SURREAL WORLD OF HUGH SYKES DAVIES:
LEXICAL AND PHONOSEMANTIC STUDY

Pradivlianna Liudmyla Mykolaivna,
Assistant Professor at the Department of English Philology
Vinnitsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University
lyu2005pra@gmail.com
orcid.org/0000-0003-1752-8613

Hugh Sykes Davies is the British poet whose work manifests his interest in surrealism, exploration of the unconscious and the dream. The paper offers analyses of syntactic, lexical and phonetic peculiarities of his poetic work. Special attention is given to the problem of sound and meaning correlation in poetry.

Key words: British surrealism, unconscious, image, sound symbolism, alliteration.

In spite of a plethora of scientific research done in the field of language and mind, the question how language expresses certain types of artistic thinking continues to inspire interest. The studies within the domain of lingvo-poetic experiment (A.A. Lipgard, V.V. Feschenko, etc.) focus on the issue of language potential in expressing outlooks, worldviews and ideologies.

In this regard the surrealist experiment with the language is definitely a very interesting subject for study and discussion as the surrealists worked hard to destroy the traditional bonds between language and thought. Rebell ing against rationalism as an established norm in the society and striving to free imagination from all boundaries, they "undermined old psychic processes" by eliminating logic and created "a new system of linguistic relations", which offered them access to "a new universe of beauty" and "the world of magic" [1, p. 726].
Reading poetic works of surrealists is a challenging adventure into the unconscious as the poets saw the whole purpose of their revolutionary activity in mingling the reality with the irrational world of dreams, reveries and the like states, spontaneously driving from the unconscious the arbitrary images of a new SURreality, free from limitations – both psychic and social.

Reading surrealist poetry might actually become an experience of facing one’s own unconscious, for it was clearly stated by the poets that their role was that of a “simple receptacles of so many echoes, modest recording instruments” [3, p. 27-28] of images of the “the supreme reality” [3, p. 37] which emerge in certain states of meditation or in specific surrealist activities and it is indeed the reader who is the author of a surrealist poem.

Although surrealism as an avant-garde movement has been thoroughly studied, the language of surrealist poetry and the phenomenon that J.H. Matthews calls “Surrealist Mind” received barely enough attention. Recent research conducted in this area includes the works on surrealist stylistics (Peter Stockwell), observations over the use of language (or, rather, its misuse) in individual poets’ works (R. Jackaman, J.H. Matthews, Patricia Scanlan). In Ukraine the questions of national surrealism and its peculiarities were discussed in the works of A. Bila, T. Antoniuk, V. Radziyevska, etc.

This paper aims to contribute into the further study of the surrealist language through observations over the techniques the poets use to manifest the ideas of the unconscious. The material for the research is the poetic works of Hugh Sykes Davies – one of the organizers of the first Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936. In this article we will look briefly at the features of British surrealism and then focus on the specifics of Davies’s poetry and examine its syntactic, lexical and phonetic levels.

It should be noted that surrealism in England had many national peculiarities, was “less outrageous, less automatic, and more reasonable, then <…> the French original” [6, p.74]. The early XX century English literature was already greatly influenced by achievements of poets-modernists T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and the new surrealist group, unfortunately, lacked “a dominant personality, someone capable of enthusing, giving guidance and direction” [7, p. 70]. As a result, British surrealism was less revolutionary in character and “restricted in practice almost exclusively to the visual and literary arts” [6, p. 72]. In the article written before Surrealist Exhibition in London, H.S. Davies himself talks about surrealists' sympathizers in England discerning not only aspiring surrealists – “independent artists” who turned to psychoanalysis, but also “simple souls”, superficially “attempting to transfer into English words the material of surrealist visual art” [4, p.16].

Hugh Sykes Davies looked to surrealism not as “new theory of art” but a movement “concerned primarily with the condition of the human race” and described it as “an attitude to life based on the work of Marx and Freud” [9, p. 65].

Here is his poem, first published in 1938, and entitled simply – Poem. This poetic work has been discussed by the British linguist Peter Stockwell in his article on (Sur)real Stylistics which he blends “a basically stylistic analysis with a consideration of various contexts” [10, p. 22]. We will examine this poem focusing mostly on its lexical and phonetic peculiarities. The poem is presented with the original punctuation and capitalization:

Poem
It doesn’t look like a finger it looks like a feather of broken glass
It doesn’t look like something to eat it looks like something eaten
It doesn’t look like an empty chair it looks like an old woman searching in a heap of stones
It doesn’t look like a heap of stones it looks like an estuary where the drifting filth is swept to and fro on the tide
It doesn’t look like a finger it looks like a feather with broken teeth
The spaces between the stones are made of stone
It doesn’t look like a revolver it looks like a convolvulus
It doesn’t look like a living convolvulus it looks like a dead one
KEEP YOUR FILTHY HANDS OFF MY FRIENDS USE THEM ON YOURSELVES BUT KEEP THEM OFF MY FRIENDS OR YOUR BITCHES OR AGAINST YOU SOON IT WILL LOOK LIKE YOURS AND ANYTHING YOU SEE WILL BE USED AGAINST YOU
The initial impression the poem by Davies produces is that of bewilderment, for it sounds like a riddle without any possibility of an answer. The most obviously striking feature of this text is its syntactic structure, as it is built on the parallel construction *It doesn’t look like … it looks like…*. In this regard, Peter Stockwell offers the explanation: “This syntactic parallelism of negation and assertion is most often generally used by a speaker grasping to pin down a definition of something that is difficult to describe, and which has no precise lexical item to refer to ‘it’” [10, p. 22].

It feels, however, that this parallelism serves to create a certain poetic pattern or rhythm in reading, for the poem itself completely lacks rhyme or a recognizable metric system, and combines extremely long lines (up to 29 feet) with the much shorter ones. Like in the poetry going back to oral Anglo-Saxon tradition, Davies’s work relies heavily on alliteration and a kind of not very strict caesura which actually breaks the line into two unequal parts. The most common alliterated sounds are voiceless fricatives [f], [s] as in *feather*, *finger*, *faces*, *father*, *flux*, *fro*, *search*, *sea*, *stone* and voiced lateral [l] most often repeated in the word combination *look like* and extremely prominent in the couplet *It doesn’t look like a revolver it looks like a convolvulus // It doesn’t look like a living convolvulus it looks like a dead one*. Besides the fact that [l] in its abundance produces a pleasing lulling tune — rather a monotonous chanting, it’s interesting to note here that Margaret Magnus in her *Study in Phonosemantics* attributes to this consonant sound no vivid features: “it has no specific shape,” “it lolls around lazily,” “it conforms to whatever form it is given” [8] and thus perfectly serves as a background melody.

As regards the other alliterated sounds, Margaret Magnus compares [s] with a Serpent for its strength and “the force of life” and describes [f] as a dynamic sound: “it has a fight in it” [8].

Sound symbolism is usually an unconscious process (A.P. Zhuravlev: “phono-semantics has a subliminal halo, almost unconscious by people. They use it intuitively, unconsciously” [2, p. 148]). Consciously or not, Davies emphasizes strong emotions using alliterations on [f] and [s] and setting them against the background of the smooth lulling sounds.

The melody which thus appears is broken by yet another parallel construction with a different sound organization: *The spaces between the stones are made of stone // The faces between the stones are made of bone // The faces beneath the stones are made of stone* — it has a rhyme, written in almost perfect and traditional iambic pentameter with identical sound sequence in each line [ei]-[eu]-[ei]-[eu]. Taken separately they remind the word game of substitution; in the poem they sound almost like a refrain.

The general flow of the text is also broken by a capitalized incorporation thus adding a visual element (welcomed in surrealism) which has prosaic qualities as well as uses an obscene word and imperative tone, creating an effect of angry shouting.

Altogether these three different structures — monotonous lulling, traditional verse and a graphic prosaic element — not only remind the surrealist technique of collage but also produce an impression of three different voices coming from one source and not so much merging into a single unity as contradicting and interrupting each other.

This kind of broken three-voiced melody, to our mind, might be a manifestation of the “unconscious instinctual forces” [4, p. 21]. Davies breaks the rigid structural parallelism of the verse-following French surrealists who defied any kind of order. Peter Stockwell also sees in this text “the poetic mechanics of paranoia and disturbance” [11, p. 58]. And it becomes especially vivid in the analysis of the word choice the poet makes.

Davies observes surrealist demand to the image as being born not “from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be — the greater its emotional power and poetic reality” [3, p. 20]. The author juxtaposes semantically incompatible elements in both parts of each parallel structure (e.g. *It doesn’t look like an empty chair it looks like an old woman searching in a heap of stones*) in the illogical combination of objects (*finger—feather*), people (*mother—father*), artifacts and people (*chair—woman searching; broken cup—cut lip*), artifacts and natural objects (*revolver—convolvulus*), active-passive voice shift (*eat—eaten*).

This certainly inspires and challenges one’s cognitive skills as “it is difficult for readers to abandon a text as absolutely incomprehensible; we all prefer to make sense of things” [10, p. 24]. The scholar thinks that it is the reader’s attempt to find sense “that generates the convulsive moment” and builds sensation [11, p. 58].

