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Saki as Dauphin of the Wildean Witticism

Saki and Wilde are often compared in biographical articles or book reviews, and the direct point of the comparison is their use of aphoristic humour. However, one notices that only one of these two authors is quoted regularly. This study attempts a considered comparison of the two authors on the basis of their terse commentaries, here called witticisms. It offers a more in-depth look at Saki, considering him as the “underdog” in the comparison. The article begins with basic information, including a brief explanation of the use of the term “witticism,” in keeping with humour studies practices. It then proceeds with theoretical considerations of humour and English culture, and ends with detailed analysis of some of each author’s productions. The final conclusion is twofold: first, that Wilde’s witticisms are more quoted because they can be more easily detached from their context; second, that Wilde produces more of the type of witticism that Saki produces, but these remain unquoted, for the same reason as Saki’s.

1 Introduction

Considering the witticism, the quip, the *bon mot*, or whatever, one thinks immediately of Oscar Wilde. I need only evoke a few of his comments to awaken recognition:

I can resist anything except temptation.
Everything matters in art except the subject.
I adore simple pleasures. They are the last refuge of the complex.
The proper basis for a marriage is a mutual misunderstanding.¹

These below, however, may be difficult to place.

All kindnesses are doubtful.
You can’t expect a boy to be vicious before school.
Addresses are given us to conceal our whereabouts.²

1. Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994), pp. 424, xix, 477, 163.

2. Saki, *The Complete Works of Saki*, intro. Noel Coward (Garden City: International Collectors Library, 1976), pp. 141, 92, 86.

These comments come from the one who was considered Wilde's dauphin of the *bon mot*, Saki. Few but the most devoted fans ever recognize them; Saki's witticisms never became quotable in the way that Wilde's did. In fact, we will see that all of Saki's quips and some of Wilde's have been equally forgotten, and for the same reasons. This study looks at the main reasons for this difference; as we will see, they are both literary and extra-literary.

2 Biography, terms and times

There are apparently many people who have not read Saki. He enjoys what is often known as a "cult" following; those who have read him are usually ardent fans, able to quote excerpts and ready to laugh at the mere mention of a title or character. Saki was born Hector Hugh Munro in 1870 in Akyab, Burma (now Myanmar), the third child of Colonel Charles Augustus Munro and Mary Frances Mercer Munro. His mother died in Devon when he was an infant, and he and his brother and sister were left there to live with his father's widowed mother and spinster sisters. The sternness of these aunts is often echoed in the aunts of Saki's stories.

After abandoning a beginning career in the colonial police because of ill-health, Munro attempted to earn his living as a historian – he was one of the last men of leisure and enthusiasm to write a history before that task fell to university professors – then began a double career as writer of satire and fiction and foreign correspondent for *The Morning Post*. (He ended the latter career in February of 1909.) He came quickly to public attention in July 1900 through the publication in *The Westminster Gazette* of the first of a set of satires that would, when collected, take on the name of *The Westminster Alice*, first published in book form in 1902. This work contained a very close imitation of the prose of Carroll's Alice books, but the nonsense of the original was used in this case to criticize the heads of the Liberal party and the government's handling of the Boer War. It attracted so much attention that a serious article criticizing the war, "The Soldier and the Statesman," refers approvingly to the satirical texts.³

Other political satires followed throughout the author's career, with titles such as "The Political Jungle-Book," "Not So Stories," "Heart-to-Heart Talks," or "Potted Parliament."⁴ Most of this satire, especially the early works, was published under the pen-name of Saki, taken from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.

3. "The Soldier and the Statesman," *Westminster Gazette* (11 Oct 1901), p. 1.

4. "The Political Jungle-Book," *Westminster Gazette* (Feb–May 1902); "Not So Stories," *Westminster Gazette* (Oct–Nov 1902); "Heart-to-Heart Talks," *Bystander* (Jul–Aug 1912); "Potted Parliament," *Outlook* (Feb–Aug 1914).

Parallel to this political satire, Saki wrote social satire contained in humorous short stories that were published in such dailies and weeklies as *The Westminster Gazette*, *The Morning Post*, and *The Bystander*. J. W. Lambert says that these stories “upend respectability,” because most of them involve a character liberated from the stilted social norms of the time playing pranks on those adhering to them.⁵ Three such characters, or havoc-wreakers, appear regularly: Reginald from 1901 to 1904, Clovis Sangrail from 1909 to 1916, and Vera Durmot from 1911 to 1913.⁶ The pranks in which they engage were seen at the time as “the most extraordinary things. . . Charming and amusing things, of course, and all so delightfully immoral.”⁷ His writing was seen as that of a “non-moral writer, with a freakish wit.”⁸ This “immorality” or “non-morality” is contained in the liberation from social norms that the havoc-wreakers display. Vladimir Jankélévitch refers to this as the ill-ease that ironists create by contradicting social conventions.⁹ Irony pulls one away from traditions.¹⁰ He was felt to have written in his short stories “a handbook of the gentle art of dealing faithfully with social nuisances – bores, cadgers, ‘thrusters’ and ‘climbers’.”¹¹ He fashioned sharp darts to throw at the pathos of such people.¹² Again, Saki’s writings were so popular that a contemporary article referred to the average Londoner as trying to imitate Saki’s characters.¹³ Critics consider him to have exercised a considerable influence on Maugham, and a great one on Wodehouse. Noel Coward was a great admirer of these works.

