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CONCERNING THE STYLISTIC PECULIARITIES OF H.H. MUNRO'S SHORT STORIES

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The present paper is dedicated to specifying the linguistic elements that are stylistically relevant in H.H. Munro's (Saki's) short stories. As the two main stylistic features of Saki's short stories the author singles out the violation of collocations and idiomatic expressions, and the extensive use of formal lexis in describing trivial and banal situations. There are five types of texts in the classification of Saki's short stories introduced in the article; the classification is based on the role and function of the marked units used in the short stories. The stylistic peculiarities of Saki's prose are in keeping with the aesthetic tendencies reflected in the works by O. Wilde, A. Beardsley, R. Firbank and other authors.

Key words: style; trope; figure of speech; collocation; idiomatic expression.

H.H. Munro (Saki) is one of the most outstanding writers of the Edwardian epoch. In his works he gains a deep insight both into human nature and the immediate social issues of his time. Saki's short stories reveal his ironical attitude towards various aspects of Edwardian social life and, at the same time, convey the sense of imminent danger threatening Britain on the verge of a world crisis.

Although Saki was successful in different genres, to the Russian reader he is mainly familiar as a short story writer (among his collections of short stories are "Beasts and Superbeasts", "The Toys of Peace", "Reginald", "Reginald in Russia", "The Chronicles of Clovis" and "The Square Egg"). Unfortunately, the existing Russian translations of Saki's short stories leave much to be desired, as they seldom reflect the dazzling irony and stylistic intricacy of the originals. And this is one of the reasons why the texts by this author should be studied more extensively. Philologists can benefit greatly from reading and analyzing Saki's work – it contains a wealth of linguistic peculiarities that can be admired, savoured and appreciated by the more experienced reader. Saki's profound interest in Russia should also be mentioned in this context [Byrne 2007: 75-98]. As is well known, in his early twenties Munro wrote a book entitled "The Rise of the Russian Empire". As a journalist, Saki visited Russia on many occasions; some of the characters in his novels and plays are actually Russians.

Saki's short stories are extremely interesting from the stylistic point of view. While reading them one has the feeling that in some way the style of these texts resembles Oscar Wilde's novels, stories and plays, Ronald Firbank's innovative novels and the aestheticism of Aubrey Beardsley's imagery. Saki obviously belonged to this artistic generation and he developed a recognizable voice of his own. The writer had a very specific way of applying stylistic devices in his texts: there is a wide variety of modes in which he uses the marked elements in different types of content.

H.H. Munro's short stories have mainly been studied with respect to his biography. Unlike Oscar Wilde, with whom H.H. Munro had a lot in common, Saki tried to keep as much of his personal life as possible in secret, and this has led many investigators to look for information about "the other Saki" and looking for a reflection of his character in his artistic texts. The most fundamental analysis of the writer's work and life can be found in A.J. Langguth's comprehensive study of Saki [Langguth 1981]. Quite a few of H.H. Munro's contemporaries, friends and admirers left some analytical notes on his biography in introductions to various editions of his texts (writers and journalists like A.A. Milne, H.M. Nevinson, C. Morley, J. Squire, G.K. Chesterton). Some philologists (like C. Hanson, for instance) have analyzed animal motifs in H.H. Munro's short stories [Hanson 1985]. Among the recent studies of Saki's literary heritage

it is worth noting S. Byrne's excellent book on the writer's life and work [Byrne 2007].

Although the volume of papers and books dedicated to Saki's work is rather impressive, the formal characteristics of his short stories have not yet been studied in depth from the stylistic point of view. To tackle this problem methodologically, in the present paper a descriptive-analytical approach is adopted. The texts of the short stories are studied to single out the linguistic units that are used systematically in them, and certain types of content are analyzed in order to see how these units function in different thematic groups of stories.

One might notice that in some of Saki's short stories this or that stylistic device comes to the fore. For example, in "The Forewarned" the humorous effect is primarily created with the help of antonomasia. The author pictures a young woman, who has spent most of her life in her aunt's house in the country, and, being a keen reader of romances, tends to judge people according to the common stereotypes common in this kind of literature: "So there was an upright man, possibly a very Hugo in character /.../ She would know him at once; he would have the dark beetling brows, the quick, furtive glance, the sneering, unsavoury smile that always characterised the Sir Jaspers of this world" [Munro 1993: 386].

In "The Background" the author's irony is based on the juxtaposition of the nominative and the transferred meanings of a set of words: "grow on", "background", "to bear the burden of". Henri Duplis orders an Italian artist to make a tattoo representing the Fall of Icarus on his back, and turns out to be "an unhappy human background". The local laws debar Duplis from swimming and forbid him from exporting the work of art from Italy: "/.../ he bore on his back the burden of the dead man's genius" [Munro 1993: 103].

Rather than focusing on separate short stories we will concentrate on the expressive means that are used systematically in all the texts under study. The writer recurrently uses formal lexis to describe trivial or absurd situations:

"No one knows what I suffer from indigestion" was one of her favourite statements; but the lack of knowledge can only have been caused by defective listening; the amount of information available on the subject would have supplied material for a monograph ("The Reticence of Lady Anne") [Munro 1993: 37].

Among other marked elements that are used regularly in all of Saki's short stories are: adherently and inherently connotative lexis (evaluative-emotional-expressive, colloquial, archaic, etc.), various devices of the lexical-semantic kind (play upon polysemous words, phraseological units and idioms),

syllipsis, the use of quotations, allusions, proverbs, sayings, proper names.

A characteristic feature of Saki's prose is that he juxtaposes marked units belonging to different varieties of inherently connotative lexis (for example, colloquial vs formal):

"/.../ those sweet, uncomplaining women one knows have seen trouble, and worn blinkers ever since. Of course, one just loves them for it, but I must confess they make me uncomfy; they remind one so of a duck that goes flapping about with forced cheerfulness long after its head's been cut off" ("Reginald on Worries") [Munro 1993: 15].

One of the devices regularly used in the short stories is playing upon the different meanings of a polysemous word. It is rather easy to notice such instances in the texts. For example, in "Cross Currents" the author uses the word "mad" in the meanings "mentally ill" and "acting without thought or control":

"Dobrinton was bitten by a dog which was assumed to be mad, though it may only have been indiscriminating" [Munro 1993: 72].

Distorted idioms, collocations and phraseological units are extensively used in the texts. The nominative meaning of a unit can be opposed to its transferred one; two collocations including the same element can be played upon; some fixed element in an idiom can be replaced by another one, or some units can be introduced violating its structure, etc.

In the following illustration the collocation "to wear smth in secret" and the word combination "to wear smth in (a particular place)" are juxtaposed:

"There is, for instance, the female relative in the country who "knows a tie is always useful", and sends you some spotted horror that you could only wear in secret or in Tottenham Court Road" ("Reginald on Christmas Presents") [Munro 1993: 5].

In the following example the primary meaning of the word "to be wedded" is opposed to its metaphorical meaning ("supporting smth so much that you are not willing to give up"):

"/.../ she was wedded to the truth; whereupon it was remarked that it was scarcely logical to be so much together in public" ("Reginald on Besetting Sins") [Munro 1993: 21].

In the short story "Fur" the saying "Every cloud has a silver lining" is juxtaposed to the metaphoric use of cloud as "obstacle" and the basic meaning of the word "lining" (the fur lining of a coat is meant):

"A cloud has arisen between the friendships of the two young women; as far as Eleanor is concerned the cloud has a silver-fox lining" [Munro 1993: 330].

Oxymoron is another stylistic device that makes for the humorous effect in Saki's short stories:

“Waldo is one of those people who would be enormously improved by death” (“The Feast of Nemesis”) [Munro 1993: 278].

Saki's aphorisms have come to be no less well known than those of Oscar Wilde:

“All decent people live beyond their incomes nowadays, and those who aren't respectable live beyond other people's. A few gifted individuals manage to do both” (“The Match-Maker”) [Munro 1993: 89].

Quite often in the texts two homogeneous parts of the sentence do not form a logical opposition, thus creating a comic effect:

“Then there is Cyril Scatterly; he has madness on one side of the family and a Hungarian grandmother on the other” (“A Touch of Realism”) [Munro 1993: 262].

“They have given up politics and taken to doing good” (“The Phantom Luncheon”) [Munro 1993: 374].

Saki tends to introduce very colourful and unexpected similes in his stories, juxtaposing objects which, in ordinary contexts, would very hardly come to be compared to one another:

“But there aren't thirty Jews in the whole neighbourhood”, protested Huddle, whose brain, under the repeated shocks of the day, was operating with the uncertainty of a telegraph wire during disturbances” (“The Unrest Cure”) [Munro 1993: 108].

