local folklore, and her occupational concerns show in her novel as the narrative frame is frequently interrupted, sometimes for entire chapters, so that the characters may tell stories in Czech peasant vernacular with a natural eloquence that belies their lack of formal education. Storytelling functions in provincial, primarily oral communities as a means of preserving past traditions and wisdom; it represents the transindividual desire of the community to pass fixed truths and meanings from one generation to the next. However, storytelling has a function outside the narrative frame as well because of its obvious political dimension: the desire of these Czechs is also the desire for Czech, both politically and linguistically. As the titular protagonist, reflecting the linguistic nationalism of the Czech Romantics, says, “If a man’s sprung of Czech blood, let him hold by the Czech tongue” (120). Strikingly, in this view the nation changes from an ethnic or a geopolitical concept to a linguistic one, and is performed whenever Czech is spoken. Indeed, the use of Czech cultivates the nation even when the latter as a geopolitical entity does not exist.

The nineteenth-century Czech peasantry are not particularly disposed toward political nationalism, and this is directly reflected in Granny’s ideology. Despite her strictly linguistic nationalism, she accepts the political order as natural and given. Granny fondly recalls an unexpected encounter she once had with the Emperor Josef II, remembered by the Czech peasantry as a benevolent monarch because he abolished serfdom and granted his subjects religious freedom (Součková 12). Indeed, Granny tells a story of when she was a young woman, and had been walking into a town to sell woolen blankets. A young man carrying a telescope approaches her, starts a conversation (in Czech), and even allows her to look through his telescope. The young man is in fact Josef II, but Granny does not recognize him. He asks Granny what she thinks of the Emperor, and she replies, “We pray for him every day, that the Lord God may grant him a long reign, and to his lady mother (panímáma), too” (Němcová 53). The term Granny uses to refer to the Empress, panímáma, is the peasant word for a farmer’s wife. The Emperor then shows his
ability to identify with the peasantry when he tells Granny to remember both him and the Empress in her prayers, repeating the vernacular “panímáma” (Němcová 54). Josef II then departs, giving her a silver thaler and revealing his identity (54). Recalling the encounter, Granny says, “He was a good man, especially to the poor people” (116). Granny’s story is slyly subversive because it suggests that the Emperor’s worth is measured by his kindness toward the Czech peasantry rather than political or military success. More importantly, the Czech vernacular becomes an instrument of subversion here because it effaces distinctions between the emperor and a common peasant.

Although Němcová’s novel emphasizes the political dimension of both storytelling and the vernacular, it depicts a world that seems far removed from that of Hašek. Babička’s titular protagonist is a wise old peasant woman who goes to live with her daughter’s family in rural northeastern Bohemia. Through storytelling, Granny passes her wisdom to the next generation and helps a young man to escape conscription into the army. Late in the novel, an aging Granny increasingly cedes her place of primacy in the narrative. She drifts to the margin of her world, and “looked on as everything around her grew and flowered, [and] she rejoiced in the happiness of those near to her” (Němcová 344), finally dying “a happy woman” (349).

Granny’s death exemplifies Walter Benjamin’s claim that “[I]t is not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death [...] Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell” (151). Peter Brooks clarifies Benjamin’s point, suggesting that “what we seek in narrative fictions is that knowledge of death which is denied to us in our own lives: the death that writes finis to the life and therefore confers on it its meaning [...] only the end can finally determine meaning, close the sentence as a signifying totality” (22). The end of narrative metonymy stops the sliding of meaning. Once all the signifiers have been uttered and the final period placed, the overall meaning of the text (or one’s life read as text) becomes clear. The metonymy of a narrative plot, once completed, acquires transmissibility as metaphor. Here, Granny’s death confers final meaning: she has successfully passed her uniquely Czech wisdom to the next generation. The novel’s idyllic nature may strike readers as unrealistic and escapist, a charge Babička shares with Hašek’s novel, but its realism is saved for the authentic representation of peasant speech. The material fact of the novel itself, reproducing Czech vernacular on paper, performs this transmission of knowledge, rendering Granny herself superfluous, as all storytellers eventually become once their wisdom has achieved transmissibility.

Sixty-six years separate the publication of Babička from that of Osudy, and the historical events of these years have altered the political and ideological situation so drastically that another idyll in the countryside is surely impossible. Neverthe-
less, Hašek’s novel responds to Němcová’s in significant ways. Both demonstrate their respective authors’ ears for dialect, and both rely heavily upon the theme of storytelling as a vehicle for representing it. However, where the stories told by Babička’s characters reflect a pastoral setting, the language of Osudy’s characters, rife with crude subject matter, is that of Prague’s petit-bourgeoisie, whose stories are often told in pubs or even more vulgar places. Němcová’s Granny enjoys a country life relatively safe from the great march of history, save for an idyllic encounter with the Emperor. However, we should note that while Josef II’s reforms may historically have benefited the Czech peasantry, they were not the result of an altruistic feeling toward the Czechs. As an Enlightened monarch, the emperor wished to undermine the Church’s authority in favor of a strong and secular centralized government. In the long reign of Josef II’s grandson Franz-Joseph, these reforms culminated in the pervasive bureaucratic apparatus confronted by Hašek’s protagonist Švejk. Thus, while Granny could interact with Joseph II and even the local Princess, the source of decision-making in Švejk is the inhuman, irrational bureaucracy. Historical figures from Hašek’s time are mentioned in the text, but are never present in the events of the novel and the characters do not encounter them. In their place looms a Habsburg bureaucracy that has extended its reach everywhere, and even the countryside is not a place where one can hide for long.

