

Analyses of Conradin's Becoming-animal in Saki's *Serdni Vashtar*

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Hector Hugo Munro (best known by his pen name Saki) is generally categorized as a master of short story who wrote witty and occasionally macabre stories that satirized hypocrisies and pretensions of Edwardian British society. However, one of the most prominent features of his short stories is that they are imbued with various animal characters, and his central positioning of the animal characters provides us a new perspective to interpret the relationship between animals and human beings. In Deleuze (and Guattari)'s philosophical thoughts and literary criticism, Becoming is of great importance. In Saki's short story *Serdni Vashtar*, through Becoming-animal, the protagonist Conradin designed a beautiful line of flight and achieved his deterritorialization. Through his deterritorialization, he succeeded in getting rid of his cousin's control and enhancing his molecular power to fight against the molar power of his cousin. Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyze the reasons and potential powers of Conradin's becoming-animal, uncover the significance of Becoming in the current post-humanist context and explore a new form of relationship between human beings and animals from the perspective of Becoming-animal.

Keywords: Becoming-animal, line of flight, deterritorialization, molecular forces

Introduction

Hector Hugo Munro (best known by his pen name Saki) is generally categorized as a master of short story who wrote witty and occasionally macabre stories that satirized hypocrisies and pretensions of Edwardian British society and culture. Nevertheless, one of the most prominent features of his short stories is that they are imbued with various animal characters and his central positioning of the animal characters provides us a new perspective to interpret the relationship between animals and human beings. In his short story *Serdni Vashtar*, Saki not only explodes the pomposity of adults and their conservative treatment of children but also the wrongdoings of adults toward animals. In order to get rid of this hypocritical adult-world, Conradin performed his revenge. Through Becoming-animal, Conradin aligned with the animals and enhanced his power.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari interpret Ahab's capture of Moby Dick as a kind of Becoming-animal. Ahab becomes the whale in the course of capturing it and the whale becomes something else, a wall of whiteness. At that moment, they are both deterritorialized, and the borderline and threshold are transgressed to form new beings. That is how Becoming happens and how the line of flight is produced. By following this classic example, the author of this paper will attempt to reinterpret Saki's short story *Serdini*

Vashtar from the same perspective and draw on three fundamental ideas: molecular forces, deterritorialization, and line of flight that produced in the story, trying to figure out how the child protagonist interacts with the animal characters to form new beings.

Becoming Houden Hen: The Design of Line of Flight

To analyze Becoming in *Serdni Vashtar*, the environment in which Becoming happened should be initially taken into consideration. In the story of *Serdni Vashtar*, Conradin “lives in a dull, cheerless garden, overlooked by so many windows that were ready to open with a message not to do this or that or a reminder that medicine were due, he found little attraction” (Munro, 1976, p. 136). At one point, in such an environment, Conradin as a ten-year-old boy, is shut down from the outside of the world, and restrained in a fixed space with neither friends nor classmates. At another point, his cousin is very indifferent to him, not treating him as a family but restricting him not to do this or not to do that in the name of ‘for his good’, the sterility and dullness of the house lead to his physical and mental illness. The desire to escape from the existing environment and the yearning for another environment is one of the key drives to Conradin’s Becoming. “In a forgotten corner, almost hidden behind a dismal shrubbery” (Munro, 1976, p. 137), he finds two real creatures: a Houden hen and a large polecat-ferret, they live in almost the same environment as him in which nobody nurtures. However, because his real world is so unpleasant that this corner on the contrary can free him from the suffocating garden. At this juncture, as a child, out of the instinctive connection toward animals, he feels at ease with them. Viewing their abodes as a haven where he can entertain himself and do lots of mystic stuff. It is in this toolshed that he designs a line of flight to pursue his liberation. Soon enough, the toolshed finally becomes the premise and the base of his Becoming-animal.

Becoming-animal is a significant way for Conradin to escape from Mr.De Ropp’s hypocritical faith and dull life, realizing his deterritorialization through rejecting to be homogenized and casting off the tradition. Conradin’s first attempt at Becoming is to Becoming the Houden hen. For a long time, under the control of Mr.DeRopp, except in his imagination, Conradin has to disguise himself with a mask and suppresses his own desire for pursuing a life full of vitality and energy instead of getting trapped in a dull world. His passion did not have a vent to let out until he discovered the animals. In front of the houden hen, he first finds an outlet to pour all his sincere love because he and his cousin Mrs.De Ropp hate each other so much that his world is full of hatred and darkness. Thus he fervently lavishes his affection on the hen that he adores. “The Houden hen represents the pleasures of his imagination and it is the canvas onto which Conradin paints one of his most elaborate fantasies. While the Houden hen doesn’t become part of the cult of Sredni Vashtar (a pagan religion Conradin invents that stands in direct opposition to Mrs.De Ropp’s stodgy church-going. Conradin makes it obvious that the hen is different from Mrs. De Ropp and he deems the hen an Anabaptist, who breaks away from the mainline Christian religions. He is on his way to Becoming Houden hen. At one point, he is creating and unleashing the particles of his molecular power, at another point, his Becoming molecular undermines the great molar power of his cousin’s. “Becoming is the movement from major (the constant) to minor (the variable); it is a movement from molar to molecular combinations, from unity to complexity, that is from organization to anarchy” (Bruns, 2007, p. 703). In this sense, Conradin is in his course of Becoming the hen and decides his own religion to intensify his molecular power. At the same time, “a line of flight begins at the movement of the molecular and it is the deterritorialization

toward the massive molar" (Tai, 2014, p. 128). A line of flight is produced but Conradin did not succeed in flighting because Mrs.De Ropp secretly sells the Houdan hen and informs him about it the next day. However, since Becoming has neither beginning nor end, origin nor destination, and it is always in the middle, even if Mrs.De Ropp tries to extinguish what the Houdan hen represents, through the movement of the molecular, Conradin still promotes his Becoming.

Conradin & Serdni Vashtar: The Power of Becoming-animal

"Becoming is also to enhance man's life power, and maximize life's potentialities" (Yin, 2013, p. 159). So is Becoming-animal. Conradin's second Becoming is to Becoming the great ferret-Serdni Vashtar. In the course of connecting with the ferret, Conradin's internal power has been activated and his potential power is also passed to the animal itself. They formed a symbiosis. Further back in a large hutch, Conradin finds a large polecat-ferret, terrified by its sharp fangs at the first sight but also impressed by its wild appearance, Conradin treats it as his most valued possession. A ferret, as a wild animal in this large size, should be in nature and it is the epitome of nature. He feels its invincible intensity and potential power and knows that it belongs to somewhere outside of the world instead of being stuck in a cage. Conradin shows his sympathy toward the ferret but demonstrates more respect and admiration to it. From that moment, the tool-shed in his deep heart becomes a secret place full of fearful joy and a treasured place where Conradin can design another line of flight afterward to get rid of his cousin's control. Becoming didn't happen until the long-time interactions between Conradin and the ferret. In order to get further close to the ferret, he firstly empowers the identity to it by naming it "Serdni Vashtar" while on the contrary, he calls his cousin "that unclean thing". On one hand, he regards this animal as his partner and this connection is a kind of alliance; on the other hand, it is also a kind of defiance to the unjustified treatment. To Mr.De Ropp, with her anthropocentric Christian faith, animals are tools and objects that can be abandoned in a forgotten corner and caged in a hutch. She searched the tool shed herself after she notices something unusual, then promptly took the liberty to sell and got rid of the Houdan hen. In the much same way, she still tried to thwart Conradin when his visits to the tool-shed do not cease. In Mr.De Ropp's mind, animals are inferior to human beings and can be casually disposed of without hesitation. On the contrary, to Conradin, the great ferret is a god, someone he admires, respects, cherishes, and feels empathy with. He considers the relationship between animals and human beings from a non-anthropocentric perspective and even tries to imagine how the great ferret will understand and view this world. "Becoming-animal is to imagine the individual him/herself like the animal, imagining how the animal itself would view, perceive or act and thus to possess the abilities like the animal" (Yin, 2013, p. 101). Conradin's opposite attitude toward animals evinces his rebellion and rejection to the anthropocentric viewpoint. The relationship between Conradin and Serdni Vashtar is magical and divine. After endowing a name to his partner, Conradin, later on, invented a pagan-style religion to worship the ferret, as opposed to the Woman's religion, offering the ferret "red flowers and scarlet berries" "powdered nutmeg on great festivals" (Munro, 1976, p. 137), with exotic rituals that contrast with the hypocritical and alien rituals Conradin observes every week in the church. During the ceremonies and connections, Conradin is very sincere in his worship and thus he feels and understands more about the ferret, and meanwhile, a desire in his body rises. In the course of admiring and worshiping the ferret, he is following the path of Becoming Serdni Vashtar. The very desire to prove the power and vitality of this creature provides the additional ability to Conradin's little weak

body. "Keeping the festival the entire three days, Conradin succeeds in persuading himself that Serdni Vashtar is personally responsible for the toothache" (Munro, 1976, p. 138). He believes that the emotion can be passed on and the ferret can feel him, in that they are in the same boat to jointly rebel against the authority and oppression from Mr.DeRopp. "Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar" (Munro, 1976 p. 139). He doesn't even say aloud what he would like, trusting his great ferret god to be able to figure it out, the ferret does what exactly he wishes. Conradin repeats variations on this prayer, "begins to chant loudly defiantly the hymn of his threatened idol:

"Sredni Vashtar went forth,
His thoughts were red thoughts and his teeth were white.
His enemies called for peace, but he brought them death.
Serdni Vashtar the Beautiful". (Munro, 1976, p. 140)

The hymn and prayer did work, Conradin realized his revenge through Becoming the Serdni Vashtar, and deconstructed the binary opposition between animals and human beings. Conradin toasted. On one hand, he toasted for what he had gotten from the ferret: a beautiful line of flight and freedom; on the other hand, he also freed the ferret to nature from the constraint imposed by Mr.De Ropp, they completed each other and formed a symbiotic relationship.

The Significance of Becoming-animal in the Context of Post-Humanism

The concept of Post-humanism was proposed by Cary Wolfe in the 1990s, who aspired to change the view of animals "as diminished or cripple versions of that fantasy figure called the human", pointing out that "post-humanism is to reject the anthropocentric view and regard humanity as an assemblage" (Cary, 2010, p. xii). The relationship between animals and human beings have been relentlessly researched and critiqued within the context of post-humanism, indicating that animals and human beings are equal and the former can even subvert the subjectivity of human beings. In lots of examples like *Serdni Vashtar*, writers privileged and humanized animals demonstrate that animals actually took the lead in human's imagination and helped create the stories, human beings to some extent are also animals.

Later on, in the year of 2008, Donna Haraway further proposed another transformative and innovative ideas of "*companion species*", who claimed that "the interactions between human beings and animals are not only equal but also independent, breaking the conventional viewpoint that animals are inferior to human beings and can only exist as the objects" (Donna, 2008, p. 16). Moreover, with her transformative ideas, she asserted that children have the stronger ability to emphasize and communicate with non-human beings than adults. The innate emotional connection between children and animals provide us beneficial and profound enlightenment in reconstructing the relationship between human beings and animals. Children's fondness toward animals may be an extension of a strong mutual emotion and it is an essential part of the relationship between equal companion species. Since animals have always been intentionally devalued in contemporary culture, however, this trend has also led some authors and readers to sympathize and reflect animals encounters and their sufferings, giving deeper meaning and value to animal narratives.

The crisis of humanism occurs when the idea of post-humanism is taking shape, which is the reflection and critic toward the traditional humanism and the reconsideration of the issues of "categorization" and "borders". Therefore, the concept of human and animals are no longer fixed but keep being dynamic and mutually Becoming

like the movement of molecular forces. Becoming-animal thus becomes necessary under such a context. For one thing, it is to challenge and deconstruct human beings' subjectivity and their dominant position, for another, it is to further increase the intensity and power of one's life through the connection with the 'other' and Becoming differences. Becoming-animal goes with the trend and adapt to the ideology of post-humanism.

Conclusion

From the perspective of Becoming-animal, we can see the psychological initiation of the child protagonist Conradin, who pursues differences through defying similarities, refuting hypocrisy, and calling for sincerity. Furthermore, in the current context of post-humanism, through the reinterpretation of the story *Serdni Vashtar*, we can also deeply feel Saki's humane concerns and his broad horizon in that he privileged both the child and the animals to reconstruct the relationship between animals and human beings. By choosing these very particular characters, that are usually marginalized by the mainstream of society, Saki overtly demonstrated that the intensity and power of molecular forces can not be underestimated. Rejecting the dualistic view of the universe and the Edwardian period, we might as well regard Saki as a "molecular author" who tends to step outside of the traditions and dominant norm of his society to Becoming his own differences. Becoming-animal, and Becoming in general, undermines the 'majority' and rewards multiplicity, enabling us to reconsider the established hierarchies in the living world. Becoming-animal is thus an exemplary post-humanist concept in that not only it reminds us that we need to break down the distinctions that elevate the human above other species but also it calls for symbiotic relations.

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