“The aunt of Clovis responded lamely to the suggestion, and churned away like a Nile steamer, with a long brown ripple of Pekinese spaniel trailing in her wake” (“The Talking-Out of Tarrington”) [Munro 1993: 165].

Instances of synonymic condensation also support the ironical effect, as most often they are introduced in passages describing absurd or banal situations. In the strings of synonyms every following word enhances the ironic effect intended by the author:

“Some people are born to command; Crispina Umberleigh was born to legislate, codify, administer, censor, license, ban, execute, and sit in judgement generally” (“The Disappearance of Crispina Umberleigh”) [Munro 1993: 354].

String compounds in the attributive function very often play an ornamental role in Munro's short stories:

“/.../ he's only eleven, and has golden hair, and those are enormous advantages when you're on the collecting job /.../ he'll be able to do the pale, fragile, not-long-for-this-world business to perfection” (“The Boar-Pig”) [Munro 1993: 212].

Quotations and allusions also serve as a means of expressivity in Saki's short stories. One will find plenty of biblical and Shakespearean quotations that

are used in describing some down-to-earth, trivial situations in the texts. The bulk of the quotations found in them come from the Bible and “Hamlet” (there are also quotations from works by John Milton, Joseph Addison, Alfred Tennyson and Rudyard Kipling). For example, in “Reginald on Christmas Presents” the biblical phrase “bitterness of death” is used ironically:

“There is my Aunt Agatha, par exemple who sent me a pair of gloves last Christmas, and even got so far as to choose a kind that was being worn and had the correct number of buttons. But – they were nines! I sent them to a boy whom I hated intimately: he didn't wear them, of course, but he could have – that was where the bitterness of death came in. It was nearly as consoling as sending white flowers to his funeral” [Munro 1993: 5].

The biblical phrase is connected with Agag, the King of Amalekites whose life was spared by Saul after Israel's victory. For this act of mercy he was denounced by the prophet Samuel, who then himself hacked Agag in pieces [Oxford Dictionary of the Bible 2004: 8]. The original sentence comes from Samuel, ch. 15, v. 32:

“Then said Samuel, Bring ye hither to me Agag the king of the Amalekites. And Agag came unto him delicately. And Agag said. Surely the bitterness of death is past” [Oxford Dictionary of Quotations 2004: 104].

In the following dialogue from “The Match-Maker” Saki introduces a distorted quotation from “Hamlet”:

“As a matter of fact, it's really I who am doing the thinking for her in this case. You see, it's quite two years since her first husband died’.

“You evidently think that brevity is the soul of widowhood” [Munro 1993: 90].

The author's irony is sometimes enhanced with the help of distorted proverbs and sayings, mostly playing an ornamental role. For example, in “Reginald at the Carlton” Saki distorts the early 19th century proverb “Providence is always on the side of the big battalions”:

“A most variable climate’, said the Duchess; ‘and how unfortunate that we should have had that very cold weather at a time when coal was so dear! So distressing for the poor’.

“Some one has observed that Providence is always on the side of the big dividends’, remarked Reginald” [Munro 1993: 18].

Words and word combinations denoting realia can be considered another kind of marked unit regularly used in Munro's stories; they also play their part in creating the humorous effect in the texts. In “Reginald at the Carlton” the expression “Tauchnitz morals” suggests certain background information.

Christian Bernard Tauchnitz was a German publisher (1816-1895), who launched the publication of cheap, paperback editions of English and American literature:

“There are people one knows, quite nice people when they are in England, who are so different when they are anywhere the other side of the Channel. The people with what I call Tauchnitz morals’, observed Reginald. ‘On the whole, I think they get the best of two very desirable worlds. And, after all, they charge so much for excess luggage on some of those foreign lines that it’s really an economy to leave one’s reputation behind one occasionally’” [Munro 1993: 20].