The affinities between Osudy and Babička are initially undermined by the much cruder style of Hašek’s novel. Yet while Osudy is indeed full of “low humor,” it is a mistake to overlook the way this humor functions in the novel. First, the objectionable dialogue comes not from the narrator, but from the mouths of the novel’s characters, and Hašek clearly wants his readers to recognize this. In the Epilogue to Part I of Osudy, the narrator (also named Jaroslav Hašek) writes that in the novel, “the soldiers and civilian population will go on talking and acting as they do in real life. Life is no finishing school for young ladies . . . and this novel is neither a handbook of drawing-room refinement nor a teaching manual of expressions to be used in polite society. It is a historical picture of a certain period of time” (214). While the sheer absence of situational realism in Švejk’s world attests to its fictional status, Hašek has an ear for stories, and the novel does present a realistic portrayal of the vernacular of Prague’s pub-goers. Indeed, the brilliance of Osudy rests in the frequent ironic juxtaposition of absurdly grotesque situations and the prosaic, yet colorful language of the characters in these situations. It is a mistake to take Hašek’s claims to historical accuracy at face value; the purpose of this epilogue is to call attention to the artificial, mediated nature of this “realistic” language and the ways in which the base nature of this language operates in the novel in terms of both content and form.

Defending Osudy’s lowbrow dialogue, the narrator resorts to a familiar argument in order to ridicule the outrage that his bawdy prose is sure to incite, claiming,
“Where it is necessary to use a strong expression which was actually said, I am not ashamed of reproducing it exactly as it was. I regard the use of polite circumlocutions or asterisks as the stupidest form of sham” (214). While the vulgar speech is indeed an accurate representation of the Prague vernacular, the novel is not, contra Wellek, simply a compendium of vulgar stories and anti-Habsburg propaganda. Rather, in defending the novel’s prosaic and profane language, Hašek calls attention to the dynamic of its interaction with both the background of nightmarish and grotesque situations in the Habsburg Empire and its interaction with the plot. That is to say, Hašek uses this passage to mark not only the mediated and overdetermined nature of the novel’s prosaic dialogue, but also its ironic function within the novel and the way this dialogue structures the novel as a whole.

The irony of Hašek’s novel begins with its title: Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války, literally “the fortunes of the good soldier Švejk during the world war,” implying that this “good soldier” actually fights in the war. Osud, the singular construction of the title’s first word, translates to “fortune,” “destiny,” or “fate,” implying that the hero does not play an active role in driving the narrative forward. Instead, the narrative will guide the protagonist along. Passivity, however, is typical of neither heroes nor good soldiers. Therefore, this choice of wording in the title already undermines the usual assumption that the protagonist’s individual desire will motivate the narrative. Furthermore, osud typically has only a singular construction in Czech, but here it has a plural ending—hence “fortunes”—suggesting an episodic structure rather than one that builds toward its conclusion, raising the possibility that the novel will simply not be coherent as a whole. These etymological implications of the plural osudy undermine the importance of the final words in the title, “za světové války” (“during the world war”), which indicate a bounded temporal period providing a contextual background against which to understand and judge discrete moments. Whereas the individual moments of a novel typically acquire meaning within what Peter Brooks would call the context of the work’s completed “metonymy,” the individual episode is the meaningful unit in the novel, not the World War as a whole. By undermining the meaning-producing effect of the phrase “za světové války,” the title does not simply suggest that the war is meaningless, it also invalidates the tropes and plot structures that typically become guarantors of meaning in a more conventional martial narrative.

The novel’s preface continues this reversal of categories, establishing Švejk as an Everyman figure whose heroism lies in his anonymity. Hašek begins,

neobtížuje nikoho, a není též obtížován žurnalisty, kteří by ho prosili o inter-
view. Kdybyste se ho otázali, jak se jmenuje, odpověděl by vám prostince a
skromně: “Já jsem Švejk…” (9, my italics)

(A great epoch calls for great people. There are unknown heroes, modest, without
the glory and history of Napoleon. An analysis of their character would eclipse
even the glory of Alexander of Macedonia. Today you can meet in the streets
of Prague a poorly-dressed man who does not even know himself what he sig-
nifies in the history of these great new times. He goes humbly on his way, not
bothering anybody, and is not bothered by journalists asking him for an inter-
view. If you asked him his name, he would answer you simply and humbly: “I am
Švejk” [1, my italics])

The adjective used to describe great men, skromní (humble, modest) is repeated
in its adverbial form two more times in this paragraph alone, and twice more in
the rest of the novel's short Preface. Švejk is an object worthy of our fascination
precisely because of the humility of his speech and manner, but in highlighting it,
the narrator invests this prosaic attitude with heightened significance. The soldier's
anonymity is due in part to the fact that he lacks the history of a Napoleon, and in-
deed, there is no desire on the part of journalists to write about him. Suggesting
that Švejk is unsuitable for narration, at least in any conventional sense, the author
concludes the Preface by saying, “Unlike that stupid fellow Herostrates he did not
set fire to the temple of the Goddess in Ephesus just to get himself into the newspa-
pers and school books. And that is enough” (1). Thus, not only is Švejk's anonym-
ous humility significant, his actions invite narration precisely because they are
not the actions that typically invite a historical chronicle, suggesting that they are
also important because they will generate new narrative conventions.

More than simply a thematic question, Švejk's apparent passivity is also a formal
problem because it establishes an absence of identifiable desire at the novel's outset.
Brooks writes that textual desire is “that which is initiatory of narrative, motivates
and energizes its reading, and animates the combinatory play of sense-making” (48).
According to Brooks, this “textual desire,” especially in nineteenth-century novels
of ambition, is often equivalent to the desire of the protagonist. Here, by contrast,
the plot's initiatory desire is not the protagonist's. Rather, the agency mentioned in
the preface is that of history: “A great epoch (veliká doba) calls for great men.” The
preface establishes a tension between narration and the march of history, on one
hand, and Švejk's indifference to it on the other. Although this opening establishes
a continuity between Osudy and the Czech prose tradition, it also marks the novel's
relationship to the modernist impulse because Osudy here utilizes themes from
earlier Czech literature in order to break from prior models by drastically changing
their function.

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Whatever Švejk’s interest regarding history and narration, a “world” war is not so easily ignored, and the narrator’s references to it continually bookend more discrete narrative units, tying them together and struggling with the foregrounded fortunes of the good soldier Švejk over the final imposition of meaning in the narrative as a whole. The first sentence, a paragraph in length, reads, “And so they’ve killed our Ferdinand,” said [Mrs. Müller] the charwoman, to Mr. Švejk, who had left military service years before, after having been finally certified by an army medical board as an imbecile, and now lived by selling dogs—ugly, mongrel monstrosities whose pedigrees he forged” (3). While the opening sentence, referring to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, establishes the historical background of the narrative, the offhand tone with which the charwoman speaks suggests that this event is wholly unimportant.

Again, Peter Brooks’ theory of narrative is illuminating here: Brooks writes, “One could no doubt analyze the opening paragraph of most novels and emerge in each case with the image of desire taking on shape, beginning to seek its objects, beginning to develop a textual energetics” (38). While desire for Brooks is not equivalent to an individual’s desire, the latter was often a text’s expressed desire in the nineteenth-century novels of ambition. In this respect, Osudy’s opening complicates Brooks’s claim because it contains no apparent indication of individual desire, suggesting instead that we cannot identify textual desire in the form of individual desire, but must look elsewhere for the motive force of plotting. Because the archduke’s assassination was the catalyst for the World War named in the novel’s title, it again appears that the forces of history itself are responsible for this novel’s metonymy. This opening paragraph situates Osudy in an era in which history becomes a force controlling the lives of men, rather than the other way around.

To name history as a protagonist, however, is unsatisfactorily vague. Suggestively, the Czech philosopher Karel Kosík writes, “The opening sentence . . . is not only the beginning of the narration but also announces a contemporaneous event which has started a certain progression. ‘Something’ has been set into motion . . . The Great Mechanism” (83). Although the war was the first event in which industrialization and militarization forced such a large percentage of the European population to take part, this mobilization was the result of the forces of modernization and centralization of the state apparatus throughout Western society. Therefore Kosík’s “Great Mechanism” is not only the war, but also the bureaucratic state apparatus of the Habsburg Empire and even the system of international alliances that caused the war to escalate beyond the initial conflict between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Serbian nationalists. That is to say, what Kosík calls the Mechanism is the system of heterogeneous forces well beyond the comprehension of the novel’s characters, which agitates the novel out of its preliminary stasis, surreptitiously appearing in the narrative as an offhand remark. If Švejk is the novel’s protagonist,
surely the Mechanism is the antagonist insofar as it continues to draw Švejk into a (narrative) plot in which he has no apparent desire to participate.