In addition to the short stories and political satire, Saki wrote two novels, *The Unbearable Bassington* (1912) and *When William Came* (1913), and a heretofore unproduced play, “The Watched Pot” (first published in *The Square Egg* in 1924). He died at Beaumont Hamel on 14 November, 1916, four days before the end of the Battle of the Somme, having attained the rank of Lance Serjeant in the Royal Fusiliers; his name is listed on the Thiepval Memorial. Saki has been called the humorist

5. J. W. Lambert, “Introduction” to *The Bodley Head Saki* (London: Bodley Head, 1963), 7–67, p. 7.

6. For the use of the term “havoc-wrecker,” see Lorene M. Birden, “‘One’s bitterest friends’: dynamique de caractère et humour chez Saki” (Diss. U Nice, 1996).

7. “Reginald’s Successor,” review of *The Chronicles of Clovis*, *Morning Post* (23 Oct 1911), p. 2.

8. “Beasts and Super-Beasts,” review of *Beasts and Super-Beasts* by Saki, *Spectator* (11 July 1914), p. 61.

9. Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L’ironie* (Paris: Flammarion, 1964), p. 12.

10. Jankélévitch, p. 74.

11. “Beasts,” p. 61.

12. Jankélévitch, p. 96.

13. Digamma, “The Brilliant Young Man,” *Westminster Gazette* (16 Jan 1904) 1–2, p. 1.

who “provided more laughter to the paragraph than almost any of his contemporaries. . . He was in the great tradition of wit with Swift, Voltaire and Byron.”¹⁴ His so-called *Complete Works* (in reality his *Collected Works*, which have left out quite a few tales) are still regularly re-issued.

Both Saki and Wilde were known for their use of brief witty comments in their works. Both were light in their irony; Jankélévitch says that the goal of an ironist is never to be profound; that irony can only be superficial.¹⁵ Different terms have been used at different times to describe the succinct, humorous comments that these authors specialize in. In addition to this abundance of terminology, there is disagreement among humour researchers as to what the terms mean; the very term “humour” receives different interpretations according to the researcher using it. The one thing that humour researchers agree on is that they should make their terminology clear for the study that they present. The following paragraph presents in succinct form the different choices possible and the decisions made.

References to Wilde’s rapid-fire comment first began to be coined by himself. He has two of his characters referred to as making “paradoxes” or “aphorisms”: Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband*. In the play *Vera*, Prince Alexis says that the wittiest of his father’s courtiers, Prince Paul, “would write an epigram upon a tombstone.”¹⁶ His story “The Remarkable Rocket” inspired some of his critics to call his turns of phrases “verbal fireworks.”¹⁷ All of these give us four choices, no one of which is usually satisfactory to everyone. Aphorisms are not necessarily ironic or comic, nor are paradoxes. The original, Roman epigram was a poem, not a saying, but did produce a witty comment. And fireworks can come from anger or holiday celebrations as much as from humour. The *bon mot* defines concise wit, but is perhaps unacceptable to non-French speakers. Emil A. Draitser prefers the word “travesty,” but uses it as much for an entire work as for a saying, and uses it only to describe a saying or work which has been altered.¹⁸

A “quip” is also a concise comment, but can also be sarcastic. Wilde and Saki can be sarcastic. Beerbohm’s famous description of Wilde’s behaviour in a restaurant is well-known: “Tell the cook of this restaurant with the compliments of Mr Oscar Wilde that these are the very worst sandwiches in the whole world and that,

14. Gerald Gould, “Saki,” *New Statesman* (Nov 1917) 159–160, p. 160.

15. Jankélévitch, pp. 33, 34.

16. Wilde, p. 698.

17. See for example Owen Dudley Edwards, *The Fireworks of Oscar Wilde* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1989).

18. Emil A. Draitser, *Techniques of Satire: The Case of Saltykov-Shchedrin* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 126–129.

when I ask for a watercress sandwich, I do not mean a loaf with a field in the middle of it.”¹⁹ Maurice Baring reports that when Saki was asked “how his book could be got” he responded, “Not at an ironmonger’s.”²⁰ Saki presents what seems to be a more polite and elaborate version of this quip when he says in “The Sex that Doesn’t Shop”:

But it is in catering for her literary wants that a woman’s shopping capacity breaks down most completely. If you have perchance produced a book which has met with some little measure of success, you are certain to get a letter from some lady whom you scarcely know to bow to, asking you “how it can be got.” She knows the name of the book, its author, and who published it, but how to get into actual contact with it is an unsolved problem to her. You write back pointing out that to have recourse to an ironmonger or a corn-dealer will only entail delay and disappointment, and suggest an application to a bookseller as the most hopeful thing you can think of. In a day or two she writes again: “It is all right; I have borrowed it from your aunt.”²¹

However, both writers engage more often in irony than in sarcasm. Their wit is too fine for the sarcastic mode.

“Witticism,” Dryden’s neologism, seems to offer the best description of what we have in the kind of verbal play that Wilde and Saki engage in. The ideas of succinctness and wittiness are contained in the term, and other connotations are absent. This then will be the term used here, although acknowledgements of Wilde’s preferences can be made by using his terms for the sake of variety.

The witticism as practiced by Saki and Wilde and the general ability to form witticisms are very characteristic of the humour of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. They are antidotes to the “narrowness and disfigurings” of those times.²² Concise humour based on wordplay is present in “The Dolly Dialogues” of Anthony Hope, in the parodies contained in Max Beerbohm’s *Christmas Garland*, in the short stories of Rachel Neish, who wrote for the *Westminster Gazette*, and in John Oliver Hobbes. J. W. Lambert explicitly indicates the genealogy of this trend: “First [Saki’s] stories made their mark . . . by their success in witticism and pinpoint flippancy. The field already well cultivated by Oscar Wilde, Anthony Hope, ‘John Oliver Hobbes’ and the rest was still popular.”²³ In fact, this form of verbal pyrotechnics was so over-cultivated that “Digamma” complains about it in a letter to the

19. Max Beerbohm, *Max Beerbohm’s Letters to Reggie Turner*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1965), p. 36.

20. Maurice Baring, *The Puppet Show of Memory* (Boston: Heinemann, 1922), p. 332.

21. Saki, p. 55.

22. Jankélévitch, p. 35, my translation.

23. Lambert, p. 39.

Westminster Gazette titled “The Brilliant Young Man”: “the ‘brilliant young man’ naturally loves to say something striking and unexpected.”²⁴ The critic devotes five paragraphs to this person’s capacity to create paradoxes, without ever once being convinced of either their accuracy or their entertainment value.

To give a more complete picture of the humour situation of the time, here are some examples of Hobbes’s wit, taken from the play *The Fools’ Hour*, written with George Moore:

Lady Doldrummond . . . where is the pleasure of having a son if you may not direct his life?

Sir Digby Soame Julia de Trappe? She must be the daughter of that Mrs. Howard de Trappe who gives large At Homes in a small house, and who spends her time hunting for old lovers and new servants.

Lady Doldrummond I daresay he already regards you as his wife.

Julia (with an inspired air) Perhaps that is why he treats me so unkindly. I have often thought that if he were my husband he could not be more disagreeable!

Mandeville Lady Doldrummond . . . would find immorality in a sofa-cushion.

Mandeville Whenever I hear of a charming husband I always think that he *must* be an invalid.²⁵

These examples represent the type of verbal vivacity prevalent in the comedy of the time; the high master of it was of course Wilde.

The explanation for such a common current of humour style is that there is always a close relation between verbal humour and language which comes from a parallel link between language and culture, and there was a particularly strong one in English culture at that time. For example, historian Paul Thompson points out that the different classes in Victorian and Edwardian England each had distinctive ways of speaking and that in order to go up in the world one had to learn the modes of speaking of the superior class.²⁶ Philip Dodd indicates that the English gentleman was duty bound to have impeccable pronunciation, use transitive verbs, and express himself in the virile, simple style exemplified by the poems of

24. Digamma, pp. 1, 2.

25. John Oliver Hobbes and George Moore, “The Fool’s Hour,” *The Yellow Book* 1 (1894) 253–272, pp. 258, 259, 267, 268.

26. Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), p. 93.

Alfred Austin.²⁷ This insistence reflects the relative narrowness of the society against which Wilde and Saki battled, each in his own way (a fact that will be further elucidated below). They opposed their world of discourse to the prevailing world.²⁸ Linda Hutcheon points out that irony is an important element in oppositional rhetoric because it involves an intentionally complicated interpretive process.²⁹ Such a process is detectable in Saki's and Wilde's ironies, which highlights the oppositional stance of the authors.

It should be underlined that both of these authors were on the outside looking in. As Marshall McLuhan shows us, one can only criticise a context when one has succeeded in pulling oneself from it.³⁰ Jankélévitch notes the disparity in irony between our perceptions and our letting go of them.³¹ He describes irony as "the melancholy gaiety that the discovery of a plurality inspires in us."³² Wilde's grandson Merlin Wilde commented, on the unveiling of the Wilde windowpane in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner, that it was appropriate because Wilde was neither inside nor outside.³³ And V. S. Pritchett mentions that Saki participates in the activities of the drawing room, but he "writes like an enemy" and behaved in those drawing-rooms like a half-tamed lynx.³⁴ Hutcheon points out that the ironist "would stand outside, in a position of power (or at least masking any vulnerability)."³⁵ Pritchett says that such ironists "are left frightened and alone," thus vulnerable.³⁶ Ironists like Saki and Wilde wish to wake ideological contradictions to jar them.³⁷ As true ironists, they go along with society expressly to reveal its foibles.³⁸

Jankélévitch recognizes a weapon in the *bon mot*.³⁹ In the ironist's war with society, he must always battle the enemy with his own arms; discourse being the prime means of access to power, appropriation of discourse by social rebels consti-

27. Philip Dodd, "Englishness and the National Culture," Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, eds., *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880–1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 1–28, p. 6.

28. Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 89.

29. Hutcheon, p. 12.

30. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet-New American Library, 1964), p. 21.

31. Jankélévitch, p. 11.

32. Jankélévitch, p. 37, my translation.

33. This commemoration took place on 14 February 1995. The source is unfortunately impossible to find at present.

34. V. S. Pritchett, "The Performing Lynx," *New Statesman* 53.1347 (1957), pp. 18–19.

35. Hutcheon, p. 17.

36. Pritchett, p. 18.

37. Hutcheon, p. 31.

38. Jankélévitch, p. 12.

39. Jankélévitch, p. 16.

tutes a kidnapping, an assault on power, and a dismantling of the structures of power.⁴⁰ Hutcheon says that ironists will take and use the social language to attack a society.⁴¹

Different researchers emphasize the rapport between language, culture, and literature. Dieter A. Berger develops a detailed analysis of Victorian and Edwardian literary conversation seen from the goal that George Meredith delineates for comedy: “the exclusive pursuit of [characters] and their speech.”⁴² Berger finds in nineteenth-century literature parodies of the British norms and values contained in what he calls conversational culture. From this point of view he reveals the sometimes subtle contrast between the superficial politeness of a fictional conversation and the wit that aggresses this conversation “from below.”⁴³ This model helps greatly to establish the different levels of the witticism in the two authors presented for study.

Considerations of sentence structure and rhythm also contribute to an understanding of the witticism. Susan Lohafer devotes part of her study of the short story to questions of sentence density and word intensity.⁴⁴ For the witticism, of necessity dense in its concision, word intensity comes from judicious choices; as will be seen below, the essence of many witticisms is in the new meaning acquired through the changing of a single word or a single syllable in a known turn of phrase. These concepts also receive additional amplitude when studied in terms of James Paul Gee and François Grosjean’s studies on the effects of rhythm on a narrative.⁴⁵ Although these researchers analyze pauses rather than words, their general comments on rhythm are useful for the study of verbal rhythm in these authors who rarely pause. In fact, it is the lack of silence which constitutes an important element in their works; Maurice Baring says of Saki:

40. For a detailed analysis of the relation of power to discourse, see Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). Susan Purdie elucidates the link between humor and power, placing discourse in the framework of “correct” use of language, in the Lacanian sense (*Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 16).

41. Hutcheon, p. 30.

42. Dieter A. Berger, “British Conversational Culture and its Reflection in Literature,” *Anglistentag 1990 Marburg, Proceedings*, ed. Claus Uhlig and Rüdiger Zimmermann (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1991) 362–372, p. 371; George Meredith, *The Egotist: A Comedy in Narrative* (London: Kegan Paul, 1880), p. 1.

43. Berger, pp. 362–66.

44. Susan Lohafer, *Coming to Terms with the Short Story* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U P, 1983), pp. 44–45.

45. James Paul Gee and François Grosjean, “Empirical Evidence for Narrative Structure,” *Cognitive Science* 8.1 (1984) 59–85, p. 68.

Every page . . . is starred with witticisms, felicitous phrases, pointed comments or verbal pyrotechnics.

At its worst, it is mere verbalism, an indulge [*sic*] in witticism more for the sake of the sound than the sense, or for the fun of twisting phrases or juggling with words and syllables and antitheses. . . But in [*The Unbearable Bassington*. . .] the level of Saki's wit and the dexterity of his phrasing is high. . .⁴⁶

Among the comments about Wilde we find those of P. S. Pathak, who talks about Wilde's addiction to words for the sake of their sounds, and of George Woodcock, who says Wilde "wrote best when he was more or less reproducing his conversation."⁴⁷ Woodcock in fact makes the same negative comment about Wilde's work that Baring does about Saki's: "he often wrote artificially and shallowly, and spoilt some of his best work by self-conscious elaboration."⁴⁸ These comments on verbal art highlight the fact that verbal rhythm plays an important part in the elaboration of Wilde's and Saki's humour.

3 The authors

The importance of these analyses will become clearer as we look more closely at the authors themselves. No one ever evokes Saki's witticisms without invariably comparing them to Wilde's. Apart from the comment by Lambert quoted above, V. S. Pritchett, S. P. B. Mais, R. Ellis Roberts, G. K. Chesterton, A. J. Langguth and J. C. Squire have all alluded to this resemblance. Of all these authors, only Pritchett offers a negative comparison: "And then there are all these echoes of Wilde's witticisms and paradoxes – some brilliant, some too facile and flat."⁴⁹ In his opinion, Saki does not often surpass his elder. On the other hand, the other critics approve of Saki's efforts. Mais, after a moment of hesitation, confirms the superiority of Saki's *mots*: "[they are] conversationally brilliant in a way that unfortunately reminds one of Wilde at very rare intervals . . . but he escapes from the sterile artificiality of the Wilde school very quickly. . ."⁵⁰ Thus Mais associates Wilde's quips with sterility and, by implication, Saki's with life, congratulating

46. Maurice Baring, "Introduction," *The Unbearable Bassington, The Complete Works of Saki*, by Saki (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1926) ix–xxii, pp. xv–xvi.

47. R. S. Pathak, *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (Allahabad: Lokbharti, 1976), p. 43; George Woodcock, *The Paradox of Oscar Wilde* (London: T. V. Boardman, 1949), p. 48.

48. Woodcock, p. 12.

49. V. S. Pritchett, "Saki," *New Statesman* 66.1703 (1963) 614–615, p. 614.

50. S. P. B. Mais, "The Humor of 'Saki'," *Books and their Writers*, ed. S.P.B.Mais (London: Grant Richards, 1920) 311–330, p. 315.

him for the freshness of his creations. As we will see, this comparison is both inevitable and misleading.

Roberts finds a direct parallel between Saki's style and the style of the *Dolly Dialogues* and of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and puts their verbal fireworks on the same level: "witticisms as near poetry and the lighter imagination as nonsense can be. . ."51 In this way the critic traces a direct line through the humoristic tradition from Wilde through Hope to Saki. Chesterton partially reinforces this connection with his favourable comments on Saki's play *The Watched Pot*, which has never been produced: "[it] deserves more serious criticism than it has perhaps received; for its dialogue has a compact and costly quality in the jewellery of nonsense not unworthy of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and more genuine than *Lady Windermere's Fan*. . ."52 *The Watched Pot* contains a mine of witticisms and other verbal humour in Wilde's style but richer in meaning.

When Langguth compares Wilde to Saki, he finds the basis of their verbal style in their sexuality. Thus he attributes to the witticism an insurrectional function already postulated in the preceding elaboration of the link between verbal humour and power. The following commentary by Langguth forms a parallel with those of Michel Foucault on power and discourse and Jeffrey Meyers on homosexuality:

It is hardly surprising that men with inconvenient lusts that could send them to jail could hold some opinions in common. And since each man was a wit, he would express himself in the witticisms that only wit can fashion. Hector was influenced by Wilde but wit cannot be learned. The two did, however, ring harmonious changes on the same themes. . . . wit is often rueful, and homosexuals have reason to rue; wit is often intolerant, and intolerance is a quality that they know; wit can be self-mocking, and it is when homosexuals mock themselves that society allows itself to relax in their presence. Oscar Wilde once illustrated perfectly the special quality of homosexual wit when he expanded upon the common lament that life is unfair. "Life is unfair," said Wilde, "for which most of us should be very grateful."⁵³

In this passage, Langguth notes a common source, an influence, and a difference all at the same time. He suggests that there is a direct connection between Reginald, the most witticism-prone of Saki's characters, and *Earnest*; at the same time, he suggests that this link comes from a more profound source than Wilde's works. The

51. R. Ellis Roberts, "Saki," *New Statesman* 27.691 (1926), p. 416.

52. G. K. Chesterton, "Introduction," *The Toys of Peace, The Collected Works of Saki*, by Saki (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1926) xi-xiv, pp. xi-xii.

53. A. J. Langguth, *Saki: A Life of Hector Hugh Munro* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), pp. 76-78.

homosexual, like the satirical author, seeks revenge for the narrowness of others by an appropriation of discourse, an example of which is found in the modification of the commonplace perpetrated by Wilde.

With this comment on appropriation I return to a fact already indicated earlier in this study: both Wilde and Saki were social rebels who placed themselves at a certain distance from their society in order to cultivate their irony. Hutcheon sees any ironist as always detached from his society.⁵⁴ Using the power of play that irony offers, they make quips that always contain some commentary, expressed in tones ranging from simple humour to biting satire.⁵⁵ They were both outsiders and observers; however, they differed in the manner and degree of condemnation, as will be seen presently.

When one sees the nearly equal status that is accorded Saki's and Wilde's witticisms, it is at first sight surprising that Wilde's have remained longer in the public mind than Saki's. One reason for this is that Wilde was by far the more inclined to self-publicity: "his personality was imposing and he delighted to dramatize it, putting form and flourish into everything he did or uttered, thus making himself unforgettable."⁵⁶ According to those who witnessed Saki's improvised productions, he possessed as much invention as his elder; the main difference was that he did not use it to put himself forward. Contemporary memoirs show a tendency in Saki to avoid being flamboyant and yet to succeed in amusing those around him. J. A. Spender describes the moment of his first meeting with Saki to discuss the creation of *The Westminster Alice*: "at the beginning one had to dig hard to get a word out of him. But the word when it came was pungent and original. . ."⁵⁷ Lambert quotes the comments of Saki's cousin, the writer Dornford Yates: "[Saki] had beautiful manners, talked easily and well and possessed the precious gift of adaptability. . . his conversation was always brilliant and amusing. . . His personality stood right out always."⁵⁸ Through these accounts we can see that Saki was as amusing as Wilde, but in a more restrained, more "gentlemanly" way. The Saki who has his listeners doubled over with laughter through an imitation of Sarah Bernhardt in a French recitation of "The Walrus and the Carpenter" is certainly the equal of the Wilde who annoys André Gide by expressing the wish to cut a waistcoat out of curtain material.⁵⁹

54. Hutcheon, p. 120.

55. Jankélévitch, p. 17.

56. Desmond McCarthy, "Oscar Wilde," *English Wits*, ed. Leonard Russell (London: Hutchinson, 1940) 47–69, p. 49.

57. J. A. Spender, "Foreword," *The Westminster Alice, The Collected Works of Saki*, by Saki (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1926), vii–xvi, p. vii.

58. Lambert, pp. 34, 35.

59. F. Anstey, *A Long Retrospect* (London: Oxford U P, 1936), p. 338; André Gide, *Si le grain ne meurt* (Paris: Gallimard-Folio, 1975), p. 332.

Thus the difference in fame can be said to come from a difference in style between the two authors. For Wilde one important thing was to be seen and heard, and for this reason he established as his favourite mode of expression the monologue; those who were present were supposed to find their diversion as spectators. On the other hand, Saki often exhibited a humour in which the surrounding people participated. When he danced in the middle of Oxford Circus one New Year's Eve, it was not alone, but with a group of friends and strangers.⁶⁰ He included Lambert, his sister, and another guest in a sun dance around a fire one summer.⁶¹ For the imitation mentioned above, Saki was not the centre of attention, but Sarah Bernhardt was; he had decentred himself, abandoning his own personality in order to embody another. Saki always carried spectators and targets off with him, and thus they became celebrants in a general gaiety. These celebrants remembered the joy of the occasion without giving as central a place in their memory to the instigator of that joy. This way of amusing others through their own participation is strictly Sakian and is absent in Wilde's performances.

4 The works

Like their behaviour, Wilde's and Saki's witticisms clearly show differences in construction and utilization. As we shall see, in the case of both authors, irony "undermines stated meaning by removing the semantic security of 'one signifier-one signified' and by revealing the complex . . . nature of ironic meaning-making."⁶² This operation "removes the security that words mean only what they say," a concept that Edwardians clung to.⁶³ These authors both function by replacing terms in an utterance by other, unexpected terms. A comparison of Wilde's witticisms with Saki's shows that the former operate almost exclusively by replacing a word in a phrase by its contrary. As a true ironist, he (like Saki) plays meanings one against the other.⁶⁴ The effect is thus created simply by the inversion of things; Desmond McCarthy is led by this effect to consider the Wildean witticism as rather "mechanical and tiresome."⁶⁵ Wilde remains at a basic level for his witticisms, that of verbal

60. Ethel M. Munro, "Biography of Saki," *The Complete Works of Saki*, by Saki, 2 vols. (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1930), 2:635–715, 2:691; Rothay Reynolds, "A Memoir of H. H. Munro," *The Toys of Peace* by Saki (London: Bodley Head, 1919) ix–xxiv, p. x.

61. Lambert, p. 38; Munro, 2:690.

62. Hutcheon, p. 13.

63. Hutcheon, p. 14.

64. Hutcheon, p. 105.

65. McCarthy, p. 59.

play, and rarely takes the meaning farther. This game of inversion is in itself very amusing, as Louis Cazamian explains it:

the humorist reaps the benefit of his startling slyness through the concrete realism of his manner; the more objective his picture, the more vividly does the soul of his subjective intent flash out. Thus the surprise of humorous treatment rejuvenates the commonplaces of actuality, and from its mere fun there tends to radiate the suggestion of a topsy-turvy universe. Now topsy-turviness for its own sake is one of the most profound desires, as it is one of the most soothing values, of art and thought; it has always been longed for by mankind, driven and vexed under the iron laws of things; there is a delicious release in extravagance. . .⁶⁶

This critic explains the mechanism of the Wildean witticism flawlessly: the extravagance of a phrase turned topsy-turvy and the humour created by this surprise are what constitute it. What is important here is to highlight the difference between Wildean topsy-turviness and Saki's witticism, couched in its contextual dimension. In order to illustrate this difference, it is useful to quote some of the more representative of Wilde's witticizers.

Lord Henry Wotton, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

There is only one thing worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.
Being natural is simply a pose.
The worst of having a romance . . . is that it leaves one so unromantic.⁶⁷

Algernon Moncrieff, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

The way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you.
Divorces are made in heaven.
Now produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable.
The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It's simply washing one's clean linen in public.⁶⁸

66. Louis Cazamian, *The Development of English Humor* (Durham: Duke U P, 1952), p. 6.

67. Wilde, pp. 19, 20, 25

68. Wilde, pp. 358, 359, 361, 362.

Thus Wilde plays on the reader's or listener's expectations, and thwarts them by this change of words. But most frequently his language play does not proceed past this stage. It is a play on forms and not on meanings. Wilde does not take advantage of this inversion in order to attain the goal suggested by Reed J. Hoyt: "[to] direct the reader towards several possible meanings."⁶⁹ Algernon's "Now produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable" reveals nothing more than the will of this character to be amused by the explanation; it reveals no commentary on his friend Jack or on society. He criticizes nothing and no one with his *mot*. Saki will play precisely on this register; what is important for him is not only to create verbal fireworks to amaze his readers, but also to communicate some aspect of the story through this witticism.

Saki starts by the substitution of a word or a syllable in an existing maxim, rather than inversion of a stock saying; this can already be considered a parody of the maxim in question, and therefore of the society that was so eager to spout maxims.⁷⁰ The resulting altered phrase is humorous in itself through its incongruity or in the displacement created by it.⁷¹ But beyond this word play, the juxtaposition of meanings created by the new witticism adds one, sometimes even two, levels to its function and its overall meaning. New connotations and resonances, often ironic ones, communicate to the reader attitudes, implicit descriptions, or other aspects of the character's subjectivity. John Gore illustrates this phenomenon when he refers, not to combinations of words, but to combinations of ideas in his definition of wit: "the power of giving intellectual pleasure by unexpected combining or contrast of previously unconnected ideas or expressions."⁷² It is also important to point out the use of the word "intellectual" in this definition; by playing on different levels of the witticism, Saki leads the reader beyond the sensorial pleasure obtained through word play and into the mental pleasure of the connotations of the phrase.

This idea of playing on several levels reveals another reason for the relative lack of popularity of the Sakian witticism: it is closely connected to its context. Lord Henry Wotton does not express a definitive attitude towards gossip in the first quotation; he takes no explicit position in relation to the society whose talk he is refer-

69. Reed J. Hoyt, "Reader-Response and Implication-Realization," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43.3 (1985) 281–290, p. 282.

70. G. D. Kiremidjian, "The Aesthetics of Parody," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28.2 (1969) 231–242, p. 235.

71. Cazamian, p. 5; Patrick O'Neill, "On Playing with Worlds: The Sense of Humor and the Sense of Literature," *Acta Litteraria Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 29.1–2 (1987) 31–38, p. 32.

72. John Gore, "Saki," *English Wits*, ed. Leonard Russell (London: Hutchinson, 1940) 307–326, p. 309.

ring to. Thus the Wildean witticism can be quoted completely out of its context. In fact, Wilde himself often borrowed quips or whole series of quips from one work in order to insert them into another, the most flagrant example being the pillaging of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to feed *A Woman of No Importance*.⁷³ The Sakian witticism, on the other hand, cannot at all be separated from its context. Reginald expresses something in relation to his society, and thus delineates his position in relation to it. For this position to be clear, the structure in which it has been taken must be present. Thus the Sakian witticism is indissociable from its narrative. This is another reason why Squire's comment on Saki is apt: "though many of his sentences might be mistaken for Wilde's none of his pages could be attributed to another man."⁷⁴ Saki's context of social satire is immediately recognizable, as well as vital to the sense of his witticism.

The close tie between the words and their context also serves the more concrete goal of preparing the story for publication in a journalistic context. We are dealing with short fiction and the necessity for density in terms of the information communicated. Saki's witticisms function the same way as his final sentences do; the need for concision makes the witticism accomplish the double aim of diverting and informing. It always contains information connected to the central plot or conflict of the narrative, or to some of the characters or character relations.⁷⁵

It is ultimately essential to remember that the Sakian witticism exists in order to accomplish the aim of the classical witticism, that of ridiculing someone or something. His irony serves, as Hutcheon says, to "expect people to understand not only what you actually do mean, but also your attitude toward it."⁷⁶ Saki is writing satirical witticisms in order to target a specific aspect of society. And, as Hutcheon also points out, any target is a good one.⁷⁷ Saki goes from tea parties to country weekends to theatre performances to art exhibits, and all are treated with irony and detachment. The levels of meaning that Saki's witticism can have correspond to this need to satirize; the opinion that the character emits in his *mot* is negative and hidden under the glitter of wordplay, just in the way in which Berger described it for us. The laugh provoked by the witticism serves as much as the witticism itself to destroy the power/discourse of the ridiculed society: "Laughing at someone involves our constructing them as discursively powerful, and then denying that construc-

73. See for example Wilde, pp. 41–44 and 469–472.

74. J. C. Squire, "Introduction," *The Square Egg, The Collected Works of Saki*, by Saki (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1926) xi–xvi, p. xv.

75. For a detailed analysis of the Sakian surprise ending, see Birden, pp. 142–60.

76. Hutcheon, p. 2.

77. Hutcheon, p. 10.

tion. . .”⁷⁸ Jankélévitch considers this as a refusal to be “enchanted”; I read this for the case of Saki as a refusal to be hypnotised by social norms.⁷⁹ Thus Edwardian language, convictions, proverbs are “unmasked and destroyed as something false,” an action that Bakhtin identifies as the main characteristic of comic fiction. In fact, in his analysis, stratification or hierarchization of language is an indispensable prerequisite to the production of comic style.⁸⁰ The rigidity of certain Edwardian verbal conventions contributes heavily to the creation of Saki’s witticisms; his inverted proverbs illustrate the concept of “robber robbed” suggested by Bergson.⁸¹ The witticism itself, however, is of infinite suppleness. According to Hugh Walpole, the common flaw in witticisms is that the effort made to produce the effect is often evident; he does not find this in Saki’s.⁸²

This is perhaps the point on which one finds the highest cultural misapprehension concerning Wilde. Wilde does occasionally engage in social criticism, as in his comment in “The Crime of Lord Arthur Savile”: “on the staircase stood several Royal Academicians, disguised as artists.”⁸³ However, more frequently, as in the case of Lord Illingworth or Lord Darling, the wit is there for surface brilliance. Wilde had a double intention: performance and commentary. His *Lady Bracknell* is as much an indictment of the culture as any of Saki’s duchesses is. However, as a second pole of wished-for brilliance was so carefully and wilfully developed, Wilde cut his own effect in the public eye. As his rejection of Victorian middle-class values was so thoroughly embodied in his actual behaviour, the condemnation contained in his texts has been enveloped by the extravagance, and the bite has been veiled. Saki did not suffer this eclipse, as he was more subtle in his behaviour. As has been indicated, his wit is also more linked to the texts, and therefore not quotable outside of them. Thus Saki is seen as a pure satirist, Wilde as a pure showman.

Since the Sakian witticism is less known and more clearly satirical than the Wildean variety, it is perhaps necessary to give a few more examples of the former to show how the social commentary works; this is perhaps easiest to do by presenting the character who most unfailingly uses them. Reginald, “one of those flippant

78. Purdie, p. 64.

79. Jankélévitch, p. 32.

80. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by Mikhail M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U Texas P, 1981), p. 311.

81. Henri Bergson, *Le rire: Essai sur la signification du comique*, *Œuvres* (Paris: P U France, 1970) 381–485, p. 438.

82. Hugh Walpole, “Preface,” *Reginald, Reginald in Russia, The Collected Works of Saki*, by Saki (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1926) vii–xiii, p. xi.

83. Wilde, p. 160.

young men about town (not very common) who are as neat in their speech as they are in their clothes,” is, of all of Saki’s characters, the most skilful at and the most prone to manipulating witticisms.⁸⁴ This first version of the flippant joker contains in embryonic form all of young Saki’s talents, which produce a basic character who leads an unperturbed life as a sort of social dare-devil, impeccable in his words and in his vengeance. The witticism is the weapon that is the best adapted to this seemingly uncomplicated personage.

Reginald begins to establish his position in “Reginald on the Academy,” with a critique of the semi-annual Royal Academy exhibition that is subtle and succinct: “The pictures are all right, in their way; after all, one can always *look* at them if one is bored with one’s surroundings. . . .”⁸⁵ At first sight, this comment seems to resemble Lord Henry Wotton’s in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “Whenever I have gone [to the Academy], there have been either so many people that I have not been able to see the pictures, which was dreadful, or so many pictures that I have not been able to see the people, which was worse.”⁸⁶ However, Lord Henry’s comment is ultimately ambiguous; his exact opinion of the Royal Academy’s efforts is not clear. At one moment he complains of being unable to see them, and at another of being able to. The designations “dreadful” and “worse” do nothing to clarify the situation; they indicate the relative positions of the two entities involved, the visitors and the paintings, without giving a definite value to either one or the other. On the other hand, Reginald makes his position very clear; for him, the paintings are only there as a last resort against boredom (a comment which implies that the visitors are capable of inspiring it). Reginald not only creates an inversion in his witticism (that of the idea of coming to an exhibition is to look at the items exhibited), but also clearly states his opinion in the witticism through this inversion. Lord Henry’s comment is amusing in its inversion, but Reginald’s establishes his position and informs the readers of it, all the while amusing them.

Reginald also uses the witticism in order to express his opinion of different representatives of the culture and the time. In this way the witticiser joins forces with the Sakian havoc-wrecker to remind the reader of his position as social rebel at the same time as he amuses. In “Reginald’s Christmas Revel” Reginald uses a witticism to explain his repeated refusals to spend the holiday at the home of some distant relatives, “a sort of to-be-left-till-called-for cousin,” as he laments: “why the sins of the father should be visited by the children. . . .”⁸⁷ The substitution of “by” for “on”

84. Mais, p. 314.

85. Saki, p. 10. For a description of the mediocrity of these exhibitions, see Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (London: Oxford U P, 1968), pp. 314–316.

86. Wilde, p. 18.

87. Saki, pp. 32–33.

places the expression in the diegetic reality surrounding it; Reginald is in fact visiting relatives who are perforce connected to him though one or the other of his parents. However, by linking the maxim and the notion of sin to these parents, Reginald comments on the situation; to have boring cousins is a “sin” that it should be the responsibility of the “father” to “expiate,” by undergoing the ordeal of this visit. A further note of irony enters the comment through the fact that it comes originally from the Bible, an oddly appropriate source for commenting on the most important religious holiday in Anglophone Christian culture. By a gesture of “robber robbed,” Reginald turns the proverb against the society which uses and believes in it.

In the same way, in “Reginald on House-Parties,” another story which dwells on his boredom with society’s habits, this languorous young man comments on a guest’s dress: “a frock that’s made at home and repented at leisure. . .”⁸⁸ As with his other witticisms, Reginald uses a substitution, although here it does not constitute a direct inversion; “made at home” is substituted for “made in haste.” This substitution, coming at the beginning of the expression, creates an effect of belated recognition; it is only when readers come to the second half of the phrase that they recognize the whole expression. They thus proceed by doubling back in order to reconstruct the meaning of the expression within its context. It is only at that point that they can arrive at the second level of the witticism and understand the actual meaning of it in relation to its producer. Reginald is classifying this young woman as a type often seen at these parties, a bit poor, a bit gauche. She is a type that would fit in or want to fit in with precisely this social group that bores Reginald, the country-house set. Through this witticism he expresses his distaste for such dull events and his disdain for such dull guests. In this form, the Sakian witticism comes closest to the goal which Charles A. Knight attributes to the classical witticism:

A poem as short as two or four lines must launch itself towards its satiric victim . . . must identify the fault of which the victim is guilty, and must condemn that fault in a particularly witty way. In a flash the grammatical connections fall into place, and the acerbic dig both identifies and castigates the victim’s failings. . . . [Its] linguistic intensity formalizes the insult but also gives it a privileged status, freed from the social restraints of conventional speech.⁸⁹

The last sentence of this description also constitutes a direct response to L. P. Hartley’s criticism of Saki: “True, the dialogue is artificial – people don’t talk like

88. Saki, p. 21.

89. Charles A. Knight, “Imagination’s Cerberus: Satire and the Metaphor of Genre,” *Philological Quarterly* 69.2 (1990) 131–151, p. 137.

that.”⁹⁰ If the witticism is freed from the constraints and conventions of conversation, then it is also released from any need to resemble discursive reality. At the same time, the artificiality of the witticism serves the goal of subversion of conversational culture suggested by Berger.

In addition, two other elements distinguish the witticism quoted from the others mentioned. First, there is a third level of resonance in this comment; by the association of “home” and “haste” made by the substitution, Saki links these notions. Not only is the girl’s dress “homemade,” it is badly made, “in haste,” and the suggestion is that this haste is visible. In this way Reginald renders the imperfections of the dress more visible to readers. Secondly, the witticism is built on a favourite maxim of Victorian and Edwardian culture, one which warns the listener against any rapid or energetic action, which by its very properties would be considered “rash.” The original expression embodies all the torpor that Saki finds in this society; Reginald appropriates it in order to turn it against that society. In this way, the witticism gives us an example of a direct attack on the structure of discourse and power. Thus a critique of a specific character becomes at the same time a commentary on the whole of society.

Reginald enlarges the sphere of this secondary, social target in a very subtle way in “Reginald’s Rubaiyat” when he says of the Duchess: “I can never remember which Party Irene discourages with her support. . .”⁹¹ By the inversion from “encourages” to “discourages,” Reginald surprises the reader, criticizes the Duchess, and forms a critique of another facet of contemporary society, the tendency of women to try more and more to “help” politicians and participate in politics. At the same time, Reginald also indicates what he finds are the effects of women’s participation, precisely the reverse of what the women were hoping. Through all of these levels, Reginald’s disapproval of this endeavour is clear. Moreover, by indicating this disapproval Saki enlarges the domain of the witticism in order to include politics and political activities.

5 Conclusion

All of this shows Saki’s ability in using the witticisms for something that is constructive for his fiction and destructive for society. It brings out some of his irony, which, as Hutcheon tells us, depends primarily on the interpreter to be recognised as such.⁹² As can be seen, this takes his witticisms beyond the shallowness and sterility seen in Wilde’s. However, the latter’s *bon mot* on the Academicians should be a clue

90. L. P. Hartley, “Saki,” *Bookman* 71.424 (1927), p. 214, pp. 216–217, p. 217.

91. Saki, p. 36.

92. Hutcheon, p. 11.

to us; first, it fits in well with the Sakian model that I have explicated. Second, it is decidedly not one of those witticisms that are the most often quoted. The impression that Wilde is a superficial quip-forger is in fact that: an impression. What Wilde did was to create a large body of sterile, superficial, facile, brilliant fireworks that everyone knows, and a certain small set of more subtle comments that function in the same way as Saki's did. And just like Saki's, they go unnoticed.

A second fact that needs to be given a last note of importance is the opposing, centripetal/centrifugal energy of each of these men. Saki's other-oriented outlook brings him more to criticize others, while Wilde's in-turned focus prompts him to glorify himself. This makes for a spectacular man whose critical eye is drowned in his showiness. Saki stands as a better social critic mainly because he can be seen criticizing society.

Ultimately, one could say that both Saki and Wilde "question the validity and even the possibility of unassailable verities" in their witticisms.⁹³ For Wilde, the very existence of the comment implies an attack; for Saki, the content conveys it. They both present the "engaging anger" and "affective charge" that Hutcheon finds in displays of irony.⁹⁴ Thus in two different ways, these two epigrammatists create fireworks that explode different domains with different results, except for one; laughter is the common product of their work.

93. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1968), p. 231.

94. Hutcheon, p. 15.