Proper names in the stories attract one’s attention as exotic, unusual, having some kind of inner form. This is often connected with either sound symbolism or additional vertical information. The phonetic form can conjure up associations with certain historical and political personages, or some kind of realia. For instance, in “The Easter Egg” the name “Slaggyby” reminds one of such words as “sluggish”, “slow”, “slushy”, and other adjectives containing the consonant cluster [sl] :

“It was distinctly hard lines for Lady Barbara, who came of good fighting stock, and was one of the bravest women of her generation, that her son should be so undisguisedly a coward. Whatever good qualities Lester Slaggyby may have possessed, and he was in some respects charming, courage could certainly never be imputed to him” [Munro 1993: 133].

Depending on certain content characteristics and the way Saki uses marked linguistic elements, his short stories can be classified into several groups. His “Reginald” collection embraces the stories featuring Reginald and Clovis Sangrail. The stories of this group usually represent dialogues between Reginald and another representative of the upper classes, or his monologues. In these texts what primarily attracts one’s attention is the ornamental, expressive use of deformed collocations, phraseological units, idioms, quotations and allusions.

In the Edwardian times small talk in high society was generally regarded as a kind of convention compared to fine art. The value of artifice is vividly shown in the characters’ dialogues, especially in Reginald’s and Clovis’s sophisticated conversations. Munro’s contemporaries identified this type of people as “brilliant young men”. The following examples can illustrate the point:

“When I was younger, boys of your age used to be nice and innocent’.

‘Now we’re only nice. One must specialize in these days’” (“Reginald at the Theatre”) [Munro 1993: 10].

“To die before being painted by Sargent is to go to heaven prematurely” (“Reginald on the Academy”) [Munro 1993: 7].

Some of the stories contain pieces of poetry in which the author parodies the poetical works and songs popular at the time (“Reginald’s Rubayiat”, “Reginald’s Peace Poem”, “The Secret Sin of Septimus Brope”, “For the Duration of the War”, “The Recessional”).

In “Reginald’s Peace Poem”, for example, one encounters a parody on the song written by Will D. Cobb in 1899 to boost the men’s morale on the verge of the Boer War (one of the last colonial campaigns, in British history this event is considered to be morally tainted, mostly due to the organisation of concentration camps on the territory of the Boer Republics):

And the sleeper, eye unlidning,
Heard a voice for ever bidding
Much farewell to Dolly Gray;
Turning weary on his trundle-
Bed he heard the honey-suckle
Lauded in apiarian lay [Munro 1993: 11].

In stories like “The She-Wolf”, “Tobermory”, “The Unrest Cure”, “A Matter of Sentiment”, “Ministers of Grace” Saki describes all kinds of gatherings, house-parties, scenes set in drawing rooms, where the characters are confronted with some unusual, absurd, or, on the contrary, banal situations.

As usual, in these stories Saki uses a lot of formal lexis to describe trivial situations. The level of syntax is also relevant to the expressivity of these texts. Basic morpho-syntactic patterns are extended with the help of attributive and modifying constructions, the commentary on the protagonists’ actions containing a large amount of inherently connotative units:

“Sir Wilfrid went in search of the animal, and the company settled themselves down to the languid expectation of some more or less adroit drawing-room ventriloquism” (“Tobermory”) [Munro 1993: 91].

In stories like “Esmé”, “The Story-Teller”, “The Boar Pig”, “Hyacinth”, “Louise”, “Laura” the use of formal lexis is less abundant. Compared to the stories of the “Tobermory” type, they are not as loaded lexically, so to speak. It is the comic nature of the situation, the engaging plot that create the ironic effect in these texts. In “Esmé”, for example, the plot compensates for the relative linguistic simplicity. On a hunting expedition, the Baroness and Constance Broddle fall behind the rest of the group and come across a hyena that has run away from Lord Pabham’s park. The animal trots by their side, until it finds a gipsy child and devours it; in the end it gets

hit by a car. All this time the Baroness and Constance Broddle comment on what is happening:

‘Do you think the poor little thing suffered much?’ came another of her futile questions.

‘The indications were all that way’, I said; ‘on the other hand, of course, it may have been crying from sheer temper. Children sometimes do’ [Munro 1993: 85].

Another group of Saki’s short stories includes those in which one can find the type of content that suggests certain contemplation about the human nature (“The Image of the Lost Soul”, “The Lumber Room”). In such stories a contemplative tone is added to the narrative with the help of metaphors, personifications, adherently connotative lexis. “The Image of the Lost Soul” is perhaps the most lyrical one of Saki’s short stories. Its plot suggests the contemplative kind of narrative. A lonely bird flew to the Cathedral roof. The pigeons tried to hustle it away, but the bird found refuge in the arms of the Lost Soul:

“The figure did not cross its hands in the pious attitude of the other graven dignitaries, but its arms were folded as in defiance and their angle made a snug resting place for the little bird. Every evening it crept trustfully into its corner against the stone breast of the image, and the darkling eyes seemed to keep watch over its slumbers” [Munro 1993: 460].

Such stories like “The Hounds of Fate”, “The Interlopers”, “The Peace of Mowsle Barton”, “The Cobweb”, “The Wolves of Cernogratz”, “Sredni Vashtar” (one of Saki’s most famous stories) contain sinister and macabre motifs. In some of the plots there is more than a touch of gothic mysticism. Saki is known to have been agnostic throughout his lifetime. His interest in the poetry of Omar, the myths of Pagan Hellas, and animal lore is in keeping with the general atmosphere of the epoch, when agnosticism and pessimism developed into a tendency among writers and intellectuals. Elements of folklore and paganism found their way into Christianity in Devonshire (where, together with his sister and brother, Saki was raised by his two aunts), and, as A.J. Langguth put it, the woodland spirits from the environs of Devon nurtured the writer’s childhood [Langguth 1981: 62]. The motifs of Fate, destiny, and doom are recurrent in this type of stories. For example, the plot of “The Hounds of Fate” is reminiscent of the settings of Anne Radcliffe’s and Horace Walpole’s novels.

What also unites the stories of the ‘gothic’ and ‘macabre’ kinds is that, in them, the characters’ speech can be stratified into that of the Londoners (people from the big cities), who, for different reasons, decide to move to the country (they speak standard English), and the speech of the local people

(their speech is substandard). Dialectisms create a local colouring in the stories:

“‘Tis death, ‘tis death a-coming’, answered the quavering voice; ‘I knew ‘twere coming. I knew it. ‘Tweren’t for nothing that old Shep’s been howling all morning” (“The Cobweb”) [Munro 1993: 231].

The present paper contains a short overview of the stylistic peculiarities of Saki’s short stories. There is a number of expressive means that are used metasemiotically in the texts in question. Among the stylistic devices that can be singled out are formal lexis used in describing trivial plots and situations, the juxtaposition of different varieties of inherently connotative lexical units, the violation of collocations and idioms proper, the contextual use of quotations, allusions, proper names, words denoting realia. The writer also relies on adherently connotative lexis, metaphors and personifications. Other expressive means used by the author are oxymoron, simile, syntactic parallelism, synonymic condensation, string compounds. Depending on the general mode of using these units, the stories can be classified into five groups: the short stories where the ornamental role of linguistic elements comes to the fore; the group where inherently connotative lexis organises other expressive means in an intricate picture combining the humorous, the banal and the absurd; the kind of stories that is less intricate from the linguistic point of view, yet in which the absurdity of the plot itself is self-sufficient; the group which contains the type of content that calls for a metaphorical kind of contemplation; the type that includes macabre and gothic motifs and elements of animal lore.

The classification suggested in the paper might be instrumental in creating new versions of Saki’s translations into Russian, thus attracting the general reader’s attention to his work. In spite of the time separating us from the Edwardian epoch, Saki’s wit and linguistic mastery continue to mesmerize and enthrall philologists both in the English-speaking world and in Russia. Saki’s stories can be read and re-read ad finitum, and we will always discover something new in them.

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О СТИЛИСТИЧЕСКИХ ОСОБЕННОСТЯХ РАССКАЗОВ Г.Х. МАНРО

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Статья посвящена анализу стилистических средств, играющих важную роль в рассказах Г. Х. Манро (Саки). В качестве двух основных характеристик, присущих стилю его рассказов, выделяются намеренное искажение идиоматических выражений и активное употребление формальной лексики в описании тривиальных, банальных ситуаций. В предлагаемой классификации рассказов Г. Х. Манро насчитывается пять типов текстов; в качестве основы классификации рассматриваются роль и функция используемых в текстах маркированных единиц. В статье отмечается близость стиля Г. Х. Манро эстетическому своеобразию работ таких авторов, как О. Уайльд, О. Бердсли, Р. Фербенк и др.

Ключевые слова: стиль; троп; фигура речи; коллокация; идиоматическое выражение.