It is clear that for his part, at any rate, Švejk is concerned less with the events of world history than with the goings-on of his neighborhood. As soon as Mrs. Müller has finished speaking, he immediately interprets her statement within his local frame of reference. He asks, "Which Ferdinand, Mrs Müller? . . . I know two Ferdinands. One is a messenger at Průša’s, the chemist’s, and once by mistake he drank a bottle of hair oil there. And the other is Ferdinand Kokoška who collects dog manure. Neither of them is any loss" (4). This exchange is semantically loaded: while the charwoman’s use of the possessive “our” to modify “Ferdinand” is unsurprising given her German surname, Švejk does not recognize this relationship between foreign Habsburg royalty and the Czechs, a failure that, like so many other moments in the novel, suggests either imbecility or political provocation. In what will become a recurring motif in the novel, Švejk, appearing ignorant of the historically relevant referents of other’s words, replaces them with insignificant local referents, generating irony through the equivalence of radically opposed elements, the worldly/historical/significant and the local/anonymous/insignificant; the deceased archduke becomes no more important than a collector of dog manure. The “vertical” vacillation generated here—the privileged term is degraded while the degraded is in turn privileged—is matched by a “horizontal” vacillation between background and foreground on the level of plot; although the assassination agitates the Great Mechanism into motion by creeping into what is otherwise the most banal of conversations, Švejk’s “patent idiocy” quickly forces the Mechanism into the background, replacing one frame of reference with another. Importantly, neither the narrator nor Mrs. Müller read much into Švejk’s remark, giving the reader no indication as to whether his certification as an idiot is justified; his desire remains hidden. Historical events generate the metonymy of narrative, but Švejk, his motivation still a mystery, hijacks the metonymic process, bending it back toward his “modest” and “humble” frame of reference; Švejk’s verbal utterance here is akin to a pawn that, once moved, confounds the player that moves it by returning to its starting position.

Ignoring the Mechanism and the narrative metonymy it generates, Švejk is nevertheless caught up again in its motion when he goes to a local pub called The Chalice. His rejection of the Mechanism of history has caused it to try a less subtle approach; in the bar, the plain-clothes member of the State Security Bretschneider—the eaglet insignia of his professional affiliation on the inside of his coat—is “vainly endeavoring” to lure the barkeeper Palivec into conversation. “‘Well, it’s a glorious summer!’ said Bretschneider, embarking on his serious conversation” (6). Despite the fact that the utterance is on its surface about the weather, Palivec can hardly misunderstand Bretschneider’s “serious” provocation; the phrase

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“glorious summer” refers again to the assassination that occurred at the end of June and attempts to solicit a sympathetic (and therefore treasonous) response. However, the cagey Palivec is as unwilling to get caught out as Bretschneider is eager to catch him. Palivec replies, “Everything’s worth shit” and refuses to talk politics, causing Bretschneider to “[lapse] into silence and [look] disappointedly around the empty pub.” Looking for another sign of sedition, Bretschneider then says, “Hallo, there used to be a picture of His Imperial Majesty hanging here once . . . Just where the mirror hangs now” (7). Palivec confirms this, adding, “It did hang there, but the flies used to shit on it, so I put it away in the attic” (8). Here, Bretschneider’s query about the picture suggests that Palivec may have political reasons for taking it down, while the bartender’s comment about the flies is intended to assure the policeman that his intentions are in fact apolitical. In such a politically charged environment, however, to say nothing of a surveillance state, even the most quotidian speech is overdetermined and every utterance has a doubling of meaning.

It is this environment of carefully weighed and measured utterances that greets Švejk, as we shall see later. The exchange between Palivec and Bretschneider does suffice, however, to sketch the background against which Švejk’s speech functions. Despite Palivec’s deliberate phrasing, Bretschneider arrests him, ironically, for having claimed that flies defecated on the emperor’s portrait. This exchange reveals the manner in which a bureaucratic apparatus (with Bretschneider as its representative) already desires a certain outcome, a certain meaning of the other’s discourse, which in this case would be a statement of treasonous sentiments on Palivec’s part. The care with which Palivec words his responses is futile because his words are always being judged by an external standard, in this case Bretschneider’s motivation to interpret whatever he says as treasonous. Palivec’s discourse merely needs a contingent element that fits within the coordinates of Bretschneider’s ideological interpretive apparatus, and this occurs whenever a word that signifies filth—“shit”—is placed in any proximity to words related to the Empire. Ironically, if Palivec is telling the truth about the flies—and we find out several pages later that he is—then removing the picture of the emperor to prevent its further defilement is a patriotic act on Palivec’s part, albeit one for which he is arrested. Irony is created here not because the world is inherently contradictory, but because the Czechs’ world is structured by an ideological system that refuses to recognize the influence of lived experience on language use; answering a simple question has implications that undermine the whole ideological edifice of an empire; even the most apolitical speech is charged with unintended meaning containing political ramifications. It is enough to have suggested that he and Bretschneider live in a world where flies could defecate on the emperor’s portrait to land Palivec in prison. Early on, we see that prosaic speech—even when seemingly unreflective—conveys much more to the reader than the surface content of the words. The empire’s survival is contingent
on its ability to fully repress the Czechs’ vulgar language, a signified whose signifier “unconsciously expresse[s] . . . the detestation the ordinary Czech feels [… ] for the Emperor and for polite phrases” (215–6). Vulgarity functions here as an irrepressible reminder that the ideological edifice sustaining the Austro-Hungarian Empire is a house of cards.

Were that the vulgarity’s sole function, however, critics like Wellek might be justified in conflating “low humor” with “cheap propaganda” in their curt dismissals of the novel. However, the demotic has a formal function in Osudy, in that Hašek uses it in order to comment on the relationship between literature, the nation, and discursive structure. Recognizing the repressive nature of the discourse of the master vis-à-vis the real world, in the epilogue Hašek writes, “Years ago I read a criticism of a novelette, in which the critic was furious because the author had written: ‘He blew his nose and wiped it.’ He said that it went against everything beautiful and exalted which literature should give the nation” (214). This unattributed story highlights literature’s nationalist obligation so that Hašek may point out that, structurally, overtly nationalist literature is another form of propaganda because it merely replaces Austro-Hungarian ideology’s intolerance for the Real with the Czechs’. Turning his scorn on his countrymen, Hašek continues, “Those who boggle at strong language are cowards” (214), adding, “Lots of people of the type of the late Bretschneider . . . are still knocking about today in the Republic. They are extremely interested in what people are talking about” (216). In contending that censorious critics are no better than the Austrian secret police, Hašek argues that literature submitted to nationalist sentiment merely reinforces a social order that repeats the previous one—and as such is a manifestation of hegemonic discourse. As a formal element of Osudy, then, the vulgarity is decidedly anti-propagandistic. Moreover, Hašek’s lowbrow humor ironically comments on the “purification” of the Czech language advocated by eighteenth-century Czech linguists and embodied in Němcová’s novel. Thus, the vulgar content expressed in the vernacular has a dual function in Osudy: it first thematizes narrative and formal conventions and their relationship to nationalism within the novel’s narrative, and it does so in order to subvert this discursive structure both within the narrative and on the novel’s formal level.

Although the vernacular subverts a conventional heroic narrative structure, the plot continues to be motivated by a drive toward mobilization in the war. That is to say, Švejk may not desire to take part in a heroic narrative, but nevertheless the “Mechanism” draws him closer and closer to the war’s orbit. As Kosík notes, both Švejk’s individual plot and the background plot (the “za světové války” of the title) “are impeded by a ‘retarding element,’ Švejk’s narrative” (84). Osudy may subvert narrative norms, but it constantly veers toward becoming a war novel, save for Švejk’s delaying tactics. He does not stop the war, but he derails the narrative drive
toward that end. At times, for instance, he gets separated from his regiment—entire chapters pass before he rejoins it—and at other times he is literally “detained” in prison. The result of this retardation is that these two plotlines never fully merge.

Švejk’s tactics, like the episode discussed above, generate moments of specific irony in the narrative. However, because Švejk, in his anonymity alluded to in the novel’s preface, is a quintessential “everyman,” he does not control his own destiny. When we analyze what happens to the utterances of the everyman within the context of the novel as a whole, the specific irony of the epilogue gives way to a more cosmic irony on the narrative level. The everyday speech of Osudy’s characters is continually ironic, and even the most apparently direct speech may be subject to ironic misinterpretation, regardless of whether this is intended by the character or not. For example, Švejk says, “Our Lieutenant Makovec always used to say: ‘There’s got to be discipline, you bloody fools, otherwise you’d be climbing about on the trees like monkeys, but the army’s going to make human beings of you, you godforsaken idiots.’ And isn’t that true? Just imagine a park, let’s say at Charles Square, and on every tree an undisciplined soldier! It’s enough to give you a nightmare!” (8–9). Here Švejk takes his former lieutenant’s metaphor at face value, thereby ridiculing it. The image the lieutenant chooses to justify his harsh military discipline, interpreted literally instead of metaphorically, is simply absurd. This shows that even hegemonic systems are never entirely totalizing because the power to misinterpret exists even in institutions otherwise known for the directness of their speech.

Švejk’s literal-minded interpretation becomes a recurring motif in the novel, and Švejk’s desire to take orders too literally will subvert the military apparatus again and again, creating one ironic situation after another. After Švejk is arrested along with Palivec and undergoes interrogation, he is asked, “Do you confess to everything?” and Švejk promptly replies, “If you want me to confess, your worship, I shall” (Hašek 22). Here Švejk takes the order to confess literally, the irony of course being that even a demand as simple as “confess!” comes with the expectation that the recipient of the order will do anything but confess. In actually following the order, Švejk makes his interrogators question his sanity, leading to his temporary confinement in a lunatic asylum. Thus even direct speech is exposed as not meaning what it says, and irony is inherent in even the most prosaic of utterances. In order to communicate (or follow military orders) adequately, one cannot take linguistic utterances at their face value; they always occur within and are subordinate to a larger context that renders the meaning of even the most prosaic speech ambivalent. The external imposition of ideology permeates lived existence, but possibilities unaccounted for by the hegemonic system remain open to us because in our prosaic existence we still use language to do things, and it is in the space between the saying and doing that we depart from the literality of an utterance.5
Lest we settle too easily on the interpretation of Švejk as a saboteur, however, it is important to note that the narrator does not confirm or contradict the interpretations of Švejk’s motives or his utterances put forth by his interlocutors. The withholding of any psychological explanation of Švejk’s behavior—in marked contrast to at least cursory psychological portraits of supporting characters, such as Lt. Lukáš—suggests that Švejk is exemplary of what Tzvetan Todorov calls “literary a-psychologism” (67). For Todorov, literary a-psychologism is not characterized simply by a lack of psychological description, but also a causal structure different from that of psychological literature. The latter has a causal relationship of consequence, where action refers back to and furthers understanding of the personality of the acting character. In contrast to the relationship of consequence endemic to psychological narrative, a-psychological narrative follows a relationship of consequence in which “action is important in itself and not as an indication of this or that character trait” (67). For the purposes of reading Osudy, this means that we should not look for moments that provide access to Švejk’s character, but rather to look at the effect of Švejk’s actions and speech on the narrative itself.

Švejk is not wholly devoid of character traits, but in a manner consistent with Osudy’s resistance to an overarching meaning, these traits are immediate and applicable only within the episode or “osud” in which they appear. For example, while on a scouting mission Švejk comes upon a small lake in which an escaped Russian prisoner is bathing. The Russian runs away naked, and because Švejk “[is] curious to know how [the Russian prisoner’s uniform] would suit him” (666), he takes off his own uniform and puts on the Russian’s, only to be captured by field gendarmerie who are looking for the escaped prisoner. According to the narrator it is only Švejk’s immediate curiosity, rather than political commitment, that causes this unfortunate misunderstanding. This is again exemplary of literary a-psychologism, which Todorov argues has an immediate as opposed to a mediated causality (68). The immediacy of this characterization, he claims, means that “the cause is not a primordial before, it is only one element of the ‘cause-and-effect’ couple, in which neither is thereby superior to the other” (69, author’s italics). In contrast to psychological narrative, where a character’s essential trait motivates behavior throughout the text, actions serving to further elucidate the character’s psychological makeup, a-psychological literature, for Todorov, works in the opposite direction; the trait suddenly appears only long enough to motivate action, and just as quickly disappears. The immediate causality of Švejk’s behavior is another way in which the novel effaces hierarchical distinctions, in this case the subordination of effect to cause in psychological narrative.

In literary a-psychologism, Todorov claims, “We are in the realm of narrative-men” in which “a character is a potential story” (70). Indeed, Švejk is just such a narrative-man whose stories subvert narrative by means of narrative. Let us re-
turn to the early episode at the Chalice. I now wish to reconsider Švejk’s part in the conversation. Stymied in his effort to draw Palivec into treasonous conversation, “Bretschneider finally relapsed into silence. His gloomy face only lit up on the arrival of Švejk who came into the bar, ordered a dark black beer and remarked: “Today they’ll be mourning in Vienna too.” (8). This sentence, typical of the narrator’s style (and indeed, of most narrative), is an example of hypotaxis, in which connectives create subordinate or dependent relationships between the clauses in a sentence. With its political associations, Švejk’s ironic remark (the word “too” creates an equivalence between Švejk’s beer and mourning attire) helps to explain the improvement in Bretschneider’s mood; hypotaxis thus indicates a relationship of consequence. In contrast to the caution displayed in the innkeeper and the policeman’s terse remarks, on one hand, and the hypotaxis of the narrator on the other, Švejk appears to be suffering from logorrhea:

And so he’s already lying with God and the Angels. Glory be! He didn’t even live to be Emperor. When I was serving in the army a general once fell off his horse and killed himself without any fuss. They wanted to help him back onto his horse, to lift him up, but to their surprise he was completely dead. And he was going to be promoted to Field Marshal. It happened at a review. These reviews never come to any good. In Sarajevo there was a review too. I remember once at a parade like that I had twenty buttons missing from my uniform . . . (8)

Here, it would seem impossible to interpret his speech as even sane, let alone political. Švejk’s monologue is characterized by parataxis, in which propositions follow one another without any indication of their interdependence. While each sentence here has a tangential thematic connection with the next, his narrative does not subordinate individual sentences or clauses to an overarching point. The relationship expressed is one of consecution rather than consequence.

Regardless of content, Švejk’s speech is structurally antithetical to the discourse expected of a national subject, what Jacques Lacan famously calls the discourse of the master. In addition to generic histories and narratives, overdetermined speech acts such as Bretschneider’s and Palivec’s are manifestations of this discourse because they operate under the aegis of what Lacan calls the master signifier.6 Explaining the master signifier, Lacanian theorist Slavoj Žižek notes that within any ideological discourse, it is the presence of the master signifier—the signifier of an ideological system as such—that stops the metonymic sliding of all other signifiers and fixes their meaning in ways that have political relevance.7 This discursive structure is inherently hypotactic insofar as all utterances—indeed, all signifiers—are subordinate to the “button-tying” work of the master signifier. By contrast, parataxis refuses the fixing of a signifier’s meaning within the broader utterance. Individual sentences and clauses become more or less equivalent as, in its reductio ad
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absurdum, parataxis resists and “unbinds” the master signifier’s button-tying. In this episode, Bretschneider interprets Švejk’s babbling as treasonous and arrests him, but in the absence of psychological realism vis-à-vis Švejk’s character, any motive imputed to his speech is wholly arbitrary. Švejk’s speech is neither patriotic nor revolutionary, but it represents a discursive \textit{structure} opposed to that of the national(ist) discourse. These speech acts thus become verbal representations of the subversion that the novel as a whole performs.

Švejk’s stories are tactics that function to frustrate the desire of military authorities (who often want to punish Švejk’s transgressions). For instance, when Švejk becomes Lieutenant Lukáš’s batman, the latter says, “The chaplain recommended you as a frightful idiot and I think he was not wrong” (168). Švejk replies,

“Humbly report, sir, he certainly was not wrong. When I was serving as a regular I got a complete discharge for idiocy and for patent idiocy into the bargain. In our regiment only two of us were discharged in this way, me and a Captain von Kaunitz. And whenever that captain went out into the street, if you’ll pardon me, sir, he always at the same time picked his left nostril with his left hand, and his right nostril with his right hand, and when he went with us to the parade ground he always made us adopt a formation as though it was going to be a march past and said: ‘Men, ahem, remember, ahem, that today is a Wednesday because tomorrow will be Thursday, ahem.’” Lieutenant Lukáš shrugged his shoulders like a man who does not know and cannot immediately find the words to express a certain thought. (168)

This passage exemplifies the subversive effect of Švejk’s parataxis on his superiors and on the prosaic context of discourse. Because he has already affirmed the Lieutenant’s accusation, there is no need for further comment on his part. Nevertheless, he continues with wholly irrelevant and pointless information and in doing so, he derails the train of Lukáš’s thought process, diverting it away from its intended goal. Lukáš is attempting to make a meaningful point, but Švejk frustrates this process. Within the plot, then, the parataxis of Švejk’s stories diverts the implied and intended hypotaxis of his superiors (and the Mechanism) from achieving its desired effect. Moreover, by describing Lukáš as the victim of a temporary aphasia—he suddenly neither knows the necessary words nor can he find them—the narrator makes it clear that despite being subversion within narrative, this is also the subversion of narrative’s drive toward closure and the fixing of meaning.

Although Švejk’s paratactic utterances are structurally different from the hypotaxis of both the narrator and Osudy’s other characters, as embedded narratives they also have an effect on the novel’s larger structure. That is to say, Švejk’s narratives are not self-sufficient, but acquire their comic and subversive status through their effect on Švejk’s interlocutors and on the larger plot. The function of em-
bedded narrative, Todorov claims, is to highlight the non-self-sufficiency of narrative as such. He writes,

Each [embedded] narrative seems to have something excessive, a supplement which remains outside the closed form produced by the development of the plot. At the same time, and for this very reason, this something-more, proper to the narrative, is also something-less. This supplement is also a lack; in order to supply this lack created by the supplement, another narrative is necessary. (76)

Švejk’s embedded narratives are lacking both because they require the larger narrative context for their comic effect and because their absurdity becomes meaningful as a tactic only in this context. Simultaneously, these narratives are excessive insofar as they affect the larger narrative, as in the examples discussed above. Precisely because of this immanent lack/excess, Švejk’s narration has a viral effect on Osudy, forcing the novel into digressions that are longer than the story from which they purportedly digress. In such circumstances, Todorov rhetorically asks, “Can we even call them digressions?” (72). It is when these digressions take over the novel’s plot that they become individual osudy in themselves. These stories thus have a subversive effect both in and on the novel’s plot.

In the vacillation between the plot’s foreground and background, not only does subversion acquire a specifically narrative dimension, so, too, does life. Within the plot, Švejk’s narration successfully deflects his superiors’ intentions of punishing him. Despite the novel’s comic tone, this punishment is not something to be taken lightly; on several occasions the narrator mentions soldiers killed by the military bureaucracy. As Todorov notes, for narrative-men, “Narrative equals life; absence of narrative, death” (74). That is to say, because the narrative-man’s identity and literary function—his ability to narrate within a narrative—are one and the same, this character’s very life is contingent upon his ability to prolong indefinitely the act of storytelling. This equation of narration with life, however, means that not only must Švejk talk his way out of punishment or execution, he must also talk his way out of the war, which throughout the novel carries connotations of death. For example, when Švejk and his battalion are crossing into the Galician frontier, the camp at the scene of a previous battle, where “all around [. . .] lay the traces of the most recent battles [. . .] Everywhere could be seen splinters of shrapnel and somewhere in the immediate neighborhood the corpses of soldiers must evidently have been buried, because it smelt frightfully of putrefaction” (598). Although death is present in its olfactory effects, it remains in the background (and does not even disturb the battalion’s dinner).

Not only is war equivalent to death within Osudy’s plot, it is also equivalent to the death of the plot. Although Todorov makes explicit the connection between narration and life, death as merely the absence of narrative is too simplistic here. As
we saw earlier, Benjamin allows us to conceptualize death as integral to narration. He suggests that the art of storytelling is coming to an end because “the thought of death has become less omnipresent and less vivid” in the course of the nineteenth century (151). Given the unprecedented loss of life engendered by the Great War (evident in the smell of putrefaction discussed above), death looms over Osudy but is strikingly absent from the plot. To the extent that death is kept at bay, so is meaning. As Benjamin notes, “it is not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life . . . which first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death” (151). The arc of a life is here equivalent to the figure of metonymy, defined by Brooks as “the figure of contiguity and combination . . . the movement from one detail to another, the movement toward totalization” (91, author’s italics). Metonymy is a movement toward totalization, but it cannot become total unless it concludes, at which point its meaning becomes transmissible only as metaphor. For Brooks, plot “must use metaphor as the trope of its achieved interrelations, and it must be metaphoric insofar as it is totalizing” (91, author’s italics). Death, then, provides the conclusion to life, the point at which the metonymy of the lifespan stops and can be understood in its totality. Narrative “death” is the moment at which meaning occurs. The world war, which makes up part of the novel’s title, is equivalent to death, not only for the death it threatens to Osudy’s soldiers but also as the temporal boundary that should provide closure to the novel. Švejk’s subversive narratives thus have a structural function in the Osudy taken, paradoxically, as a whole: they extend the novel’s metonymy ad infinitum, preventing any closure that would enable the novel to end. Every one of Švejk’s narratives becomes a deflection of the plot away from the expected end, away from closure, and away from the fixing of meaning.

By staving off death—both Švejk’s death and the novel’s “narrative death”—storytelling becomes a commentary on the experience of modernity. Karel Kosík argues that in Osudy, “only single, individual ‘movements’ (destinies, encounters, events) make any sense, while the movement of the machine as a whole is senseless; the movement of the machine is the movement of absurdity” (84, my italics). Kosík here does not recognize that it is precisely the digressions-cum-osudy that frustrate any drive toward meaning. This frustration is consistent with the changing function of storytelling. Benjamin writes that “the ability to exchange experiences” necessary for storytelling is coming to an end in modern times (143). According to Benjamin, this is primarily because in modernity, “experience has fallen in value” (Ibid.). He continues, “Beginning with the First World War, a process became apparent which continues to this day. . . For never has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power” (143–44). The sheer scale of a modernity increasing to global proportions makes the small, local exchange of meaning that is the function
of storytelling impossible. However, rather than disappearing, storytelling acquires a new function, ironically becoming a form of resistance to nationalist propaganda embedded in narrative structures.

Prosaic irony is thus a narrative mode within Osudy because it allows Švejk and others to generate ironic situations and responses, thus frustrating the Austro-Hungarian military bureaucracy on the level of plot. More interestingly, however, prosaic irony comments on and subverts the Czech linguistic nationalism in its nineteenth- and twentieth-century manifestations as well as Czech nationalism’s most famous literary prose manifestation, Babička. Structurally, prosaic irony subverts genre convention (especially that of historical narrative) and hegemonic discourse. It also comments on prose as such, marking the prosaic utterance as always mediated, always political, and always resistive to closure. Finally, anticipating Benjamin’s essay by thirteen years, it acts as a commentary on the changing relationship of man to the concept of death in the twentieth century and on the changing function of storytelling in modernity.

Ultimately, Osudy cannot reach a conclusion because it is the very idea of a conclusion that the novel subverts. Instead, it can only stop with the literal death of its author: the novel remained incomplete at the time of Hašek’s demise in January of 1923. The unintended end of the novel becomes oddly appropriate, as the Czech Lieutenant Dub remarks that the soldiers “will in foreseeable time be crossing the frontier” (752). Were the soldiers to have finally arrived at the front, the novel would have reached its end, but instead Osudy remains in the continual deferral and construction of individual moments of meaning that open up spaces for unconventional and idiosyncratic desire, a “true” desire that always eludes and exceeds narrative closure.

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NOTES

1 The turbulent history of Czechoslovakia in the twentieth century paved the way for a belief that literature had to be committed to the nation. At various times, Švejk has been interpreted as antifascist and anticommunist even though the novel addresses neither political phenomenon.

2 Although poetic speech is certainly capable of generating irony, poetic irony is different from prosaic irony in that poetic speech is already understood as a violation of the norms and situations governing prosaic speech.

3 Because it is easily the most widely available version of Osudy available in English, I have relied upon Cecil Parrott’s translation for Penguin. However, I have silently emended the translation in this quotation.

4 My use of the term tactic is borrowed from Michel de Certeau, who writes that a tactic “must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign
power . . . must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment” (37). For my purposes, a tactic is any action on Švejk’s part that opens a temporal window in which the narrative is diverted from its ultimate end, participation in the war.

5 I am influenced here by Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where the author claims that although we are continually surrounded by the products (including language) of networks of power, we still use these products in ways unaccounted for by these systems. The ways in which individuals utilize the products of networks of power, de Certeau argues, “compose the network of an antidiscipline” (xiv-xv).

6 For further explication of this discourse, see Lacan.

7 According to Žižek, when the discourse of the master is in operation, “[I]n the ideological space float signifiers like ‘freedom,’ ‘state,’ ‘justice,’ ‘peace’ . . . and then their chain is supplemented with some master-signifier (‘Communism’) which retroactively determines their (Communist) meaning: [for example] ‘freedom’ is effective only through surmounting the bourgeois formal freedom” (102).

**WORKS CITED**