To our mind, irrationality most beautifully manifests itself in the word-combinations which create unexpected images: *a feather of broken glass, a feather with broken teeth, a finger with broken wings*. P. Stockwell characterizes lexical level of the poem as “a semantic content that resists coherence” [11, p. 58]. But in spite of semantic difference of the juxtaposed words, they allow certain imagination to develop and to produce dynamic and “convulsively beautiful” images with a strong aesthetic effect: something fragile in a *feather of broken glass*, violent in a *feather with broken teeth*, almost romantically touchy in a *finger with broken wings*. Davies
depicts that side of reality which is hidden and inaccessible to observation, which defies logic and can’t be expressed with the clichéd mental modes.

Actually the poet saw the mission of both surrealism and psychoanalytic theory in solving the “problem of distinguishing between normal and abnormal, social and asocial expression” and thought that this issue can be resolved by adopting dialectical materialist approach [4, p. 21]. This idea might give a certain insight into his Poem, which certainly presents some forms of dynamic development, striving for clarity and distinctiveness, on the one hand, and concealing and cyphering the meanings, on the other.

Although it is hard even to be certain whether the author speaks about one object naming it it or different ones, in the first negation-part of the structure (It doesn’t look like…) the poet casts away issues which might be easily observed in the real “normal” or “social” world: a finger, something to eat, an empty chair, a heap of stones, a revolver, a living convolvulus, an eye, my mother in the garden, an old woman’s mouth, a broken cup. Imagery here is always specific and undetailed.

Whatever Davies is speaking about in the second part of the parallel structures, looks very much like something from the fantastic illogical dreamlike world: a feather of broken glass, a finger with broken wings or carries the implicit or explicit images of decay and destruction: something eaten, a dead convolvulus, an estuary where the drifting filth is swept to and fro on the tide, a handful of broken feathers or a revolver buried in cinders, a cut lip, a bowl of rotten fruit, my father when he came up from the sea covered with shells and tangle or an equally baffling image of an old woman searching in a heap of stones. These parts are longer and detained but the details don’t illuminate, they take the reader to a new paranoid world of “chance objects” and “objective chances”.

As a result, it is extremely difficult to make sense of this poem. The fact that Davies, like many surrealists, doesn’t use punctuation (Andre Breton: “The fact still remains that punctuation no doubt resists the absolute continuity of the flow with which we are concerned, although it may seem as necessary as the arrangement of knots in a vibrating cord” [3, p. 30]), encourages the reader to look for the sense across the lines in an attempt to find some links and connections between the images. On the whole, the vocabulary of the poem falls into several paradigmatic groups with the biggest of “anthropos”: woman, teeth, mouth, handful, finger, eye, hands, mother, father, friends; nature: sea, stone, estuary, convolvulus, fruit, shells, feather, wings; much less words belong to the group of artifacts: grass, chair, revolver, bowl, cup. Absence of words of abstract semantics increases visual effect and strange dismemberment of a human (most of the man-related words are separate parts of the body) bring to mind the paintings of the torn world like those of Picasso.

The visual component is amplified in the key phrase look like and its antagonistic doesn’t look like which acquire a conceptual meaning in the poem emphasizing its visual aspect. Still, it is hard to say whether this poem can be called surrealistic. The poem rather sounds like a conscious effort to explore the unconscious and create a surrealistic text, based “on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought” [3, p. 26].

No doubt, though, most of the “irrational” French surrealistic poetry was just as “rationally” processed by the poets before being published. Thus, a somewhat ironic suggestion from Rob Jackaman that surrealists used certain tactics – “techniques of unsettlement” aiming at “preventing the reader from feeling at home in the work of art” [6, p. 76] makes much sense.

And the reader certainly doesn’t feel “very much at home” while reading poems by Hugh Sykes Davies. George Watson in the article about the poet recollects their meetings and compares him to Alfred Prufrock – the protagonist of T.S. Eliot’s Love Songs just like him the poet was “living his life in fragments … in unromantic world”. Watson writes: “As a post-Marxist you are not sure of your class; as a post-Darwinian you are not even sure of your species… Others might be unclear who or what you were. But then you were unclear yourself, and life was not a finding but an unending search” [12, p. 575].

It feels that this may give explanation to Davies’s Poem where the poet seems like looking for something and encouraging the reader to continue this search. In it, he is dealing with the irrational world, indulging in “depiiction of thought rather than communicating it” [11]. His poem might be his ideology verbalized, or it may just reflect doubts of his personality. Love for the irrational is well-known in the English literature. Whether it can be called surrealism and whether the English surrealists found verbal expression of the unconscious – are the questions for the further research.

LITERATURE:
5. Davies Hugh Sykes. Poetry. URL: https://allpoetry.com/Hugh-Sykes-Davies

REFERENCES: