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Saki, Nietzsche and the Superwolf

John Miller

The recurrent fascination with *Canis lupus* in the fiction of Hector Hugh Munro (more familiar under his penname, Saki) is perhaps best introduced with a story about another apex predator. In the October of 1893, installed in Munro's rooms at the Hôtel de France in Mandalay, Burma, where he was serving as an officer in the colonial police force, was a most unusual resident: a 'tiger kitten' he had adopted some months previously and which was inconveniently given, he explained in a letter to his sister Ethel, to 'fine romps' that greatly dismayed the 'fidgety old lady' in the adjoining apartment.[1] Munro's depiction of the developing tensions between the boisterous animal and its pompous human neighbour (a woman 'with a tongue and a settled conviction that [she] can manage everybody's affairs') are delivered with an amusement that makes light of the social codes the situation deliberately troubles:[2]

> the 'cub' had spent a large proportion of the afternoon pretending that [the] door was a besieged city, and it was a battering ram. And it does throw such vigour into its play. I met the old lady at dinner and was greeted with an icy stare which was refreshing in such a climate. That night the kitten broke out in a new direction; as soon as I went up to bed it began to roar […] The more I tried to comfort it the more inconsolable it grew. The situation was awful – in my room a noise like the lion-house at 4pm., while on the other side of the door rose the beautiful Litany of the church on England. Then I heard the

> rapid turning of leaves, she was evidently searching for Daniel to gain strength from the perusal of the lion's den story.[3]

The contrast Munro cultivates between the unmanageable predator and the buttoned-up world of the colonial hotel effects a blunt disruption of etiquette accentuated as the anecdote progresses. Although for a time afterwards the tiger behaves 'fairly well', its manners desert it again when it eats a handkerchief and sends a teacup 'flying into [a] plate'.[4] The ruin of these emblems of bourgeois order evidently functions as part of the self-fashioning of the young man out on his first commission and not immune to some youthful braggadocio. Munro was twenty-three at the time and, discovering himself a world away from the family home in Devon, appears keen to emphasise his sense of burgeoning empowerment in the context of Britain's imperial project. Ethel's acquisition of a Persian kitten in February the next year allows him to hammer the point home: 'of course I who have the untameable carnivora of the jungle roaming in savage freedom through my rooms, cannot feel any interest in mere domestic cats'.[5]

For all Munro's audacity in housing the tiger, the story invites reading through what seems now a fairly conventional symbolic structure, and one that is susceptible to an all-too-easy psychoanalytic interpretation (also clearly with colonial ramifications). The tiger is the primal, exotic presence that threatens to tear apart the stifling conventions of Victorian domesticity, a force that Munro both manages and embraces. On one side, we might extrapolate, is the animal energy of the id; on the other, the table cloths and doilies of the superego. Munro's narration of his companionship with the tiger makes considered use of its emblematic weight, an

arrangement, he jokingly suggests, in which the tiger is consciously complicit. As he explains to Ethel, 'It goes into lovely tiger attitudes, when it thinks I'm looking'.[6] Such a performance before its human and colonial master shows the tiger drawing attention to its status as an aesthetic and by extension political object. Crucially, Munro's contention is not without irony. The blithe assumption of the tiger's awareness and enjoyment of its role represents a purposefully exaggerated account of the extent of the penetration of human symbolic economies into animal minds. Conversely, therefore, the final effect of the tiger's 'lovely attitudes' is to disturb the readiness with which this kind of symbolism might be promulgated. To frame this problematic more broadly, and in doing so to introduce this chapter's overarching concern, the material animal and the figurative animal appear in close, complex and disquieting alignment in Munro's relation of an incident calculated to both shock and impress.

In his guise as Saki, Munro went on to produce two novels and a significant body of shorter fiction before his death in the trenches in 1916. Animals play a central role in both his biography (as Munro) and his fiction (as Saki).[7] Although, he would never number a wolf amongst his many unusual animal companions, they are a recurrent feature of his writing. A. J. Langguth cites the wolf as Munro's 'favourite beast'[8] and there is a good deal of evidence, both biographical and textual, to support this claim. An encounter with a menagerie in Buckinghamshire sees him write enthusiastically to Ethel of some 'seductive little wolf-puppies which you would have loved'; later, after Ethel's dog disappears, he encourages her (presumably in jest) to get a wolf instead.[9] Among his shorter fiction there are six lupine and/or lycanthropic stories: 'Reginald's Drama' from the debut collection *Reginald* (1904); 'Gabriel-Ernest' from its

follow-up *Reginald in Russia* (1910); 'The She-Wolf' and 'The Story-Teller' from *Beasts and Superbeasts* (1914); and 'The Wolves of Cernogratz' and 'The Interlopers' from the posthumously published *The Toys of Peace* (1919). There is also a significant lupine scene in his second novel, *When William Came* (1913). *Canis lupus* is, as this volume shows, the most over-determined of beasts, notably in its various gothic manifestations as a creature of 'ravening hunger and bestial ferocity' to quote Kirby Flower Smith;[10] wolves, therefore are paradigmatic creatures for investigating the kind of tension between the real and the figurative that develops in the narration of Munro's Burmese tiger. As such, Saki's writing forges a rich and subtle, if at times uncomfortable, contribution to the literary construction of wolves and werewolves in which the process of fabulation – the drive to make living animals into fables, part of the 'animal-really-means-human' assumption,[11] as Susan McHugh puts it – is both exemplified and critiqued.

I focus on three lupine moments in Saki's fiction that articulate his sense of the awkward balance between the task of writing about animals in an unsentimental, counter-anthropomorphic (and also counter-gothic) way and accommodating animals in the social critique his fiction performs. Saki's wolves, like Munro's real-life tiger, do a good deal of anthropomorphising symbolic and psychological work, but his stories are also, I will argue, at certain key points *about* the very process of rendering animals in humanist terms, a transaction which might be claimed as the overarching question literary animal studies is concerned with. Notwithstanding the symbolic mileage Munro extracts from his unlikely companion in the Hôtel de France, the animal beating on the door was terrifyingly and poignantly real. This materialist dimension of

Saki's fiction is not entirely lost (though it is at best very marginal) in Saki criticism. For the novelist Tom Sharpe, Saki's 'superbeasts always remain animals', in contrast to the anthropomorphic sentimentality of his contemporary A. A. Milne, for example.[12] Importantly, then, Saki's lupine fiction invites interrogation of exactly the problem that his writing might be taken to express, especially when read in the light of his adventures with the Burmese tiger. At the same time that wolves operate as signifiers in the conflicted political and, as we shall see, psycho-sexual dynamics of Saki's prose, their representation also, simultaneously, censures the appropriation of animals for cultural, symbolic purposes. Beginning *When William Came* and its depiction of performing wolves on the London stage, I move next to *Beasts and Superbeasts*' 'The She-Wolf' and the trickster Clovis's persuasion of an elite gathering that their hostess Mary Hampton has been magically transformed into a Siberian timber wolf. I conclude with 'Gabriel Ernest' in which a beautiful young werewolf wreaks havoc in the English countryside. Informing this wolfish oeuvre, I will argue, is a significant consanguinity between Saki's fiction and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, a link which Saki invokes with *Beasts and Superbeasts*, a title that gestures back to the great German thinker via George Bernard Shaw's 1903 play *Man and Superman*.

Nietzsche's recourse to animals in his writings has garnered a good deal of attention and a thorough reprise of this substantial body of work is impossible here.[13] A more specific connection between Nietzsche and the development of the literary (were)wolf has been noted by Chantal Bourgault du Coudray. The sense that Nietzsche, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau before him, 'idealized notions of a pre-modern, primal past in contrast to a debased, "civilized"

humanity' certainly speaks to Saki's interest in the disruption of domestic normality by predatory beasts.[14] If society, as Nietzsche complained in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, makes 'the wolf a dog',[15] Saki's depiction of wolves is geared in Nietzschean style towards refusing this taming. It is no surprise, therefore, that Nietzschean ideas have appeared occasionally in Saki criticism,[16] mainly with reference to the attitudes associated with Nietzsche's designation of the übermensch (the super– or overman), the model, as Margot Norris explains, of a 'human creature cured of its pathogenic culture and vitally reclaimed by its instinctual nature'.[17]

It is worth noting that the Saki/Nietzsche connection involves some disturbing ideological material; there are undoubtedly fascist elements in Saki's work that may remind us of how eagerly the Nazis laid claim to Nietzsche's thought.[18] Although this troubling politics is a part of this chapter, it is not its main focus. I am interested here in moving beyond a fetishisation of instinct to engage more specifically with the *representational* politics of Saki's wolves and the ways in which they appear through, as Antoine Traisnel argues of Nietszche's creatures, a kind of 'allegorical distance […] necessary in order to unsettle both a strictly figurative viewpoint *and* a naturalist perspective on animal life'.[19] Nietzsche, as Traisnel recounts, has drawn a certain amount of criticism, particularly from Elizabeth de Fontenay, for an inclination towards beastly allegory that 'does violence to the animal by capturing it in a dragnet of tropes and instrumentalizing it for strategic ends'.[20] So, as Ralph R. Acampora, summarizes 'references to animals in his corpus' might be understood as 'little more than rhetorical tactics, writerly embellishments, or metaphors pointing towards other (broadly humanistic) themes and issues of greater import'.[21] Traisnel's counter-argument is that Nietzsche's animals (especially his famous

ruminating cows) are ‘figures that operate as signifiers yet refuse to be reduced to the conceptual signification that the anxious philosopher seeks to impose on them’.[22] It is something like this operation that Saki performs in his writing of wolves.

Saki’s Animal Worlds

Before turning explicitly to Saki’s lupine imagination, it will be beneficial to expound the role of animals in his fiction a little more broadly. The scenario of the wild animal intruding on the domestic realm enacted in the Hôtel de France might be considered Saki’s signature motif. As Tim Youngs explains, the ‘anomalous is at the heart of Saki’s writing’.[23] More specifically, in Philip Stevick’s summary, Saki’s fiction consistently dramatizes the ‘comic incongruity of beasts and gentry’, most notably in *Beasts and Superbeasts* which includes, as Stevick enumerates, ‘boar-pigs, an elk, an ox, a cat, a hen, and all manner of imagined animals from sheep to wild dogs’.[24] The structural role of this creaturely cast is to disturb middle-class and aristocratic social mores, often in a menacing and violent way (though, importantly, animals also often appear, if a little less regularly, as victims in Saki’s world). So, in ‘The Boar-Pig’, Mrs Philidore Stossen and her daughter are prevented from accessing a garden party through a paddock by Tarquin, a ‘huge white Yorkshire’ pig freed by a disgruntled thirteen-year-old.[25] Or, in ‘The Stalled Ox’, the eponymous animal breaks first into the garden of Adela Pingsford and then, following the incompetent attentions of the cattle painter, Theophil Eshley, ‘through the open French window into the morning room’ (p. 347). With even greater anarchic force, ‘The Elk’, a usually tame denizen of a park in bucolic Woldshire, is eventually destroyed when in ‘a fit of exceptional

moroseness' it kills 'the Bickelbys' German governess' (p. 362), much to the distress of Mrs Teresa Thropplestance.

Both earlier and later collections provide examples of the same theme of the displaced beast wreaking havoc in homely Britain. 'Esme' from *The Chronicles of Clovis* (1911) sets a hyena in the way of the Baroness and Constance Broddle during a fox hunt; 'The Hedgehog' from *The Toys of Peace* (1919) shows that even seemingly harmless, native fauna can erupt into the domestic calm as the story moves from a game of mixed doubles at the Rectory to the haunting of Ada Bleek by 'an evil, creeping thing, a sort of monstrous hedgehog, of a dirty white colour, with black, loathsome claws that clicked and scraped along the floor, and narrow, yellow eyes of indescribable evil' (p. 478). The characteristically excessive names of Saki's human protagonists (we might also mention Gervase Cullumpton, Norman Gortsby or the proprietors of the department store Messrs. Goliath and Mastadon) contribute to a surreal ambience in which animal life flourishes in enormous variety and occasional ferocity at the expense of a privileged, normative (particularly heteronormative) culture. To continue to foster a broad sense of the connection between Saki and Nietzsche, if *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* comprises, as Jacques Derrida contends, 'one of the richest bestiaries in the Western philosophical library',[26] Saki's literary output is similarly beastly and contains, like Nietzsche's writing, a particular interest in beasts of prey. It is worth noting that the Dickensian exuberance of Saki's naming also often incorporates a hint (or more than a hint) of the animal (see, for example, Artemus Gibbon, Hatch-Mallard and the Mullet family). The name as a signifier of aristocratic family lines, decorum and social stability (especially in the status driven world of Saki's comedy) is

recalibrated to an unreliable, chaotic and uncanny realm continually subject to more-than-human activity. The effect, in Sharpe's precis, is of '[c]ivilization […] overthrown by a strange supernature', an implicitly Nietzschean pattern that 'comes at us more forcefully because it emerges from the setting of house party and afternoon tea, and all the hallowed conventions of Edwardian society'.[27]

The question of how, exactly, to read the disobedient beasts of Saki's fiction has been beset to date by two critical problems. Firstly and very pertinently for my concerns in this chapter, Saki criticism has rather self-defeatingly, highlighted the interpretive difficulties created by the stylistic accomplishment of his work – what Stevick refers to as the 'facile gloss' of his prose which, for Christopher Morley, 'offers no grasp for the solemnities of earnest criticism'.[28] As Christopher Lane explains 'his narratives rescind depth and spin out across a taut and brilliantly condensed semiotic of Edwardian etiquette'.[29] Following this style-over-substance hypothesis risks the reduction of Saki's animal characters to a self-enclosed aesthetics that denies the stories' referentiality, which is to say the possibility that they may also be about the world and its creatures in some, however deeply mediated sense. Rather, as we shall see, Saki attends knowingly to the semiotic processes Lane identifies so that it is the very idea of condensation – of distilling literary meaning from animal life – that his fiction circulates around in a significant number of instances.

Developing this problematic refusal of textual depth, a second issue concerns the way in which the immaculate surface of Saki's writing seems to invite a psychoanalytic approach in

which the representation of animals is necessarily assigned a human psychic function. In such readings, the apparent absence of philosophical depth acts to demand the assignation of a meaningful latent content to the ostensibly frivolous, if sometimes macabre manifest content. Lane's discussion sets out from 'the psychoanalytic premise that there is always a remainder of desire that identity cannot incorporate'.[30] For Lane, Saki's animals, 'fulfill the private dreams of cruelty that his "civilized" protagonists must repress', as part of what Sharpe describes, again in terms evocative of Nietzsche, as the stories' 'worship of instinct'.[31] Joseph S. Salemi exemplifies the dangerous limits of an approach in which the depiction of animals is seen to operate always necessarily from within a generic discourse of the animal as part of a 'vindictive zoology'[32] that serves to elucidate, however ambiguously, the psychic economies of human repression. Ultimately, for Salemi, Saki 'makes us aware that there is an animal within each of us, crouching and ready to spring'.[33] The insistent, carefully wrought depiction of animals in Saki's writing becomes a disappointingly simplistic cipher for a vaguely conceived animality that Salemi advises, in a headmasterish final twist, we would be 'well advised to keep in mind'.[34]

Psychoanalytic perspectives, as Lane's discussion amply demonstrates, are nonetheless useful in articulating some aspects of Saki's fiction, specifically (for Lane) the ways in which the depiction of disruptive animals contributes to the expression of the 'impossibly conflicted' relation between 'political allegiance' and 'homosexual desire' in the work of a writer equally remarkable for his 'virulent conservatism' as for his concern with 'the possibility of representing his homosexuality in fiction'.[35] Still to understand Saki's animal more fully we should continue along what should be a fairly obvious path, especially in the light of the Burmese material: that

behind and within this figurative and psychic labour, Saki's writing is involved with animals as animals and, as we shall see, with the kinds of ethical and political questions being debated in the twenty-first century's so-called animal turn.

When William Came

Saki's resentment towards anthropomorphism is most clearly dramatized in the wolf scene from *When William Came* with the scornful depiction of hyper-anthropomorphised animals doomed to a bizarre and deliberately troubling stage career. The context is a Britain that has been conquered by an invading German force; as such, *When William Came* exemplifies a notable anti-German strain in Saki's writing and a countervailing patriotic investment in supposed ideals of Britishness. At the heart of the story is Murrey Yeovil, an explorer and naturalist who has been absent in Eastern Siberia during the fateful events in Europe and who returns to his homeland to discover a Britain greatly changed. Chapter VIII focuses on an evening at the theatre in which the great and the good of the new regime are gathered with those, including Yeovil, still in a state of 'mourning' after the 'great catastrophe' of the 'national overthrow'.[36] The entertainment set before the house is clearly designed in mockery of the imagined character of a German Britain. A troupe of Japanese jugglers performs 'some artistic and quite uninteresting marvels with fans and butterflies and lacquer boxes' (p. 73); later the occasion's decadence is signalled in the avant-garde dancing of Gorla Mustelford, probably based on Isadora Duncan, whose 'running and ricocheting about the stage, looking rather like a wagtail in energetic pursuit of invisible

gnats and midges' (p. 75) parodies the artistic experiments of European modernism. But the most forthright demonstration of British cultural degeneration appears in the evening's second act.

As a key part of Saki's lupine imaginary, the scene is worth quoting at length.

> The music came to an end, episode number two in the evening's entertainment was signalled, the curtain of Alexandrine blue rolled heavily upward, and a troupe of performing wolves was presented to the public. Yeovil had encountered wolves in North African deserts and in Siberian forest and wold, he had seen them at twilight stealing like dark shadows across the snow, and heard their long whimpering howl in the darkness amid the pines; he could well understand how a magic lore had grown up round them through the ages among the peoples of four continents, how their name had passed into a hundred strange sayings and inspired a hundred traditions. And now he saw them ride round the stage on tricycles, with grotesque ruffles round their necks and clown caps on their heads, their eyes blinking miserably in the blaze of the footlights. In response to the applause of the house a stout, atrociously smiling man in evening dress came forward and bowed; he had had nothing to do either with the capture or the training of the animals, having bought them ready for use from a continental emporium where wild beasts were prepared for the music-hall market, but he continued bowing and smiling till the curtain fell (p. 72).

The episode's movement from Yeovil's recollection of his adventures in the world's remotest corners to the tawdry spectacle of the music-hall wolves frames the novel's concern with nationhood in ecological terms. National strength is vouchsafed by a sensibility that thinks nothing of facing up to the world's wildest denizens; national waning sees those denizens reduced to a pitiable condition 'with grotesque ruffles round their necks and clown caps on their heads'. Central to Saki's message is the contrast between the globe-trotting Yeovil and the emasculated figure of the 'stout, atrociously smiling man in evening dress' who orchestrates the gaudy show without any involvement in the more virile business of the 'the capture or the training of the animals'. The wolves themselves, Saki is at pains to emphasise, are thoroughly depressed, 'their eyes blinking miserably in the blaze of the footlights'. This investment in the wolves' condition contains at least the seed of pro-animal, ethical thought, though there is also a more obvious and abstract point. Saki craves animality and bemoans its taming as a crucial part of the imaginary of his nationalist politics.

Saki's depiction of the negation of the wolves' animal natures (as set against Yeovil's adventuring) intersects strikingly with Nietzsche's condemnation of civilisation and his sense of humanity as something to be overcome by the coming übermensch. The Saint of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*'s 'Introductory Discourse' advises 'Go not to men, but tarry in the forest! Go rather to the beasts!'[37] Zarathustra's ensuing exaltation of the superman as 'the meaning of the earth'[38] is predicated on a kind of turning towards animals embodied by Yeovil who might be taken, in Traisnel's summary of Nietzsche's übermensch, to encapsulate 'the reconnection of humans with the world they dreamed themselves detached from'.[39] Following this reasoning would identify

his Siberian sojourn as the locus of authenticity, earthliness and animality that strikingly juxtaposes the sorry anthropomorphic sight of the trike-riding wolves. Saki's representation of Yeovil's recollection, however, complicates the ease with which this move might be made, turning as he does to the default gothic setting of the wolves 'stealing like dark shadows across the snow' and voicing their 'whimpering howl in the darkness amid the pines'. Any sense that Yeovil's memory of the Siberian wolves constitutes a moment of profound ecological connection is eroded by the all-too-familiar lupine tropes. Crucially, these lead to a reflection on the processes of translation that see an already thoroughly mediated scene provide the basis for 'a magic *lore*' through which 'their *name* had passed into a hundred strange *sayings* and inspired a hundred *traditions*'. Yeovil's connection, if it is with anything, is with language rather than animals. Clearly, this forms a more desirable example of anthropomorphism than that of the London stage, but the enclosure of the wolves within a circle of textual forms highlights how Saki shares not just Nietzsche's craving for the transcendent form of the übermensch, but also his concern with human representations as inevitably distanced from the animal self, a theme that surfaces again in *Beasts and Superbeasts*' 'The She-Wolf'.

'The She-Wolf'

Russia is important in Saki's prose. Munro spent a good deal of time in Eastern Europe; the only book he published under his own name was a now little known historical study, *The Rise of the Russian Empire* (1900) Byrne summarises how Saki's pursuit of the 'whiff of the feral' frequently involved 'an eastern European register of wolves and steppes and icy spaces'.[40]

Accordingly, *The Rise of the Russian Empire* does not hesitate to bring wolves into the foreground, pondering at some length medieval Russian lycanthropy and anticipating Yeovil's thoughts in *When William Came* in a passage on 'Eastern mysticism': 'The shambling form, the wailing howl, and the narrow eyes that gleamed wicked hunger in the winter woods gave the wolf a reputation for uncanny powers, and the old Slavic folk-songs clearly set forth a belief in wehr-wolf lore.'[41] It is the role of magic in relation to wolves that Saki develops in 'The She-Wolf' through the figure of Leonard Bilseter who offers a neat counterpart to Murrey Yeovil.

Like Yeovil, Bilsiter has recently returned to Britain from Russia, most immediately from a long-distance railway journey beset by industrial action during which he is initiated into Russian folklore by a 'dealer in harness and metalware' he meets at a 'wayside station' (p. 236). Much taken with 'Siberian Magic', back in England Bilsiter makes 'detailed allusions to the enormous powers' of this 'esoteric force' (p. 236) with the result that the host of a house-party, Mary Hampton, issues a sudden and surprising request: 'I wish you would turn me into a wolf, Mr Bilsiter' (p. 236). Notwithstanding his mystical bluster, Bilsiter is understandably reticent, and the eaves-dropping Clovis Sangrail hatches a plan to expose the fraudulent would-be magician. Speaking to his friend Lord Pabham, a collector of wild animals, Clovis is able to borrow a timber-wolf so that after Bilseter launches into another grandiloquent discourse on 'the subject of unseen powers' (p. 237), Clovis swaps Mrs Hampton for the wolf to leave the gathered company confronted by an 'evil-looking grey beast that was peering at them from amid a setting of fern and azalea' (p. 238). The horrified Bilseter is forced to admit he has no idea how to return Mrs Hampton to human form and Lord Pabham lures the wolf away with the sugar bowl. Mrs

Hampton (who had been in on the joke all along) returns, and with Bilseter flabbergasted, Clovis claims responsibility:

> you see, I happen to have lived for a couple of years in North-Eastern Russia, and I have more than a tourist's acquaintance with the magic craft of that region. One does not care to speak about these strange powers, but once in a way, when one hears a lot of nonsense being talked about them, one is tempted to show what Siberian magic can accomplish in the hands of someone who really understands it (p. 241).

There are a number of immediate points of connection between 'The She-Wolf' and Saki's other animal writings. As Mrs Hampton's macaws react fearfully to the timber-wolf's arrival, breaking forth into 'ear-splitting screams' (p. 238), the story resolves into the signature Sakian juxtaposition of the wild and the domestic.

Perhaps most significantly, 'The She-Wolf' establishes Saki's concern with the *super*natural, that most central of gothic tropes. There is considerably more to the supernatural, both in Saki's writing and more broadly, than merely the sense of the occult, the mysterious or the unexplainable. As the opening story of *Beasts and Superbeasts*, 'The She-Wolf' speaks to the idea of the transcendent or the beyond; the collection concerns animals and those creatures that exist somehow in a superlative or excessive relation to natural historical animals. In this context, and as a key allusion to Nietzsche, Saki's intertextual reference to Bernard Shaw is worth briefly

expanding on. Shaw was exactly the kind of bohemian socialist the patrician Munro most despised and the title of *Beasts and Superbeasts* represents, as Langguth puts it, 'one of Hector's japes against GBS'; seemingly these were not infrequent.[42] In Shaw's 'Epistle Dedicatory' to *Man and Superman* he lists Nietzsche as 'among the writers whose peculiar sense of the world I recognize as more or less akin to my own' and the drama imagines the advance of man unfolding through a reconfiguration of gender relationships.[43] As he argues in 'The Revolutionist's Handbook', published as an appendix to the play, marriage 'whilst it is made an indispensable condition of mating, will delay the advent of the Superman as effectually as Property'.[44] Saki's substitution of 'beast' for 'man' sees him, in a sense, looking to out-Nietzsche Shaw with a wilder and more primal literary vision that signals a forceful break with Shaw's left-wing humanism and its commitment to 'the Socialist's dream of "the socialization of the means of production and exchange,"' and 'the Positivist's dream of moralizing the capitalist'.[45] The superbeast of Saki's title might be taken, then, to figure both the metaphysical animal and a response to the Nietzschean superman with the instinctual force that is usually taken to signify.

The central point of 'The She-Wolf' is the ironic inapproriateness of the prefix 'super' for the story's action. As Youngs summarises, 'Saki mocks the protagonist's pretensions to supernatural abilities' and 'parodies those stories in which transmutations are said to occur'.[46] The overarching effect might, then, be taken as a prosaic literalism that offsets the fantastic narratives Bilseter crafts and which Clovis sarcastically repeats. To read the collection's title into the events of its opening story, the story satirises the allure of the superwolf, the glamorous, magical creature of the steppes, available to shamanic metamorphosis, with the somewhat

disappointing reality of the mere wolf. Much of the story's comedy inheres in the development of the party's response to the wolf's arrival from an initial 'general chaos of fright and bewilderment' (p. 238) to a somewhat calmer state after the wolf is given a sugar lump. An echo of Munro's Burmese tiger appears in the animal's participation in the rituals of Edwardian society, though the wolf has far better manners than the tiger, taking its sweet treat nicely and shedding 'some of its terrors' (p. 240) in the process. Indeed, the tension between the wolf and the superwolf ultimately unfolds in the tension between two distinct types of ritual, the 'magic-craft' of north-eastern Russia, versus the etiquette of urban privilege. It is the disturbance of etiquette that emerges as the most enduring problem presented by Mrs Hampton's replacement by the timber wolf. As one Mrs Hoops complains, 'If our hostess really has vanished out of human form … none of the ladies of the party can very well remain. I absolutely decline to be chaperoned by a wolf!' (p. 240) Bilseter's supposed shamanism turns out to be just extremely inconvenient.

In the exposure of the self-aggrandizing Bilseter, 'The She-Wolf' is a story on one level with a straightforward moral. The Russian traveller gets his just deserts for claiming entry to a world he does not understand; from the beginning Saki draws attention to a fundamental lack in Bilseter's character as 'one of those people who have failed to find this world attractive or interesting' (p. 235). Behind this is a larger point about the irreconcilable distance of twentieth-century British society from a shamanic past imagined as still existing in underdeveloped, wild Siberia. The superwolf, that wolf metaphysical, is still structured, then, as a figure of desire. For all the story's mockery of Bilseter's too-easy seduction by the romance of the East, Clovis's

parting rejoinder that he has 'more than a tourist's acquaintance with the magic craft of that region' (p. 241) leaves the possibility of the mystical wolf intact, somewhat against the direction of Youngs' argument. So 'The She-Wolf', like *When William Came* and *The Rise of the Russian Empire*, sees Saki/Munro apparently buying into the wolf's mythic, gothic nature. Part of this, as with *When William Came* but more strongly, is to resent the taming of animals into an effete urban economy while at the same time clinging on to their wildness as not entirely reducible to or incorporated into that bourgeois order. Even in *When William Came*'s sorry spectacle, the sense of the wolves' misery indicates their yearning for the world beyond their torment. Saki's description of the she-wolf '*peering*' at the party from the ferns likewise shows an animal consciousness, perhaps a defiant one, looking in on the culture that now contains it.

Crucially, however, 'The She-Wolf' figures the mythic opposite to the bitter anthropomorphic reality as necessarily out of reach. Clovis's rejoinder to Bilseter merely replaces one story about Russian wolf magic with another; Clovis's credentials are uncertain and, of course, his supposed transformation of Mrs Hampton into the wolf is only a witty illusion. The situation we are left with, then, is one in which Saki craves for access to a wild lupine realm while at the same time exposing that desire as simultaneously over-written and unwritable. It is in this regard that Saki finds his most subtle and significant relation to Nietzsche. Youngs argues of Saki that his fiction demonstrates 'an unease about the suitability of appearance to substance; of outward form to inner nature'.[47] Traisnel, referring to the cows of *Thus Spake Zarathrustra*, argues that the beggar who meets them 'dreams of an unmediated relationship with the animals'

but receives only a ‘confused stare’.[48] Saki’s wolves accordingly foreground the desires and restrictions inherent in the work of anthropomorphism.

‘Gabriel-Ernest’

The sense of a counter-anthropomorphic agenda in Saki’s representation of wolves is perhaps hardest to maintain in relation to ‘Gabriel-Ernest’, his only werewolf story and the representation of the lupine that most directly reprises the (were)wolf’s conventional function as an emblem of threatening and supposedly aberrant sexuality. As a creature solely (we presume) of the imagination, the lycanthrope is automatically assigned to the category of the mythic, and so to exist at a distance from ecological materiality. Indeed, as the exemplary metamorphic figure of the human in animal form and the animal in human form, the werewolf could never only be ‘the animal’. Accordingly, ‘Gabriel-Ernest’ forms an important part of Saki’s engagement with the representational politics surrounding wolves and werewolves, particularly for its concern with the impossibility of representing the werewolf’s animal nature.

In brief, ‘Gabriel-Ernest’ concerns the discovery of a ‘wild beast’ in the country estate of one Van Cheele, initially by his guest, the artist Cunningham, who spies something in the woods before he departs for the station. Shortly afterwards, Van Cheele, out for an afternoon walk, encounters a curious stranger described in language with an unmistakeable erotic charge:

> On a shelf of smooth stone overhanging a deep pool in the hollow of an oak coppice a boy of about sixteen lay asprawl, drying his wet brown limbs luxuriously in the sun. His wet hair, parted by a recent dive, lay close to his head, and his light-brown eyes, so light that there was an almost tigerish gleam in them, were turned towards Van Cheele with a certain lazy watchfulness (p. 64).

The story's sensuous attention to the young male body through an intimate tactile register (the smooth stone, the wet limbs, the wet hair) shifts rapidly to menace as the boy, when questioned by Van Cheele, makes several suggestive remarks about his predatory habits; he confesses that he feeds on the flesh of 'rabbits, wild-fowl, hares, poultry, lambs in their season [and] children when I can get any' (p. 64). His enjoyment of flesh – he pronounces 'the word with slow relish, as though he were eating it' – operates as the immediate signal of the dangerous allure of same-sex desire (p. 64). Van Cheele quickly moves off to reflect on the appearance of this 'astonishing young savage' (p. 66), who, ever the landowner, he suspects of poaching. He is later surprised to discover the boy naked in his morning room, once again 'asprawl', this time 'on the ottoman, in an attitude of almost exaggerated repose' (p. 67).

The narrative develops with the arrival of Van Cheele's maiden aunt. Like Oscar Wilde and P. G. Wodehouse, to whom his fiction has often been compared, Saki's stories are excessively concerned with aunts, for the most part as stereotypical figures of a restrictive social

order.[49] Here, charitably, the aunt blithely puts their visitor down as a 'poor boy who has lost his way' (p. 67) and, in a clear Wildean reference, names him 'Gabriel-Ernest'. Van Cheele has misgivings about his aunt's good intentions and contacts Cunningham to request he expands on his hints about the glimpsed 'wild beast'. Here is how his story unfolds. Observing a 'naked boy' whose 'pose was so suggestive of some wild faun of Pagan myth that [he] instantly wanted to engage him as a model', Cunningham is surprised that as the evening sun fades, the boy vanishes and in his place 'on the open hillside where [he] had been standing a second ago, stood a large wolf, blackish in colour, with gleaming fangs and cruel, yellow eyes' (p. 68). Van Cheele is a little embarrassed by his conclusion that 'Gabriel-Ernest is a werewolf' (p. 68), but the suspicion appears to be tragically confirmed by the death of a child that Gabriel-Ernest had been trusted to take safely home. Gabriel-Ernest disappears too and is thought to have died a heroic death trying to rescue the child from the mill-stream. But while his aunt 'sincerely mourned her foundling' (p. 69), Van Cheele pointedly refuses to subscribe to the 'Gabriel-Ernest memorial' (p. 69).

'Gabriel-Ernest' is an important story in Saki's oeuvre. It significance is widely construed to lie in its status as one of his most direct commentaries on the relation of homosexual desire to heteronormative social forces and therefore as evidence against an assertion made by Ethel Munro (among others) that, in Byrne's description, the 'one subject her brother never wrote about was sex'.[50] Byrne notes how John Addington Symonds, a contemporary of Saki and another gay writer (who Munro spent some time with in Davos, Switzerland), codes the 'wolf' as a sign of same-sex desire – specifically in Symonds' language the wolf signifies 'the hankering after males' – and the usage is easily transferred to 'Gabriel-Ernest'.[51] The story's boy/wolf is an

example of the recurring figure in Saki's fiction that Byrne dubs the 'feral ephebe, the sleek young male killer'[52] who as a figure of longing and menace evokes both homosexual attraction and its disavowal, a conflicted condition that is encapsulated in the tale's opening sentence. Cunningham's remark to Van Cheele, 'There is a wild beast in your woods' (p. 63), might be taken to pose the woods as the unconscious and the beast as the figure of repressed gay desire that threatens to emerge. A key part of the story, then, is the way that its spatial politics operates in relation to psychoanalytical topographies.

As the 'disordering and haunting "wildness"' Gabriel-Ernest represents is brought uncomfortably into the Van Cheeles' domestic arrangements, the home comes to operates, Lane argues, as something like Hélène Cixous's 'Realm of the Proper'. That, as Cixous explains, carries 'the sense of the general cultural heterosocial establishment in which man's reign is held to be proper'.[53] Such an intrusion is a familiar part of the lycanthrope's frisson. Du Coudray traces how the literary history of the werewolf since the Romantic period routinely features a 'spatialization of subjectivity' that pivots on 'an internal-external or depth-surface duality'.[54] The wolf – as the emblem of unconscious or unspeakable drives – exists simultaneously both *within* the human as the sign of the 'tenacious concept of the "beast within"' and *beyond* the pale of the human (read as culture and civilisation) as the sign of the dangerous other.[55] Thus, Gabriel-Ernest's arrival in the Van Cheeles' morning room represents the surfacing of the depths of an animalistic desire into the domestic realm from which it is necessarily excluded. As Saki has his narrator reflect, the 'prospect of this wild, nude animal in Van Cheele's primly ordered house was certainly an alarming one' (p. 65). In this sense, 'Gabriel-Ernest's narrative structure closely

reproduces Munro's outré gesture at the Hôtel de France. It is worth noting Saki's reiterated insistence on the 'tigerish gleam' in the boy's eyes, as if that incident were being specifically recalled and loaded with a further array of metaphoric possibilities.[56]

Significantly, the function of the 'proper' and so socially acceptable here is closely related to the cognate term 'property'. 'Gabriel-Ernest' is a story in large part about trespass. As Van Cheele begins to piece together the cause of his missing poultry, lambs and hares during the proprietorial walk home through his estate following his first strange meeting with the boy, Saki foregrounds an anxiety about ownership that emerges bluntly in the landowner's immediate instruction to the boy 'You can't live in the woods' (p. 64). As the werewolf moving between the human and the animal the boy is able to evade two economic designations; Gabriel-Ernest is neither the landowner's animal property, nor a human subject liable for rent (or indeed prosecution for poaching). The questions around sexuality that the story unavoidably raises with its luxurious attention to the naked male body are imbricated, therefore, within wider socio-political concerns in which heteronormativity and economic stability function neatly, and unsurprisingly, as a pair. Consequently, the eruption of animality into a conservative social domain serves to signal, to return to Lane's terms, the impossibility of incorporating homosexuality into a world of maiden aunts and morning rooms that might be taken to stand in for British patrimony more generally. Economic and patriarchal reproduction are stalled by the figure of the werewolf.

What this leaves us with is certainly, in part, a reaffirmation of the werewolf as the most densely symbolic and politicised of creatures; the body of the werewolf articulates a range of human anxieties, an operation that is consolidated by the apparent resolution of the story into two opposed and generic forms of animality, a tactic that anticipates the depiction of Mrs Hampton's macaws in 'The She-Wolf'. A 'staid and elderly spaniel' bolts 'out of the house at the first incoming of the boy', while the canary puts 'itself on an allowance of frightened cheeps' (p. 67). The werewolf, characteristically, is the wild force that distresses the domesticated creatures of the Van Cheeles' home. There are crucial ways, however, in which the idea of the werewolf as a cipher for animality as forbidden desire is complicated by Saki. 'Gabriel-Ernest' is a story that consistently returns to the topic of representation, drawing attention, significantly, to numerous textual and artistic forms. On discovering the naked boy in his morning room, Van Cheele's instinctive reaction is to endeavour to obscure 'as much of his unwelcome guest as possible under the folds of a *Morning Post*' (p. 67). Later, after the boy's true nature has been rumbled, Van Cheele dismisses 'the idea of a telegram' (p. 68); Cunningham's artistic intentions are stymied by the boy's lycanthropic metamorphosis. 'Gabriel-Ernest' presents therefore a comic interplay between the drive to representation and its inevitable failure. The daily paper standing in for the boy's missing underwear humorously hints at the incapacity of textual production to reveal the boy's nature – the joke is that it can only, farcically, *conceal* it. The one textual form the story allows to be produced is the aunt's memorial; as a text to be preserved in perpetuity, this represents the most institutionally solid of inscriptions, but one that is based on fantasy and misapprehension. To the naïve Miss Van Cheele, the werewolf appeals 'as warmly as a stray kitten or derelict puppy would have done' (p. 67); her invention of a name for him cannot mask the fact that he remains, in the story's penultimate sentence, an 'unknown boy' (p. 69).

For sure, Saki's focus on the failure of representation is a powerful part of the story's engagement with the theme of sexuality. An immediate reference point is Lord Alfred Douglas's famous identification in his 1894 poem 'Two Loves' of 'the love that dare not speak its name'.[57] Looking forward, we might also cite the anxiety of E. M. Forster's eponymous *Maurice* in announcing that he is 'an *unspeakable* of the Oscar Wilde sort' (emphasis added).[58] Such disruptions in the process of signification have the effect of embroiling the animal metaphor (if that is what the lycanthrope is condemned to be) in an infinite deferral; the werewolf is the sign of that which must not be signified. This break is complemented by a superfluity of heterogeneous animal imagery that confuses the often normative logics of lycanthropic figuration. In place of a pure wolfishness, Gabriel-Ernest's seductive animal bearing is comprised of the characteristics of other species too, not just his eyes' 'tigerish gleam', but also, more curiously, his lutrine deportment. As he turns away from Van Cheele, the narrator comments that 'In an otter the movement would not have been remarkable; in a boy Van Cheele found it sufficiently startling' (p. 65). Rather than being figured through the unitary metamorphosis of human to wolf (and back again), Gabriel-Ernest emerges through a variously configured animality that exceeds and evades the story's attempt to designate him, both zoologically and symbolically. The image of the otter, which Byrne takes as 'a fantasy of an amphibian youth'[59] – able that is to move between social (and indeed anti-social) worlds – replaces the clichés of the lycanthropic imagination with a slippery creaturely presence much less appropriable by the heteronormative and humanist (or anthroponormative)[60] figure of the aunt.

‘Gabriel-Ernest’, then, does more than simply tag homosexuality onto the figure of the untameable animal. Rather, it illustrates the way in which same-sex love and animal lives share an exteriority to conventional Edwardian modes of representation. In doing so, it contributes to the same agenda that Saki develops in his later lupine writings, refusing a simplified anthropomorphism and occupying a far more ambiguous and complex position with regard to the task of writing wolves and werewolves. To return to the terms of Traisnel’s thesis on Nietzsche, ‘Gabriel-Ernest’ can be read neither as a natural history of an objectively knowable world, nor as an exercise in figuration, but instead as a balancing of both these possibilities marked, above all, by a dissatisfaction with a humanism that mitigates towards the taming of animal life.

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1 Cited in Sandie Byrne, *The Unbearable Saki: The Work of H. H. Munro* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 68.

2 Cited in A. J. Langguth, *Saki: A Life of Hector Hugh Munro* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 45.

3 Byrne, *The Unbearable Saki*, p. 68–69.

4 Byrne, *The Unbearable Saki*, p. 69.

5 Byrne, *The Unbearable Saki*, p. 69.

6 Langguth, *Saki*, p. 45.

7 Nomenclature becomes a testing issue when writing about Munro/Saki. Lane provides a compelling discussion of the intimacies and tensions between the literary and biographical figures. See Langguth, pp. 61-63 for an explanation of the origins of the soubriquet Saki in Munro’s reading of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. For an interesting alternative take on

Munro's choice of the 'Saki', see Tom Sharpe, 'Introduction' in *The Best of Saki* (London: Picador, 1976), pp. 13-14. For practical purposes I follow the usual convention in this essay of referring to the biographical figure as Munro and the literary author as Saki, although I am lead once or twice to use the clumsier Munro/Saki when referring simultaneously to both.

8 Langguth, *Saki*, p. 263.

9 Cited in Langguth, *Saki*, p. 72; 122.

10 Kirby Flower Smith, 'An Historical Study of the Werewolf in Literature', *PMLA*, 9. 1. 1894, p. 2.

11 Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 8.

12 Sharpe, 'Introduction', p. 8.

13 I am particularly indebted in this essay to Derek Ryan's discussion of Nietzsche in *Animal Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). Other important studies include (amongst others) Vanessa Lemm's *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy: Culture, Politics and the Animality of the Human Being* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), Christa Davis Acampora and Ralph R Acampora's edited *A Nietzschean Bestiary: Becoming Animal Beyond Docile and Brutal* (New York; Rowman and Littlefield, 2004) and, going a little further back, Margot Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988).

14 Chantal Bourgault du Coudray, *The Curse of the Werewolf: Fantasy, Horror and the Beast Within* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006), p. 7.

15 F. W Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (London: Everyman, 1933), p. 152.

16 See particularly Byrne, *The Unbearable Saki*, pp. 144, 158, 257.

17 Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination*, p. 79.

18 For a discussion of wolves, werewolves and the Nazis that incorporates an account of elements of Nietzsche's work see du Coudray, *The Curse of the Werewolf*, pp. 99-102 and pp. 105-107.

19 Antoine Traisnel, 'Zarathustra's Philosafari', *Humanimalia*, 3. 2, 2012, p. 87.

20 Traisnel, 'Zarathustra's Philosafari', p. 87.

21 Ralph R. Acampora, 'Nietzsche's Feral Philosophy: Thinking Through an Animal Imaginary' in Christa Davis Acampora and Ralph R Acampora (eds.), *A Nietzschean Bestiary: Becoming Animal Beyond Docile and Brutal* (New York; Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), pp. 1–2.

22 Traisnel, 'Zarathustra's Philosafari', p. 91.

23 Tim Youngs, *Beastly Journeys: Travel and Transformation at the Fin de Siècle* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 200.

24 Philip Stevick, 'Saki's Beasts', *English Literature in Transition*, 9. 1. 1966, p. 34. It is worth noting that there are some tragic biographical circumstances that intersect with, and may well lie behind, Saki/Munro's apparent fixation with incongruous human/animal interactions. Bizarrely,

Munro's mother Mary was killed by a 'runaway cow' in Devon when he was just two years old (see Langguth, *Saki*, p. 7). Going further back into Munro family history, in 1793 saw another relative, one Lieutenant Munro killed by a tiger in India after 'retiring behind a bush for "a necessary moment", presumably to urinate' while out hunting (Byrne, *The Unbearable Saki*, p. 4).

25 Saki, *The Complete Short Stories* (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 246. Subsequent references to this edition occur in parenthesis in the text.

26 Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 3.

27 Sharpe, 'Introduction', p. 8.

28 Stevick, 'Saki's Beasts', p. 33.

29 Christopher Lane, *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 213.

30 Lane, *The Ruling Passion*, p. 215.

31 Lane, *The Ruling Passion*, p. 217; Sharpe, 'Introduction', p. 200.

32 Joseph S. Salemi, 'An Asp Lurking in an Apple-Charlotte: Animal Violence in Saki's *Chronicles of Clovis*', *Studies in Short Fiction*, 26. 4. 1989, p. 430.

33 Salemi, 'An Asp Lurking in an Apple-Charlotte', p. 430.

34 Salemi, 'An Asp Lurking in an Apple-Charlotte', p. 430.

35 Lane, *The Ruling Passion*, pp. 212-213; p. 223; p. 213.

36 Saki, *When William Came* (London: Penguin, 1941), p. 69. Subsequent references to this edition occur in parenthesis in the text.

37 Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 5.

38 Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 6.

39 Traisnel, 'Zarathustra's Philosafari', p. 95.

40 Byrne, *The Unbearable Saki*, p. 162.

41 H. H. Munro, *The Rise of the Russian Empire* (London: Grant Richards, 1900), p. 5.

42 Langguth, *Saki*, p. 263.

43 George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 29.

44 Shaw, *Man and Superman*, p. 219.

45 Shaw, *Man and Superman*, p. 245.

46 Youngs, *Beastly Journeys*, pp. 199; 200.

47 Youngs, *Beastly Journeys*, p. 199.

48 Traisnel, 'Zarathustra's Philosafari', p. 92.

49 As A. J. Langguth observes, Saki's stories 'abound with aunts, whose emotions range from unfeeling to diabolic' (*Saki*, p. 9. Langguth also provides an extended discussion of Munro's

own seemingly very trying aunts who, after his mother's untimely death, played a major role in his upbringing.

50 Byrne, *The Unbearable Saki*, p. 159.

51 Cited in Byrne, *The Unbearable Saki*, p. 50

52 Byrne, *The Unbearable Saki*, p. 50

53 Lane, *The Ruling Passion*, p. 216; Hélène Cixous and Annette Kuhn, 'Castration or Decapitation', *Signs*, 7. 1, 1981, p. 50.

54 Du Coudray, *The Curse of the Werewolf*, p. 3.

55 Du Coudray, *The Curse of the Werewolf*, p. 91.

56 The dedication of *The Chronicles of Clovis* to a 'To the lynx kitten' which Langguth sees as offered with the 'secret purpose' of paying tribute to a 'hidden love' provides further evidence of a connection between imagery of apex predators and same-sex love Saki's work. See Langguth, *Saki*, p. 188.

57 Lord Alfred Douglas, 'Two Loves', *The Chameleon*, 1. 1. 1894, p. 28.

58 E. M. Forster, *Maurice* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 139.

59 Byrne, *The Unbearable Saki*, p. 158.

60 I am indebted to Tom Tyler for the term 'anthroponormative'. See http://www.cyberchimp.co.uk/research/