UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

A SOLID MASS OF HUMANITY, ALL ON VELVET: HUMOUR, COMEDY AND LIFE IN P.G. WODEHOUSE'S JEEVES SAGA

Thesis submitted to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to obtain a PhD Degree in Culture Studies

By

Hugo Miguel de Almeida Sousa Simões

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Fevereiro de 2024

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Under the supervision of Professora Doutora Alexandra Ambrósio Lopes and Professor Laura White

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Abstract

In this thesis I argue that P.G. Wodehouse's Jeeves saga is deeply embedded in a comedic tradition that uses humour in order to assuage the distress caused by a fundamental incongruity in human life: the difference between our desires of perfection and unity and what is often a stark reality. By adopting a perspective in line with Frye (1973), Goodman (1978) and Iser's (1990) views on the relation between literature and life, I argue that a contextualised reading of the Jeeves saga is valuable, but only insofar as it provides a reading that, in line with Brooks (1994), prioritises its poetics and how it ultimately engenders meaning. I thus begin with a contextual analysis that is solely focused on establishing the mimetic aspects and sources of Wodehouse's style, proceed to an analysis of humour and comedy, and then perform a close-reading of a representative selection of his stories and novels that bears out my argument. Ultimately, I argue that the Jeeves saga adopts a comic perspective on life, creating the good cheer and detachment that allows temporary respite from existential suffering and the pressures of convention, and thus an ability to derive greater pleasure from life, one which in no way consigns its readers to nihilistic complacency.

Keywords: Humour; Comedy; Wodehouse; Jeeves; Incongruity; Existentialism; Cliché.

Resumo

O argumento principal desta tese prende-se com o facto da saga Jeeves de P.G. Wodehouse estar inserida numa tradição cómica que utiliza o humor para suavizar a angústia causada por uma incongruência inerente à existência humana: a diferença entre os nossos desejos de perfeição e união e o que é amiúde uma realidade decepcionante. Adoptando uma perspetiva em linha com Frye (1973), Goodman (1978) e Iser (19990) a propósito da relação entre a literatura e a vida, sugiro que uma leitura contextualizada da saga Jeeves é valiosa, mas apenas enquanto, na esteira de Brooks (1994), priorize a poética das obras e a forma como estas criam sentido. Começo então por uma análise contextual focada apenas em estabelecer os aspectos miméticos e as origens do estilo de Wodehouse, procedendo depois a uma análise dos conceitos de humor e comédia, subsequentemente passando a uma *close-reading* de uma seleção representativa dos seus romances e contos que vem ilustrar o meu argumento. Para terminar, defendo que a saga Jeeves adopta uma perspectiva cómica sobre a vida, levando à boa disposição e ao desapego conducentes ao alívio temporário tanto de uma angústia existencial como das pressões da convencionalidade, e consequentemente a uma capacidade de derivar mais prazer da vida, capacidade esta que de forma alguma relega os seu leitores à complacência e ao niilismo.

Keywords: Humor; Comédia; Wodehouse; Jeeves; Incongruência; Existencialismo; Cliché.

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Avant-Propos

> One cannot claim to speak for the text until one has attempted to let the text speak through oneself.
>
> (Brooks, 1994: 165)

Before we delve into Wodehouse, here is something about pufferfish. The *fugu* is a pufferfish. Its home is the Pacific Ocean. In its western shores, the *fugu* is considered a delicacy, but if handled wrongly, the meat becomes tainted by a fatal neurotoxin. None but a skilled specialist may cut into the *fugu* without tainting the meat. The slightest deviation makes it useless – hazardous.

Wodehouse's work is a special kind of pufferfish. My hope is to slice it with care and stay clear of the rot.

Introduction

> For professional critics Mr. Wodehouse has no great respect and that for the very good reason that, as I know from long personal experience, his books are almost impossible to review. It is easy enough to compose a general dissertation about his idiosyncratic art, but as year by year each book appears there is singularly little to be said about it except to acknowledge the event gratefully and joyously.
>
> (Waugh, 1983: 565)

There is an immediate justification for my *avant-propos*, and that is that if the study of humour is often discouraged due to its intangibility (famously, once explained it tends to lose its impact[1]), the study of Wodehouse in particular tends to be discouraged on the grounds that, according to an apposite blurb by Stephen Fry featured in many of Wodehouse's books: "You don't analyse such sunlit perfection, you just bask in its warmth and splendour".

The perfection that Fry alludes to can be said to consist of three interrelated characteristics: Wodehouse's effective use of humour on a sentence-by-sentence basis, his focus on creating complex, musical prose, and the so-called "escapist" atmosphere of most of his fiction. Reading Wodehouse is held to be a joyful experience, and one runs the risk of losing grasp of the effect of his work when dealing with characteristics such as the above. After all, how does one analyse something that appears to be merely funny and light without losing sight of its tone and adopting an attitude of peering behind the veil – getting past a deception? This is often the problem with humour, relying heavily as it does on shared contexts and constant incongruity-play. As Lord David Cecil states in his preface to *Homage to P.G Wodehouse*: "the man who writes seriously of comic things easily appears ridiculous"

[1] According to E.B. White and Katharine White: "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the purely scientific mind" (White and White, 1941: 16).

(Cazalet-Keir, 1973: 4). Even one of Wodehouse's recent biographers, Robert McCrum, appears to think the same: "Wodehouse took his work very seriously, but the irony of his work is that, like all comedy, it rebuffs serious analysis" (McCrum, 2005: 15).

This reticence should be taken in earnest: all in all, it conveys a concern that critics of Wodehouse will misread his work. If there ever was a case for being cautious with the extent of one's interpretation and avoiding the mining of a work of literature for concepts and ideas that simply are not there – as per Susan Sontag's famous essay – Wodehouse is that case: "The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs 'behind' the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one" (Sontag, 2009: 7). In this labour of excavation, humour and comedy are often ignored. What Sontag suggests as an alternative is an "erotics of art", respectful of its poetics, and as I will later argue apropos the developments in literary criticism in the 20th and 21st centuries, this focus on poetics rather than on peering past it seems to me essential to understanding a work of comedy.

This brings me to the current state of criticism on Wodehouse. Wodehouse was a prolific author whose career spanned over 70 years from the beginning of the 20th century to his death in 1975. He produced over 90 books, many of which were instalments in several different sagas, such as the Jeeves saga, the Blandings Castle saga, The Psmith saga and the Mr. Mulliner saga. Due to a certain amount of neglect by the literary establishment which sees Wodehouse reduced to a few quick words in the majority of volumes on the history of English literature[2], most of the comprehensive early criticism on Wodehouse consists of large-scale overviews of his work designed to point out its quality and relevance[3]. Often,

[2]Anthony Quinton made a similar observation in 1998, but little has changed since (Quinton, 1998). Among these books, all of them recent editions, are *The Macmillan History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, *The Routledge History of Literature in English* and the *Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Literature*.

[3] The first book-length volume written about Wodehouse's work is by Richard Usborne and dates from 1961 – it is a collection of insightful observations about Wodehouse's work. Usborne was also Wodehouse's first biographer. In 1966, two different authors published books wherein they analysed Wodehouse's body of work

such works are in fact biographies that offer commentary on the author's *oeuvre*, such as the books by Herbert Warren Wind (1971), Joseph Connolly (1979), David A. Jasen (1981), Frances Donaldson (1982), and more recently Robert McCrum (2005) and Paul Kent (2020, 2021, 2022). Arguably, this is due to the fact that writing appears to have been the central aspect of the life of so prolific an author. But while Wodehouse himself was generally dismissive of any intersection between his personal life and his writing[4], there is one moment where they are inextricably connected: the controversy surrounding his Berlin broadcasts during the Second World War. To put it very briefly, as the subject has been treated at length in most books on Wodehouse, in 1941 the author wrote and performed a series of comic, self-effacing radio pieces on the conditions of his year-long imprisonment in France, Belgium and Germany as an internee. They were broadcast to his fanbase in The United States, a country that would only join the conflict later that year. In the United Kingdom, although the pieces remained largely unheard, Wodehouse was the victim of a smear campaign for having broadcast on German radio in the first place. Particularly incisive, and at the origin of the controversy, is journalist Sir William Neil Connor's column on the broadcasts, suspiciously quiet about their contents, written for the *Daily Mirror* under the pen name Cassandra. It begins as follows:

> I have come to tell you tonight of the story of a rich man trying to make his last and greatest sale, that of his country. It is a sombre story of honour pawned to the Nazis for the price of a soft bed in a luxury hotel. It is the record of P.G. Wodehouse ending forty years of money-making fun with the worst joke he ever made in his life. The only wisecrack he ever pulled that the world received in silence" (Connor *apud* Sproat, 1981: 13).

up until that time – R.B.D French and Richard J. Voorhees. 1974 saw the publication of Robert A. Hall's The *Comic Style of P.G. Wodehouse*.

[4] "The book is supposed to be an analysis of my work, and references to my private affairs have no part in it." (Wodehouse *apud* Ratcliffe, 2013: 499).

Comparisons to the likes of Lord Haw-Haw, oddly paired with accusations of clowning, ensued: "Quintin Hogg, M.P. (later Lord Hailsham) called him a traitor and compared him to 'Lord Haw-Haw,' saying, 'while he was clowning, British boys were resisting the Germans" (Sproat, 1981: 14). Since then, the content of the broadcasts having come to light in detail, Wodehouse has also been criticised for adopting a tone which, while never pro-Nazi, was also not discernibly anti-Nazi nor anti-German during a critical point in the conflict for the Allies. That is to say: his broadcasts certainly did nothing in particular to help the Allied war effort, did not align themselves with Allied propaganda, nor did they truly offer insightful commentary on the conflict, but merely humorous comment on his own living conditions [5].

Although several authors have, time and time again, defended Wodehouse from charges of treason – most notably George Orwell in his 1945 "In Defence of P.G Wodehouse", Evelyn Waugh in his 1961 BBC Radio broadcast "An Act of Homage and Reparation", and at length Ian Sproat in *Wodehouse at War* (1981) – the controversy appears to live on vaguely tied to the author's name[6]. It typically raises the question of what Wodehouse's political sympathies were and how these may or may not have influenced his work – how they might be its "true" meaning. The most virulent of this kind of treatment of Wodehouse's writing can be found in a 1941 letter to the *Daily Telegraph* signed by a Colin Vincent:

[5] Having said this, according to Joseph Connolly at one point it came to light that the contents of Wodehouse's broadcasts were used by the United States Department of War as an example of wartime, anti-Axis propaganda: "The broadcasts themselves were actually used by the U.S. War Department as models of anti-Nazi propaganda. These facts illustrate the truth. America was not yet a part of the War, and they did not yet hate. The senses of the British people were very close to the surface, and they over-reacted" (Connolly, 1987: 93).
[6] See a 2018 article which comments on Wodehouse's 2018 memorial in Westminster Abbey's Poet's Corner and is titled "Tom Peterkin: PG Wodehouse was no traitor despite Nazi broadcasts" (Peterkin, 2018).

> Sir – Pick up any book by Wodehouse and you find it peopled by men and women who have never worked and are moneyed and bored – the breeding ground for Fascism. For the embryo of the Fascist mentality was revealed in his whole set of characters, who were essentially undemocratic, unprogressive and reactionary. (Vincent *apud* Sproat, 1981: 19)

The takeaway being, of course, that even if unconsciously, Wodehouse harboured fascist sympathies and that these came across, covertly, in his fiction, particularly in his choice of characters and narratives. Or otherwise – in a more puritanical vein which as we will see has its place in Wodehouse criticism – the simple thought that idle hands do the devil's work: the non-workers among Wodehouse's characters appear to cause peculiar outrage. Orwell answers this kind of criticism by pointing out something which appears to be consensual: there is nothing about either the broadcasts or Wodehouse's work in general that can be considered fascist, pro-Nazi or Nazi propaganda – this is a fairly obvious point and need not be belaboured. Orwell's second point, however, is a more nuanced one which seems to have run through quite a good deal of the more negative criticism of Wodehouse since: that his work is decidedly not anti-English *to a fault*. By this Orwell means two things: that while in his work Wodehouse does not exactly commit the excesses of jingoism, neither is he sufficiently critical of the establishment. In fact, in Wodehouse, Orwell sees a kind of loving, acritical acceptance of an English *status quo* and all of its furnishings: "Wodehouse's attitude towards the English social system is the same as his attitude towards the public-school moral code—a mild facetiousness covering an unthinking acceptance" (Orwell, 1946: 235). As an example, Orwell argued that the fact that the valet Jeeves is smarter than his master Bertie Wooster is only funny because it relies on the idea that "the servant ought not to be superior to the master" (Orwell, 1946: 235). This is true, although it must be said that relying on an idea widely shared by a readership and then turning it on its head at each turn is not exactly tantamount to an endorsement. It is this kind of observation – a much less vicious one than

Colin Vincent's comment about the "fascist mentality" present in Wodehouse's books – that is typically used to associate Wodehouse and his books with explicitly conservative or even reactionary sympathies.

This idea that between Wodehouse and Modernism a choice had to be made was perhaps most famously established by Sean O'Casey who, during the broadcasts debacle, referred to Wodehouse as "Britain's Performing Flea" and summed up the controversy thusly: "It is an ironic twist of retribution on those who banished Joyce and honoured Wodehouse" (O'Casey *apud* Sproat, 1981: 19). O'Casey was of course referring to the establishment's initial indifference towards the works of James Joyce, in contrast to the honorary doctorate conferred to Wodehouse by Oxford University in 1939. O'Casey sees this as politically motivated, which it perhaps was – yet it has no true bearing on Wodehouse's work itself. There are, if anything, similarities between Joyce and Wodehouse in terms of the relationship between their art and the politics of their time – neither are particularly interested in aligning their work barefacedly with a cause. Apropos O'Casey's point, however, some of the more exuberant praise for Wodehouse's work has come from politically conservative authors such as Hillaire Belloc, Evelyn Waugh and Rudyard Kipling. This equation of Wodehouse with politically-charged conservatism comes across very clearly in Kathy MacDermott's "Light Humour and the Dark Underside of Wish Fulfillment: Conservative Anti-Realism" (1987), where Wodehouse and his work, along with that of writers such as Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley and S. J. Perelman are grouped under the banner of "conservative anti-realism", and are seen as reactionary against social progressiveness and Modernism on the whole: "[w]hat conservative anti-realism naturalizes is a view of Life which is reactionary and even defeatist in its implications" (MacDermott, 1987: 49). More recently, a collection of essays titled *Middlebrow Wodehouse* (cf. Rea,

2016) tackles several aspects of Wodehouse's work as a reflection of a "Middlebrow" aesthetic, or as books that, while worthy of analysis, validate or promote Victorian and Edwardian bourgeois values and middle-of-the-road conservatism to a middlebrow audience (each of these essays, however, has certain merits that will be later discussed). Between the tone of these works and the preface of David A. Jasen's biography *Wodehouse, A Portrait of a Master*, in the opening sentence of which the author declares: "P.G. Wodehouse is the funniest writer in the world" (cf. Jasen, 1981), it sometimes seems as if a degree of exaggeration is at stake.

On the one side, one tends to find discussions of how consistently funny Wodehouse's work is along with some apposite considerations on his style [Voorhees (1966), Hall (1974), Sharma (1982), and the others mentioned above]. On the other (MacDermott in particular, and Orwell and Richardson to an extent), there tends to be a dismissal of the humour in the works in order to claim that certain political, social or moral values are being earnestly or passively promoted under the guise of humour, or through the saccharine powers of humour – typically contented, myopic conservatism. This claim is often countered by the fact that many on the other side of the political spectrum enjoy Wodehouse and that there are satirical instances in Wodehouse's work in which he is critical of things such as the class system, the mental abilities of the aristocracy and landed gentry, authority, capitalism and fascism [cf. Owen Dudley Edwards (1977)][7].

It thus seems that in an academic context the worth of Wodehouse's work is often gauged by whether or not he is considered to be a shrewd social critic, and consequently, whether or not his books can be considered satires. The humour itself is put aside as a mere

[7] Examples of self-professed Wodehouse fans who currently cannot quite be considered politically conservative are Christopher Hitchens, Bertrand Russell, Gore Vidal, Isaac Asimov, Stephen Fry, Hugh Laurie, Shashi Tharoor (in an Indian context) and Claud and Alexander Cockburn.

vehicle for conveying either opinion or ideology. This is often the case with academic analyses of works of humour – Kathy MacDermott's essay covers the work of humorists Dorothy Parker, S. J. Perelman, Robert Benchley and Wodehouse with the same stroke of the critical brush. The main, or even sole commitment to funniness in their writing is the issue.

Humour can and certainly has been employed for the purposes of social criticism or satire. The comedies of Aristophanes, the earliest that we know, contain satirical elements[8]. But to reduce humour to satire is too simplistic. In this thesis I will argue that a detailed view of humour as a concept and a practice, drawing from humour theory, provides a more nuanced reading of Wodehouse's work – and perhaps of any work of humour. In addition, some authors seem to gloss over the fact that most of Wodehouse's output is inscribed in a particular genre, and that genre is comedy – not satire. If anything, it borders on the genre of farce, which has been defined as "dramatic work (usually short) which has for its sole object to excite laughter" (OED). While genres are permeable to influence and cannot be considered absolutely rigid (again, there are satirical elements or moments in Wodehouse), there are particular tendencies that one can detect, and there are particular tones, perspectives, themes and tropes that one can attribute to comedy which differ from those of satire. A "successful" work of comedy cannot be judged by the same standards of a

[8]Francis Macdonald Cornford argues that, nevertheless, and no matter how much he is using the names of real individuals, Aristophanes is still lampooning "types", and not actual individuals. The controversially inaccurate lampooning of Socrates in *The Clouds* would be a prime example: "The glaringly unhistorical picture of Socrates in the Clouds has excited the wonder of many generations. Not only does the poet attribute to the philosopher many opinions and forms of speculation of which the historic Socrates was notoriously innocent, but what is equally surprising, though less often noticed—he does not avail himself of many real traits which would seem to offer most attractive material for satire and caricature. (…) The secret of these curious facts was found when it was shown that the Socrates and Euripides of Aristophanes have several traits in common which the two actual men certainly did not share, and that these traits belong to the stock mask of the Learned *alazon*. The epithet 'Impostor' is twice in the play applied to the philosophers, who, in striking contrast with the real practice of Socrates, are supposed to dispense mysterious doctrines inside their Cave of Trophonius. The mask worn by these lean and unwashed ascetics is not individually characterised: it belongs to all philosophers on the comic stage, as well as to the other types we have above enumerated" (Cornford, 1914: 157-158).

"successful" work of satire. For all the reasons above, this thesis aims to read Wodehouse with a focus on his use of humour and the conventions of the comedic genre.

On a conceptual note related to literature, I will be following Northrop Frye in his view of fiction as analogically related to reality – an "analogy of proportion" (Frye, 1973: 84) – thereby attempting to read the Jeeves saga as, analogically, *about* Life (Damrosch, 2003: 218). That is, as having a bearing on the human condition or aspects of the human condition. As it happens, life in the Jeeves saga seems to be very sturdily built on the conventions of the comedic genre, conventions which carry a particular outlook on the lives of its characters, and which led Frye to refer to comedy as "the mythos of spring" (Frye, 1973: 154). An analysis of the Jeeves saga from this perspective, and what it might convey about the human condition, thus seems appropriate. The work of Frye, foundational in its study of literary comedy, particularly in "The Argument of Comedy" (1949) and *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), has been alluded to by other writers who have dwelled on Wodehouse's work, namely Anthony Quinton, Stephen Medcalf and Laura White. His observations will be a key starting point to my argument.

I will also be drawing from several theories of humour, with particular emphasis on incongruity and the existential aspects of humour – that is, on how humour as a practice dwells on and deals with the pitfalls of existing. Here it must be said that I do not endorse an absolutely univocal explanation of the concept of humour, especially not in terms of objective moral value, but do believe that certain observable tendencies exist, and that the concept of incongruity is central, with particular emphasis on the work of Henri Bergson. The idea that humour has no one single nature is something previously echoed by authors such as Rod A. Martin in *The Psychology of Humour: An Integrative Approach* (Martin, 2006). Despite the fact that humour has generated several "with-it-or-against-it" discussions

along the ages, it cannot be said to be simply either good or bad: it is, like walking, a fact[9]. As a practice, it is neither a panacea for society's ills nor merely a tool for oppression and exclusion. But it does, regardless of their nature, underline incongruities. In this thesis, I will attempt to understand how it works in conjunction with the conventions of the comedic genre in order to offer a reading of Wodehouse's Jeeves saga, one that argues that the books convey a comic perspective on life – that they are "existential" in that sense.

As for the scope of this thesis: the span of the critical books which dwell on the entirety of Wodehouse's work appears to make it difficult for their authors to go beyond the surface, relevant though their observations are. In order to avoid this, I will concentrate on the Jeeves saga within the *oeuvre* so as to focus on a sample of Wodehouse's comedic output that is perhaps his most well-known (which facilitates contextualisation) and that arguably best showcases his distinctive style, close reading given passages while bearing the entire saga in mind. While I believe that this angle is lacking in most Wodehouse scholarship up to date, I am of course not entirely alone in this, but have been influenced by the observations of authors such as R. B. D. French (1966), Robert A. Hall (1974), Barbara Bowen (1976), Richard Usborne (1978, 1988), Kristin Thompson (1992), Laura White (1994), Anthony Quinton (1998), David Damrosch (2003), Sarah Säckel (2009), Stephen Medcalf (2010) and Sophie Ratcliffe (2013).

I am furthermore indebted to Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the work of Rabelais (1968) for two main reasons: the similarities between Rabelais' novel and Wodehouse's work, most of which have been pointed out by Barbara Bowen; and mainly for Bakhtin's desire to recontextualise Rabelais' novel within a particular comedic tradition, which I

[9] An example of this "is laughter good or bad" debacle is the anti-humour position taken by Hobbes versus the view taken by Francis Hutcheson, although the latter's view is nuanced, and distinguishes between laughter proper and ridicule (Hutcheson, 1973).

believe has truly allowed for a deeper, more valuable analysis of what some had previously considered to be frivolous vulgarity – again, a misreading of comic flamboyance[10].

Finally, Culture Studies fields a broad range of objects and methodologies. Regarding objects apt for cultural analysis, Raymond Williams, a seminal figure in the field, wrote in an eponymous article that "Culture is Ordinary" (1958) – meaning that culture is at heart any expression of something human (Williams, 2014). In that sense its presence is far more ubiquitous than envisioned by those subscribing to what Williams refers to as the standards of the "teashop crowd". It also includes what those who, hating the teashop and its standards, choose to ignore as old-fashioned or unprogressive. At least as a starting point, any cultural object is worthy of analysis on those grounds. As far as the range of methodologies in Culture Studies goes, its diversity is attested to by Mieke Bal in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Bal, 2002). In lieu of any precise methodology, it is both the advantage of and the difficulty with cultural analysis that, in Bal's words: "you don't apply one method; you conduct a meeting between several, a meeting in which the object participates, so that, together, object and methods can become a new, not firmly delineated, field." (*ibid*.: 4) The difficulty lies in the fact that the potential breadth of Culture Studies, the observation that culture is ordinary, still comes with a demand for relevance: the relevance of the object *as* a cultural object and the relevance of the methodologies in relation to the object. In this thesis I argue that the Jeeves saga is culturally relevant in three ways: (a) for its sheer popularity both during Wodehouse's lifetime and, to a lesser extent, today; (b) for its aesthetic quality; (c) and for the questions that it instigates about comedy as a genre, humour as a practice deeply connected with that genre, literature and its all-too-controversial connection to entertainment, the relation between literature and life, and

[10] The original Russian version of *Rabelais and his World* was first published in 1965, but written in 1940.

ultimately, its bearing on the human condition. In the realm of culture studies, humour has particular relevance: it is an absolutely ubiquitous cultural practice present not only in art, but in every aspect of public and private life. More than that, it is, as argued by Henri Bergson, an eminently social, collective practice that requires being aware of certain contexts (Bergson, 1938: 6). These contexts are cultural contexts, and while, as we will see, humorous techniques and subjects can often travel well, humour rarely survives its immediate environs: either in space or in time. Language-based humour, such as Wodehouse's, relying heavily as it does on knowledge of a particular language at particular points in time, doubly so. The fact that the Jeeves saga has effectively survived while appearing, on the surface, to be more than ordinarily context-dependent is worthy of cultural analysis. For this purpose, some of its contextual elements – among them the ever-elusive concept of "Englishness" – will factor into my thesis. Its bibliography and methodology were chosen to better aid me in – not solving, not answering, but elaborating on – these questions, and particularly on two overarching questions: how has the Jeeves saga, as a work of comedy, survived the trappings of its immediate context? And what is its analogical bearing on the human condition?

I. The Jeeves Saga and Literature

> From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
> That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
> And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.
> (Stevens, 1954: 383)

The Jeeves saga was written by Anglo-American author P.G. Wodehouse (1881-1975) and published from 1915 to 1974. It comprises eleven novels and thirty-five short stories and stands alongside other famous sagas and recurring characters by the author, such as those of Blandings Castle, Psmith, the Drones Club stories, the Lord Ickenham stories, the Mr. Mulliner stories, and the Ukridge stories[11]. Many of the characters cross over from one saga to another, and beyond their style they generally share a number of characteristics[12]. For one, all of the sagas are famously endowed with a certain timelessness. The first story of the Jeeves saga, narrated as always by young man-about-town Bertie Wooster and documenting his adventures alongside his manservant or "valet" Jeeves, is "Extricating Young Gussie"[13]. It was published in 1915, during World War One, in *The Saturday Evening Post*, an American magazine first established in 1821 with a predominantly middle-class readership. While it is perhaps not surprising that the tremendous changes which the world was going through during that conflict were conspicuously absent from "Extricating Young Gussie", their absence in Wodehouse's work – at least on the surface of it – would remain conspicuous all the way through to the final novel of the saga, *Aunts Aren't Gentlemen* (1974), published

[11] For the purposes of this thesis I will not be considering Ben Schott's Jeeves homages, nor will I consider Sebastian Faulk's *Jeeves and the Wedding Bells*.

[12] There is a very blatant crossover between the Psmith series and the Blandings Castle series in *Leave it to Psmith* (1923), and Wodehouse left notes to the effect that he once planned a Jeeves-Blandings crossover, namely in one dated February 23rd, 1948, where he goes on to outline the plot: "Here's a colossal idea. Could I make the story a combined Jeeves and Blandings Castle one?" (BL Loan MS.129/1/113). It was, as we know, never to be.

[13] Two exceptions to this rule are the short story "Bertie Changes His Mind", narrated by Jeeves, and the novel *Ring for Jeeves*, which does not include Bertie and is thus fundamentally different from the rest of the saga – the latter will matter to this thesis only incidentally.

nearly sixty years later. This is to say that far from directly reflecting the times as they go by, the narratives always take place in a quasi-Edwardian, apparently pre-World War I reality: from the use of spats, to gentlemen's clubs, to the grand English manors of the aristocracy and landed gentry, bustling with domestic staff; to the business of the aimless second sons of the former and their valets; and to their constant, though temporary, impecuniousness. The building blocks of the Jeeves saga are thus indeed historical to a degree[14]. On this subject, in an essay titled "My World: and what happened to it" Wodehouse, not without a hint of irony, proclaimed himself to be a historical novelist – the "reality" that he wrote about having "gone with Nineveh and Tyre" into oblivion (Wodehouse, 2011: 519, 524)[15].

Yet the Jeeves saga was, if anything, anachronistic from the start. As Orwell commented, in all likelihood "Bertie Wooster, if he ever existed, was killed round about 1915" (Orwell, 1946: 237). That is to say, the bumbling, innocent young men that feature in the Jeeves narratives were some of the greatest victims of the conflict, and consequently a demographic that – in reality, but apparently not in the books – was changed forever. But it is not merely a matter of correspondence with reality. Even within the narratives themselves we find instances of anachronism between the reality depicted and the references provided by the characters. In the words of Robert A. Hall, an early Wodehouse scholar:

> That there are numerous discrepancies in Wodehouse's stories, between the presumed time of the action and various details of the setting and of the characters' behaviour, is

[14] This is something that Norman Murphy has explored in great detail, as his work involved the tracing of every real-life counterpart of the places and characters included in Wodehouse's fiction. While the intricacy and depth of his work is extraneous to the purposes of this thesis, it illustrates the fact that Wodehouse's constant quest for plausibility ensures that, despite the saga's loose connection to reality, there is indeed a particular reality that his work departs from (and departing is the key word). For more, read the two volumes of Murphy's *A Wodehouse Handbook* (cf. Murphy, 2013).

[15] The reference to Nineveh and Tyre appears to be to Kipling's poem "Recessional", in which the poet mourns the transitory nature of all empires and, consequently, of the British Empire too.

> well known. These discrepancies occur principally in the 'sagas,' notably those dealing with Lord Emsworth and Blandings Castle, and those narrated by Bertie Wooster. The inconsistencies are due chiefly to the clash between the apparent timelessness of the socio-economic back-ground and of the personal relationships between the characters on the one hand, and the references which Wodehouse himself makes as narrator, or which he has his characters make, on the other hand, to features of the situation that are usually contemporaneous with the actual date of writing and publication." (Hall, 1985: 21)

These references include, particularly in the early stories, direct references to World War I, but there are also small anachronistic details which pepper the narratives: "steam trains, open-topped buses, and trams – which last-mentioned disappeared from London in 1952, worse luck – survived even into Wodehouse's last stories" (Hall, 1985: 23)[16]. Or, according to Robert Kiernan: "In deference to history, two world wars are allowed to transpire in the background of the series, but young men continue to linger over port in the 1950s and to patronize London clubs widely supposed to have attracted them no longer." (Kiernan, 1990: 118).

All of this immediately showcases one of the difficult tensions in Wodehouse's work: the one between reality and fiction. Addressing this tension is important because it is so often held to be central to the critical evaluation of works of literature. Particularly outside of academic circles, narratives are frequently taken to be all the more valuable or worthy of analysis the more they convey a portrait of and either a critical or reinforcing attitude towards the customs and mores of their time and place – a conception of literature as chiefly mimetic and moralistic in its virtues[17]. Both of these perspectives, as indicated by Brian Doyle in *English and Englishness*, are a case in point when we look at the history of the project of

[16] References to World War I are particularly present in *The Inimitable Jeeves* (1923), and will be addressed below during the close-reading of what is essentially a collection-of-short-stories-turned-novel.
[17] On this subject, and speaking of a broader, non-academic context, in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry on Pragmatic Theories of Art John Hospers writes: "The moralistic view of art is still, on the whole, the unarticulated view of art held by the masses, particularly when they are under the sway of a dominant religious or political doctrine" (Hospers, 2024).

English as an important discipline in a school and university context in the United Kingdom, for instance. There, the focus was initially tied to the forging of a national identity and to the education of good citizens through exposure to certain morally improving works of English literature of great aesthetic quality. F.R Leavis, for instance, was a great defender of this undertaking, leading for a time to the dominance of what was referred to as Leavisism: an Arnoldian view of high culture as the repository of each civilization's greatest values, in particular those of a non-industrial nature, as applied to the teaching of literature. In the post-WWII era, in a less conservative vein, academics such as F. W. Bateson would argue that the study of English literature was particularly suited to inculcating the basic principles of democracy. Richard Hoggart and others would place focus on the study of English as a means to provide the student with enough critical skills with which to understand and analyse modern culture (Doyle, 1989: 115). But as Steiner wrote in 1964, the latest conflict had made a dent in the idea that consuming great literature begets civilization and moral improvement: "We know that some of the men who devised and administered Auschwitz had been trained to read Shakespeare and Goethe, and continued to do so" (Steiner, 1964: 23). In a quest for the continued relevance of English studies, the response, both in the United Kingdom and the United States at least, would be to incorporate other theoretical strands into the subjects. As we will see below apropos Peter Brooks' essay, this was also the case with literary criticism.

In the course of contemporary literary criticism, this "critical portrait of society" view was famously echoed by Auerbach in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946): "[i]n our study we are looking for representations of everyday life in which that life is treated seriously, in terms of its human and social problems or even of its tragic complications" (Auerbach, 2003: 342). Since WWII this angle has become ever more

ubiquitous in literary criticism, and it is increasingly difficult to disentangle a work of literature from the moral crucibles of its day and age. But when applied to Wodehouse, and perhaps to comedy in general, such an approach to fiction leads the critic to the peculiar, uninteresting places alluded to in the introduction above[18]. For all of its undeniable mimetic aspects and mimetic power – as Wolfgang Iser has pointed out through an evocation of Samuel Johnson – one tends to forget that as related to "reality", fiction is inevitably a kind of lie. Nevertheless, it is a kind of lie that, while lying, is able to convey a greater truth, and one that ultimately has an anthropological dimension (Iser, 1990). In fiction, any given reality is thus drawn from and transformed with an ultimate goal in mind, aptly summarised by Joseph Conrad in his preface to the novella *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897):

> A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. *It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential—their one illuminating and convincing quality—the very truth of their existence.* (Conrad, 2017: 5 my italics)

Conrad's focus is on poetics, on bypassing the merely mimetic by using the very stuff of life to deliver an object that reflects the human condition, that has a bearing on it. Northrop Frye, in turn, describes the mimesis of fiction as an indirect mimesis, resorting to the famous lines from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* whereby Hamlet describes play-acting as holding a mirror up to life:

> Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of

[18] This is something that Auerbach himself appears to admit in his analysis of another work of comic fiction: Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, as we will see below.

> playing, whose end both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature. (Shakespeare, 2019: 159)

Frye observes: "the poem is not itself a mirror. It does not merely reproduce a shadow of nature; it causes nature to be reflected in its containing form" (Frye, 1973: 84). Thus, by virtue of being inevitably within reality, and through its own particular aesthetic unity (through the aesthetic rules that dictate how one, in fiction, lies), fiction analogically relates to reality. It reflects it. But there is an added layer to this mimesis – an anagogical aspect derived from that aesthetic unity and which allows the writer to convey what Conrad describes as "the fundamental, what is enduring and essential" (Conrad, 2017: 5) – thus rising above mere wordplay by resonating with the reader as true, as providing insight into the human condition. What is at stake is not necessarily an objective portrait of a particular reality, but a practice that "imitates the total dream of man, and so imitates the thought of a human mind which is at the circumference and not at the center of its reality" (Frye, 1973: 119). Or rather, fiction is not necessarily bound to an emulation of the exact details of real life. Instead, it taps into the very fabric of human desire and imagination. As put by Nelson Goodman on the subject of Don Quixote and literality:

> 'Don Quixote', taken literally, applies to no one, but taken figuratively, applies to many of us—for example, to me in my tilts with the windmills of current linguistics. To many others the term applies neither literally nor metaphorically. Literal falsity or inapplicability is entirely compatible with, but of course no guarantee of, metaphorical truth; and the line between metaphorical truth and metaphorical falsity intersects, but is no more arbitrary than, the line between literal truth and literal falsity. (Goodman, 1978 103).

The 20th century has seen the coming and going of many different currents in literary criticism, each with its own particular approach. In a 1994 essay titled "Aesthetics and Ideology: What Happened to Poetics?", and referring to a broader context than that of Brian

Doyle's, Peter Brooks argues that with the work of Frye and Jonathan Culler came the rise of cultural poetics – the realisation that the study of literature must be grounded in the study of poetics; that is, in "precisely the grounds on which texts make sense, and can be made sense of" (Brooks, 1994: 154). Thereafter, however, a shift quickly came:

> [C]ultural poetics quickly gave birth to a subgenre of specifically ideological criticism, implicit of course in the Foucauldian exemplum, and influenced also by a return of Frankfurt School critical theory, by the British Marxist tradition running from Raymond Williams to Terry Eagleton, and by the unique, and uniquely sophisticated, American Marxism of Fredric Jameson. Here, for the first time since the 1930s, and in a vastly different form, we have an ideologization of the aesthetic: the claim that the critic can, and must, position him or herself as analyst and actor in an ideological drama, that not to do so is simply to be a bad-faith participant in hegemonic cultural practices. (Brooks, 1994: 157)

Brooks sees this need as a reaction to what is fundamentally a case of "bad conscience" among literary critics, who suspect that "that they don't really have a valid subject to profess" (Brooks, 1994: 157). He argues that a respectable concern around the possibility that confining themselves to the study of literature might reduce them to monkish, ivory-tower irrelevance perhaps propelled critics to transcend the study of poetics and foray into the realm of the political and the ideological. We have seen this happening to artists themselves, who, like many, are rightly frustrated by social strife and eager to escape creative isolation by engaging directly with their audience in what is often also a merge between art and activism[19]. Performance artists from the 1970s up until now, such as Marina Abramovich, Ai Weiwei, Nan Goldin and Tania Brughera in particular aptly showcase this tendency. But if Brooks too had once argued, against influential critic Clement Greenberg, that literary criticism should not be limited to making artistic judgements of aesthetic value, in 1994 he

[19] This is not of course to deny that, much before these artists began their careers, many others were deeply ideologically and politically committed in their work, but instead that there seems to be an increasing blurring of the boundaries between art and activism nowadays.

also argues against Montrose – an early proponent of New Historicism – that poetics is nevertheless central to the study of literature:

> [O]ne should generally try to work from specific textual instances to the general conditions and project of literature that they imply—and then back again, reinvesting in reading of the text what one has learned about its conditions of possibility and understanding. Such a concern with poetics was not necessarily incompatible with history—as I tried to suggest in my own books—since certain imaginative modes, their conventions and rules, are produced by certain historical contexts. (Brooks, 1994: 154, 155)

As famously stated by T.S Eliot in his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, this project of literature is the result of an engagement with the long tradition that came before it (Eliot, 1949). It is this context, along with a degree of general historical context, inasmuch as it has a bearing on the poetics of a literary artefact, that must be taken into account in order to "make sense" of a work of fiction. Or rather, to see in which way literature holds a mirror up to the human condition.

Among the other changes that Brooks referred to in 1994 and which marked a shift in criticism away from cultural poetics, one is particularly relevant for this thesis on literature written from within the field of Culture Studies: the very analysis of literature within Culture Studies itself. About this, Brooks issues a guarded warning: "to place the study of literature in the context of "cultural studies," as is sometimes currently proposed, will be a mistake if thereby the specificity of the aesthetic domain is lost" (Brooks, 1994: 162). That is, Brooks was concerned that the multidisciplinary nature of Culture Studies would gloss over aesthetics, an essential quality shared by all literature. It is perhaps so that in discussions of an object's cultural, political or sociological impact, the importance of poetics can be easily lost. Moreover, it does seem to be the case that, as stated in my introduction, Wodehouse scholarship is torn between Clement Greenberg's aestheticism, on one hand, and the

disregarding of the poetics of comedy in line with Sontag's destructive interpretation on the other. Goodman argued, rightly, that "a thing may function as a work of art at some times and not at others" (Goodman, 1978: 67). A potential disregard for the poetics of a work of art, for the wherefores of when it does function as a work of art, might have already been at stake, and the multidisciplinary, contextual approach of Culture Studies could potentially exacerbate this further. On the other hand, the tendency towards cognitive literary studies that began in the early 2000s, a field which has exerted some influence on Culture Studies itself, has to an extent provided a focus on poetics that Brooks believed to be essential. Authors such as Lisa Zunshine, Reuven Tsur, Alan Richardson, Alan Palmer and more recently Karin Kukkonen have engaged with poetics by theorising about the neurological processes that works of fiction set off in the reader and thereby gain anthropological insight. Zunshine in particular, in the 2006 book *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, argues that we read fiction in order to exercise our Theory of Mind, our metarepresentational abilities, that is: we read fiction in order to keep cognitively sharp, particularly in what concerns our ability to recognise other individuals – other minds – and, in the case of fiction, engage with writing in such a way that conjures up character and emotion:

> The very process of making sense of what we read appears to be grounded in our ability to invest the flimsy verbal constructions that we generously call "characters" with a potential for a variety of thoughts, feelings, and desires and then to look for the "cues" that would allow us to guess at their feelings and thus predict their actions. Literature pervasively capitalizes on and stimulates Theory of Mind mechanisms that had evolved to deal with real people, even as on some level readers do remain aware that fictive characters are not real people at all. (Zunshine, 2006: 10)

Work in the cognitive literary field is perhaps still scientifically in its infancy, but it does appear to provide interesting perspectives on the physiology, *per se*, of how writing affects

the reader[20]. Yet if some of their observations will be useful for this thesis, I am on the one hand not a cognitive literary critic; and, on the other hand, Zunshine's answer to the question of why we read fiction, for one, appears to me to leave the reader yearning for more. There is again, beyond the cognitively impressive ability to fashion and read a tapestry of minds, the matter of the text's bearing on the human condition, which I believe the literary critic should attempt to glean from the poetics of an artefact and its constituent elements. This is a possibility partly denied by New Historicism in its denial of any "universality" in a work of fiction, or, more humbly, any potential commonality on a large scale. I would argue that works of humour and works of comedy force the critic to engage heavily with their aesthetics, their poetics. It is a style even more than usually interwoven with its content – to an extent, it dictates it. To take into account primarily the significance of a poetics of humour – and particularly a poetics of comedy – is the object of my attempt in this thesis. By so doing, I also hope to answer Sontag's plea for an erotics of art – or at least to respect the erotics (if such a term can be said to apply) of the Jeeves saga.

All of the above is to say that a degree of historical contextualisation is valuable in order to understand what exactly it is that Wodehouse is doing in the Jeeves saga. But this contextualisation should always be guided by the fact that such a reality is mainly the source of the building blocks of an aesthetically cohesive object. It is not necessarily the purpose of all literature to provide a critical evaluation of a particular bygone or ongoing reality, which is what Orwell for one seems to expect when he accuses Wodehouse of "present[ing] the British upper classes as much nicer people than they are" (Orwell, 1946: 235). The question would be if, in his work, he is truly "presenting" or "portraying" the upper classes at all or

[20] Marco Caracciolo and Karin Kukkonen, for example, have recently developed interesting work on an embodied cognitive response to literature (cf. Kukkonen, 2021).

merely – and yes, mostly without trenchant criticism – using their habits and conventions for the purposes of play. One should perhaps then ask of the Jeeves saga not its value as a critical portrait of a specific society, but rather: what does this playful work of comedy, through its internal unity, signify? How does it hold a mirror up to the human condition, and how does it continue to do so? A Culture Studies approach that respects the importance of context and the centrality of poetics may provide the answers. But first, to the building blocks.

1.1 The Building Blocks – The Jeeves Saga's Relation to its Context

1.1.1 Early Life and Edwardian England

> Of course, the society into which Wodehouse was born in 1881 has its importance either as an influence or as a springboard.
> (Pritchett, 1981: 3)

Pelham Grenville Wodehouse was born in 1881 in Guildford, Surrey, to an upper middle-class family – one with "no title, nor ever any real prospect of one", but still "a family of long-established Norfolk knights with centuries of royal service" (McCrum, 2005: 11). His father was a magistrate in Hong Kong, where he and his wife spent the vast majority of their year. Wodehouse had two older siblings, Armine and Peveril, and later a younger brother, Richard. Due to his father's profession, Wodehouse spent his youth at several boarding schools, such as Elizabeth College, Malvern House and ultimately Dulwich College. During his holidays, he would spend long stretches of time with several different aunts at their homes, and was often taken along on visits to neighbouring country estates, where he was able to observe the habits of country-house guests and their domestic staff:

> My acquaintance with butlers and my awe of them started at a very early age. My parents were in Hong Kong most of the time when I was in the knickerbocker stage, and during my school holidays I was passed from aunt to aunt. A certain number of these aunts were the wives of clergymen, which meant official calls at the local great house, and when they paid these calls they took me along. (…) There always came a moment when my hostess (…) suggested that it would be nice for your little nephew to go and have tea in the servants' hall. And she was right. I loved it. My mind today is fragrant with memories of kindly footmen and vivacious parlour maids. (Wodehouse, 1981: 512)

When his father was unexpectedly unable to put him through Oxford like his older siblings before him, Wodehouse took up a low-paying job at The New Hong-Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. He worked on his fiction in the meantime, and eventually quit in order to become a struggling freelance writer. The figure of the aunt, the English country houses of the landed gentry and their domestic staff, the knuts or men-about-town of Wodehouse's generation, his impecunious colleagues, and the strict conventions of Victorian and Edwardian society undoubtedly influenced the Jeeves saga[21]. They became, as it were, the sandbox, the playground – severed from the world at large – within the confines of which he would develop his comedy.

In his biography of Wodehouse, *P.G Wodehouse: A Life* (2004), Robert McCrum showcases this influence by juxtaposing Wodehouse's family origins with the typical Victorian portrait of the social classes by *Punch*, the widely syndicated satirical Victorian magazine:

> Families like the Wodehouses were the people who ran the country, and who served as MPs, admirals and District Officers. As boys, they went to the public schools which had

[21] "A knut, preceded by the 'masher' of the 1890s, was quintessentially Edwardian, a 'fashion-eddy', with antecedents in the fops and dandies of Restoration comedy and the plays of Sheridan. A knut was a figure of fun in the Edwardian editions of *Punch*, an amiable cove you could laugh at but hardly despise, given to absurd expressions like 'Oojah-cum-spiff' and 'Tinkerty-tonk' (McCrum, 2005: 84). Likewise, Usborne: "The Knut was an amiable person. You could laugh at him kindly. He cultivated a 'blah' manner and vocabulary. Some of Psmith's vocabulary was from early Knut sources. 'Oojah-cum-spiff' and 'Rannygazoo', both Knut locutions, were used by Psmith first, and later by Bertie Wooster. In the Wodehouse play *Good Morning, Bill* (…) Lord Tidmouth, a Knut, says goodbye in six different ways: 'Bung-ho', 'Teuf-teuf', 'Tinkerty-tonk', 'Toodle-oo', 'Pop-boop-a-doop', and 'Honk-honk' (Usborne, 1988: 130).

> been set up for their preparation in the duties of empire. As grown men, they enlisted in regiments and the imperial civil service, and joined clubs in Pall Mall where they read *The Times*, and relaxed over coffee, cigars and copies of *Punch*, the Victorian magazine which perfectly expresses the mandarin hierarchy in which they were so comfortably at home. In *Punch*, there are only three classes: the frivolous toffs, who wear top hats, and put up with the lower orders; the respectable middle classes, who aspire to better things; and the aitch-dropping working classes, who throw half-bricks at their superiors. This hierarchy was part of Wodehouse's unconscious inheritance. (McCrum, 2005: 10)

But Wodehouse's relationship with this inherited class awareness is nuanced. McCrum illustrates Wodehouse's take on the matter by way of the story "The Metropolitan Touch", where the audience of Bingo Little's village hall production of *What Ho, Twing!!* is divided by class into Nibs (upper classes), middle classes and Tough Eggs (lower classes): "Wodehouse slyly describes the Nibs 'whispering in a pleased manner to each other', observes the middle classes 'sitting up very straight as if they'd been bleached', and caricatures the Tough Eggs exchanging 'low rustic wheezes' (McCrum, 2005: 10). Through behaviour or epithet, Wodehouse's description is humorously detached, coming as if from one who is no stranger to this scene, but is able to place himself outside of it and comically distort it, fulfilling his dictum that "to be a humorist, one must see the world out of focus" (Wodehouse, 1981: 541). In his essay "The Admiral on the Wheel", James Thurber sums up this same phenomenon in reference to his literally unreliable vision paired with the absence of glasses:

> With perfect vision, one is inextricably trapped in the workaday world, a prisoner of reality, as lost in the commonplace America of 1937 as Alexander Selkirk was lost on his lonely island. For the hawk-eyed person life has none of those soft edges which for me blur into fantasy; for such a person an electric welder is merely an electric welder, not a radiant fool setting off a sky-rocket by day. The kingdom of the partly blind is a little like Oz, a little like Wonderland, a little like Poictesme. Anything you can think of, and a lot you never would think of, can happen here. (Thurber, 1981: 115-116)

For Wodehouse, the entire picture of the audience at Bingo Little's production must be seen out of focus for the purposes of playful distortion, of humour, and not merely to validate or

perpetuate class distinctions. Biases exist, and Wodehouse like everyone certainly had his own, but in comic fiction they are particularly liable to be noticed and consequently detract from a humorous description by deviating from the purpose of entertaining and crossing the line into blatant didacticism or partisanship. This is not to say that comic exaggeration is typically absolute fabrication for the purposes of play, however. As with Thurber's radiant fool, perhaps there is an ounce of truth to this distortion – a picture that is aesthetically more interesting, through its beauty or through its incongruity, and both a window into our own perception and playing with such a perception.

But what are the other elements of this conscious or unconscious context, inherited and experienced, that Wodehouse draws from? In "My World and what happened to it", Wodehouse writes:

> It was always a small world – one of the smallest I ever met, as Bertie Wooster would say. In London it was bounded on the east by St James Street, on the west by Hyde Park Corner, by Oxford Street on the north, and by Piccadilly on the south, overflowing in the rural districts to country houses in Shropshire and other delectable countries. And now it is not even small, it is nonexistent. (Wodehouse, 2011: 519)

This world of Wodehouse's is, he admits, Edwardian in its furnishings, and his focus was on the lives of the second sons of the British aristocracy and landed gentry, epitomised by the figure of the Edwardian knut, who was, of course, also a figure of the stage. "The Edwardian knut was never an angry young man", Wodehouse writes, highlighting the difference between his characters and those in vogue when the essay was published in 1959[22]:

[22] It must be said that the common factor that unites the authors or characters who are typically classified as "angry young men" is indeed anger towards life and towards the establishment in its many shapes and forms, including the class system. Wodehouse's stoic outlook cannot be said to be fully compatible with the plunges into the depths of frustration and violence such as those that authors like John Obsorne, Kingley Amis, J.P. Donleavy, or even Alan Sillitoe have regaled us with in their works.

> He would get a little cross, perhaps, if his man Meadows sent him out some morning with odd spats on, but his normal outlook on life was sunny. He was a humble, kindly soul who knew he was a silly ass but hoped you wouldn't mind. Portrayed on the stage by George Grossmith and G. Huntley, he was a lovable figure, warming the hearts of stone. You might disapprove of him for not being a world's worker, but you could not help being fond of him. (*ibid.*: 520)

> Most knuts were younger sons, and in the reign of good King Edward the position of younger son in aristocratic families was (…) a trifle on the superfluous side. (*ibid.*)

> What generally happened was this. An Earl, let us say begat an heir. (…) But then (…) he begat (…) a second son and this time was not any too pleased about the state of affairs. Unlike the male codfish which, becoming the father of three million five hundred thousand little codfish, cheerfully resolves to love them all, the aristocrat of those days found the younger son definitely a nuisance. Unless he went into the Church and became a curate – which as a rule he stoutly declined to do – it was difficult to see how to fit him in. But there he was, requiring his calories just the same. (*ibid.)*

These young men lived on allowances, "and so there came into being a group of ornamental young men whom the ravens fed" (*ibid.*: 521), who had nothing to do, Wodehouse claimed, but "exist beautifully" (*ibid.*: 520). The reference to being fed by the ravens is intriguing. Its usage is clearly a playful Biblical nod to 1 Kings 17, where God favours Elijah by commanding the ravens to feed him, saving him from an incoming drought. The allusion to this episode appears to be an accurate expression of Wodehouse's vision of the idle young men in his fiction, particularly the relationship between Bertie and Jeeves, inasmuch as it illustrates the notion expressed by Bertie, in one of his optimistic philosophical moods, that "Providence seems to look out for the chumps of this world" (Wodehouse, 2008b: 109).

The two world wars of the 20th century changed the reality of these second sons in two ways, comically put by Wodehouse thusly, in a rare moment of Saki-esque satire[23]:

[23] In one of Wodehouse's many handwritten notes on ideas and sequences for stories and novels we find a particular reference to writing a story "like (…) Saki's 'Open Window'" (BL Loan Ms. 129/1/109), so despite the general differences in style, Wodehouse was a reader of Saki, willing to enjoy and draw from his work. This excerpt is particularly reminiscent of a short piece by Saki titled "The Baker's Dozen" (Saki, 1976: 90)

> "[S]o long as the ravens continued to do their stuff, they were in that blissful condition known as sitting pretty. Then the economic factor reared its ugly head. There were global wars, and if you have global wars you cannot have. Happy well-fed younger sons. Income tax and supertax shot up like rocketing pheasants, and the Earl found himself doing some constructive thinking. (…)
> 'Dash it all,' he said to his Countess as they sat one night trying to balance the budget, '*Why* can't I?'
> 'Why can't you what?' said she.
> 'Let Algy starve.'
> 'Algy who?'
> 'Our Algy.'
> 'You mean our second son, the Hon Algernon Blair Trefusis ffinch-ffinch?'
> 'That's right. He's getting into my ribs to the tune of a cool thousand quid a year because I felt I couldn't let him starve. The point I'm making is, why *not* let the young blighter starve?'
> 'It's a thought,' (…). 'Yes, a very sound scheme" (Wodehouse, 2010: 521)

Additionally, in accordance with Orwell's observation quoted above, many of the second sons in Wodehouse's fiction would have been killed in combat during World War I, in a large-scale loss of youth that has contributed to what has since become the lamenting of a Lost Generation. By way of an example, a mere year after Jeeves made his debut on the printed page, young cricketer Percy Jeeves – the inspiration for the valet's name – died at the Somme at the age of twenty-eight[24]. According to official numbers:

> Taking figures for England and Wales only, 70 per cent of men who served were under age 30, as were 74 per cent of the men who died on active military service. Men under age 20 were most likely to be killed (more than one in six). At higher ages, the chance of a man in uniform being killed was one in seven at ages 20-24, and one in seventy at ages 45-49 (Winter, 1977: 452)

Of those who enlisted and were killed, a disproportionate amount belonged to higher social classes:

[24] "I was watching a county match on the Cheltenham ground before the first war, and one of the Gloucestershire bowlers was called Jeeves. I suppose the name stuck in my mind, and I named Jeeves after him" (Day and Ring, 2012: 21).

> [T]he majority of working-class men were, by the medical standards of the day, unfit to shoulder the burdens of trench warfare. Consequently, despite heavy enlistment among all sections of society early in the war, casualty rates among workers were bound to be lower than among middle-class men or social elites. We have seen how proportions enlisting in the first two years of the war varied from around 30 per cent for manual workers to over 40 per cent for non-manual workers. No similar figures exist for elites, but there is every indication that rates of enlistment among them were higher still. We may conclude, therefore, that a man's class position had a direct bearing on the length of time he spent in the armed forces and on whether he was likely to see combat. Higher social status carried with it increased risks of becoming a casualty during the Great War. (*ibid*.: 456)

University graduates such as Bertie and his friends consistently boasted higher death rates than the national average of twelve percent of males of all ages mobilised during the conflict, those of Cambridge, like Bertie, coming in at eighteen percent (*ibid*.: 460). Secondly, the war effort engendered a state of things whereby the aristocracy and landed gentry could by and large no longer so easily afford to keep their more superfluous kin alive and well on allowances. The country estates which always provide the background for the Jeeves narratives, for instance, often proved too costly to maintain, leading to a widespread sale of property:

> It is generally accepted that, during the period between 1910 and 1921, around 6 million acres of land changed hands. This was the largest turnover of land since the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the sixteenth century and, possibly, since the Norman Conquest. Most gentry estates coming up for sale were sold to sitting-tenant farmers. (Rothery, 2007: 256)

While this meant relative impoverishment for certain members of the aristocracy and landed gentry, it certainly did not of course mean poverty, which in pre-war Edwardian England had already been a severe problem. Indeed, between 1901 and 1914, class distinctions and income inequality were marked, and poverty among the working classes startling:

> [I]n 1904 regular work was not sufficient to protect families against poverty and (...) low wages were the most important cause of poverty in the period. We find household poverty rates of over 60 per cent for households with unskilled heads and more than three children. Tellingly, poverty rates for labourers were about 50 per cent. (Gazeley, Newell: 69)

Elsewhere, Simon Szreter refers to "a peak in income and wealth inequality in the Edwardian period" (Szreter, 2021: 8).

In the realm of literature, both Wodehouse's light-hearted world of second sons and Robert Tressell's 1914 *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, a harrowing story of the daily struggles of an English labourer, draw from exactly the same period. This does not in any way detract from the realist origins of Wodehouse's young men on allowances who employed valets – that is, personal servants – and spent their time between London, the country houses of rural England, the resorts of France and perhaps even the United States. Nor does glossing over the reality depicted by Tressell detract from the quality of Wodehouse's work. Both his intentions and style were vastly different from Tressell's, which perhaps better suits historical purposes. Wodehouse merely drew from the reality of a particular context and prolonged it anachronistically, peppering his narratives with references both vague and topical enough to both relate to its contemporary audience[25] and withstand the test of time *as* comic literature, rather than as a potential historical document that can be read ethnographically – that is, following Goodman, a work of literature that functions as history[26]. To quote Orwell: "A humorous writer is not obliged to keep up to date, and having struck one or two good veins, Wodehouse continued to exploit them with

[25] "The scattered bits of contemporaneity [serve] only to relate them, on occasion, to the reader's current world and to add to his or her amusement" (Hall, 1985: 24).

[26] I am not claiming that Tressell's novel is now merely a historical document, but that its style might better suit that purpose than Wodehouse's work, and that not suiting that purpose does not make a work of literature any less valuable *as* literature.

(…) regularity" (Orwell, 1946: 236). Again, Wodehouse weaved these very real elements into Iser's fictional "lie". In that process, and as comedy, he detached them from their tragic aspects, or the socio-political fate of their real counterparts. The question would be: what truth can this possibly convey? What bearing on the human condition?

But there are other relevant contextual influences.

1.1.2 School and School-Literature

Wodehouse began boarding at Dulwich College in 1894. He would remain there until 1900 (Richardson, 2016: 93-94). In his essay "The Prison Camp as Public School: Wodehouse, School Stories and the Second World War", included in the *Middlebrow Wodehouse* collection, Caleb Richardson claims that Wodehouse's Dulwich education and early penchant for schoolboy fiction paved the way for his general outlook, explain his controversial conduct during WWII, and more importantly, influenced his creative output, particularly the school stories and the broadcasts.

In his youth, Wodehouse was an avid reader of school stories. Some of the books that can be said to have exerted an influence on him include Thomas Hughes' seminal *Tom Brown's School Days (1857)*, Kipling's collection of stories *Stalky and Co.* (1899) and many short stories from several "boys' weeklies" of the time, like *Chums* (1892-1941)[27] or *The Boy's Own Paper (1879-1967)*. Such stories were taken to reflect life as lived in the Arnoldian public-schools of Victorian England, that is, public-schools as they were during the period when they finally ceased to function merely as "holding-pens for the children of the upper class" (Richardson, 2016: 89). Thomas Arnold (1795-1842), who had been

[27]*Chums* once serialised a Wodehouse story, *The Luck Stone* (1908) which he submitted under the name of Basil Windham (Usborne, 1978: 61).

appointed headmaster of Rugby College in 1828, had taken radical steps to reform his school, "introducing uniforms, institutionalising games and most significantly implementing a hierarchy among boys known as the prefect system" (Richardson, 2016: 89). Other like-minded headmasters soon followed suit, "and widespread school reform swept the country" (ibid.), inaugurating a period during which public schools abided by the principle that "education should be primarily a character-building, rather than an intellectual, enterprise" (Richardson, 2016: 93). Richardson, like many others, summarises the ethos of this education as that of a "Muscular Christianity" (Richardson, 2016: 94)[28]. These changes to the public-school as an institution came with a new code of behaviour, one promoted both by headmasters and prefects, directly and through the syllabus, but which was also taken up and fictionalised by the school stories themselves: "A public-school boy should act according to a certain code. For middle-class boys, that code was learned as much from *Gem* and *The Boy's Own Paper* as Livy or Xenophon" (Richardson, 2016: 89). This resulted in what Richardson characterises as an attitude which was "anti-intellectual, apolitical, obsessed with athletics" (Richardson, 2016: 91), but also loyal, accepting of hierarchical structures and wary of sentimentality.

By all accounts, Wodehouse thrived in Dulwich, frequently referring to that period as "six years of unbroken bliss" (Wodehouse, 1981: 474). The influence that Dulwich and the public-school code must have exerted on his life and outlook is undeniable. Richardson subsequently claims that "Wodehouse had a triple dose of the 'public-school code': (…) had grown up reading about it, had been inculcated with it at Dulwich, and had then become one

[28] Curiously, when Wodehouse uses the term Muscular Christianity himself, it is during Styffy Byng's description of Stinker Pinker in *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*, Pinker being someone whom Bertie also describes as: "constitutionally incapable of walking through the great Gobi desert without knocking something over" (Wodehouse, 2008c: 171).

of its greatest popularizers" (Richardson, 2016: 89). The implication is a critical one, much like Richardson's statement that "Wodehouse would make a career out of 'annexing aristocratic values and identities'" (ibid.: 88), and, though faintly, appears to indicate that Wodehouse produced ideological propaganda. A quick survey of Wodehouse's school-stories, skilled portraits of aspects of school life, suggest this to be misleading. Additionally, the conclusions that one can indirectly derive from this essay about the influence of the public-school code in Wodehouse's later conduct and fiction – among which are the novels and short-stories of the Jeeves saga – deserve a nuanced approach.

Wodehouse did indeed begin his career by writing school stories. About this period he once wrote, unsurprisingly: "I first started writing public-school stories (…) because it was the only atmosphere I knew at all" (Wodehouse *apud* Richardson, 2016: 94). Having been both academically successful and athletically skilled, he had perhaps little personal knowledge of the more unsavoury side of the public-school, an experience heavily drawn from by other public-school educated authors such as Compton Mackenzie, George Orwell or Alec Waugh. Nevertheless, while inspired by the school stories he had read, and particularly by *Stalky and Co.*, which already displayed a certain scepticism towards the cult of games in public-schools (Kipling, 2009), Wodehouse was put off by stories which dealt in overt sentimentality and indoctrination. An example in that vein would be the 1858 book *Eric, or Little by Little* which culminates in the title character's death. The preface to the fourth edition of *Eric* tellingly states:

> The story of 'Eric' was written with but one single object—the vivid inculcation of inward purity and moral purpose, by the history of a boy who, in spite of the inherent nobility of his disposition, falls into all folly and wickedness, until he has learnt to seek help from above. (Farrar, 1880)

This kind of moralising did not suit Wodehouse's purposes. And indeed, mirroring Wodehouse's distaste, it had been a development in school stories since the beginning of their popularity after the Arnoldian reform that they had grown less intentionally proselytising about school or moral virtue and keen on avoiding the maudlin (Richardson, 2016). Despite Kipling's known affinities, the Stalky story "The Flag of his Country", for instance, Stalky and his schoolmates show great revulsion and even rebellion towards exaggerated displays of militarism and patriotic fervour (Kipling, 2009). Already after Wodehouse's time at Dulwich, this sceptical tendency is perhaps best illustrated by the novels and stories of Frank Richards – the pen name of prolific writer Charles Hamilton – and others written for *The Gem* (1907-1939), whose characters "care little for Empire or politics of any sort, and (…) love games" (Richardson, 2016: 92). It is in this sense closer to *Stalky and Co.* and Frank Richards's stories that Wodehouse's early work lies: keen on plausibility and wary of breaking into elegiacs or sensational plotting: "A lingering, beautiful sunset kind of death is too big a thing to happen in a school story. The worst thing that ought to happen to your hero is the loss of the form-prize or his being run out against the M.C.C.[29]" (Wodehouse *apud* Richardson, 2016: 96). The most telling consequence of this view is that in these school stories modelled more after *Stalky* rather than *Eric*, sentimentality as well as extreme violence are taboo, and as we will see, so are sex and religion.

In his 1940 essay titled "Boys' Weeklies", George Orwell wrote specifically about the short stories in *The Gem* and *The Magnet*, comparing them to the more recent boys' weeklies of his time as well as their American counterparts. Along with considerations on their style, Orwell focuses on the basic political background of these school stories, in a fashion reminiscent of his treatment of Wodehouse: "Naturally the politics of the *Gem* and *Magnet*

[29] M.C.C. stands for Marleybone Cricket Club.

are Conservative, but in a completely pre-1914 style, with no Fascist tinge. In reality their basic political assumptions are two: nothing ever changes, and foreigners are funny" (Orwell, 1971: 187). Elaborating on this view, Orwell writes:

> The year is 1910 – or 1940, but it is all the same. You are at Greyfriars, a rosy-cheeked boy of fourteen in posh, tailor-made clothes, sitting down to tea in your study […] after an exciting game of football which was won by an odd goal in the last half-minute. There is a cosy fire in the study, and outside the wind is whistling. The ivy clusters thickly round the old grey stones. The King is on his throne and the pound is worth a pound. Over in Europe the comic foreigners are jabbering and gesticulating, but the grim grey battleships of the British Fleet are steaming up the Channel and at the outposts of Empire the monocled Englishmen are holding the niggers at bay. Lord Mauleverer has just got another fiver and we are all settling down to a tremendous tea of sausages, sardines, crumpets, potted meat, jam and doughnuts. After tea we shall sit round the study fire having a good laugh at Billy Bunter and discussing the team for next week's match against Rookwood. *Everything is safe, solid and unquestionable. Everything will be the same for ever and ever.* That approximately is the atmosphere. (Orwell, 1971: 189-190, my italics)

The description ranges from mere aesthetic, domestic context (cosy meals and fires, the energy of youth) to the more ideological fare of the stability of the British Empire and Britain's relation to foreign nations. Yet other elements stand out:

> In the *Gem* and *Magnet* sex simply does not exist as a problem. Religion is also taboo; in the whole thirty years' issue of the two papers the word 'God' probably does not occur, except in 'God save the King'. On the other hand, there has always been a very strong 'temperance' strain. Drinking and, by association, smoking are regarded as rather disgraceful even in an adult ('shady' is the usual word), but at the same time as something irresistibly fascinating, a sort of substitute for sex. In their moral atmosphere the *Gem* and *Magnet* have a great deal in common with the Boy Scout movement, which started at about the same time. (Orwell, 1971: 180)

Orwell's contention is that these stories are political not through direct proselytising, but mainly by dint of their passivity, of their apolitical, unprogressive nature as well as their potential to influence a readership that, being mostly – although not exclusively – in its teenage years, is impressionable. The stories may not often actively harp on about Empire

or morality as it would be distasteful to its readers and not particularly entertaining, but this contextual backdrop is inherently accepted in order to create entertainment. Entertainment however, that also has a distinct, though vague, moral code – that of decency: "it ought to be emphasized that on its level the moral code of the English boys' papers is a decent one. Crime and dishonesty are never held up to admiration, there is none of the cynicism and corruption of the American gangster story" (Orwell, 1971: 194). But of course decency is a vague term, and what may appear to be a defence of mere common-sense decency may all too soon lapse into intolerance towards any deviation from the norm – regardless of whether or not it is justified. The most potentially damning side of the decency upheld in these particular stories is its connection with the British politics of the time.

Either actively or passively, it has often been claimed that "[t]he public schools, long the source of Britain's ruling class, […] became an incubator for its leading imperialists," (Richardson, 2016: 91). Public-schools and the public-school code, accepting of authority and hierarchy, can thus be understandably associated with conservatism. Yet as an iteration of ethical behaviour, read with all potential biases and inaccuracies considered, this code of decency can also reflect a moral bare-minimum, or as exemplified by Orwell, a (simplified) antipathy towards dishonesty and rule-breaking that provides palpable background for adventure stories – or comic literature. For Wodehouse's purposes a basic sense of morality, even if rudimentary to the point of mere *pacta sunt servanda*, is enough upon which to build a farcical playground.

Although Wodehouse's school stories contain many of the elements of the stories analysed by Orwell, they also have certain distinctive features. As per Tony Ring and Barry Day:

> They were written for himself and his generation of public school-boys – a generation grown older but not altogether grown up – and they rang true.
>
> And there was another component – and one which makes them still readable today. Their style was Early Ironic. While the characters did what they did wholeheartedly, the books' attitude makes it clear to the reader that what we are witnessing is a prelude to real life and not the life itself. Wodehouse the gentle satirist is already at work. (Day and Ring, 2012: 131)

What these authors are detecting is the embryo of what would later become common Wodehousian practice: his use of the cliché and his constant playfulness with the tropes of a particular subgenre – here, the school story, later the tropes of comedy, farce, musical comedy, *vaudeville*, and English literature in general. While the term "gentle satirist" is understandable, it is perhaps better to say, in line with the comic perspective, that Wodehouse constantly mocks and restates, only occasionally providing moments of satire proper. To this point, in Chapter 32 of *Mike* (1909), in which we are introduced to the character of Psmith, the latter asks Mike, in a metafictional vein: "[a]re you the Bully, the Pride of the School, or the Boy who is Led Astray and takes to Drink in Chapter Sixteen?" (Wodehouse, 1910: 179). Again, what we have here is play with convention, both the conventions of the public school, parodied in such a way that rang true, and those of public-school stories. *Mike* was the last Wodehouse school story. Having finished it, the author commented: "The School stories have served their turn, and it would hurt my chances of success to have them bobbing up when I'm trying to do bigger work. I have given up boys' stories absolutely" (Ratcliffe, 2013: 76). The novel was six years away from the first Jeeves tale. From the first story which Wodehouse published in *The Gem*, to *Mike*, to *Psmith in the City*, and finally to "Extricating Young Gussie" of 1915, there were considerable developments in his style, which shifted away from the narrative tropes and the straight

narration of school stories[30]. The intricacies of this style will later be explored further, but having said that, "School" and its furnishings do feature saliently in the Jeeves saga. Bertie's friends tend to have been at school with him, and this is often invoked as a reason for him to lend them all the assistance that he can. Bertie's code: "never let a pal down" can be considered a direct off-shoot of the public-school code, but then again it is vague enough – or has been made vague enough – to merely signify common decency. The comic nature of the books preclude anything resembling the moral code of the Boy Scouts from being taken truly seriously, and a morally-improving tone is largely either absent or directly lampooned in the Jeeves saga, especially through the character of bumbling do-gooder Edwin, a boy scout whose actions, prompted by a frantic obsession with being good by helping others, always turn out for the worst. Bertie, on the other hand, sticks to his code but is flexible as well as light-hearted, and Jeeves navigates the murky waters for him.

A conspicuous lack of sentimentality, a tendency to avoid sex jokes (which, as noted by Orwell, is a big sacrifice for a humorist to make[31]), and the absence of anything remotely pious are some of the more obvious commonalities between schoolboy fiction and the Jeeves saga. In addition, the young second sons, the drones, of the Jeeves books appear to inhabit in a perpetual state of innocence, of "arrested development", that effectively makes them resemble public schoolboys throughout their lives[32].

[30] By straight I mean less immediately concerned with the intricacies of farcical plots or consistent humour, rather than a terse matter-of-factness. The stories of Frank Richards, for instance, have a great degree of padding – of needless repetition in order to reach a particular word count, as Orwell has observed (Orwell, 1971: 191). This is something Wodehouse did not do.

[31] "How closely Wodehouse sticks to conventional morality can be seen from the fact that nowhere in his books is there anything in the nature of a sex joke. This is an enormous sacrifice for a farcical writer to make. Not only are there no dirty jokes, but there are hardly any compromising situations: the horns-on-the-forehead motif is almost completely avoided. Most of the full-length books, of course, contain a "love interest," but it is always at the light-comedy level: the love affair, with its complications and its idyllic scenes, goes on and on, but, as the saying goes, 'nothing happens" (Orwell, 1946: 233).

[32] This is particularly evident in the short-stories that focus on the Drones Club, of which Bertie is a member.

As stated above, in Richardson's essay the author refers specifically to how Wodehouse "codified the behaviour he had learned at Dulwich – and in the pages of other school-story writers" (Richardson, 2016: 94), thus identifying his output with his outlook, but confining his claims to the school stories. Yet as we have just seen, particularly in relation to Bertie's code and a lack of sentimentality (or emotional cladding[33]), the public-school aspect is partly alive in his more mature work as well. Richardson makes the robust and not exactly unsympathetic case that Wodehouse's upbringing influenced how he accepted to write and perform the Berlin Broadcasts as well as contributed to their overall tone: "according to the schoolboy code, he was behaving perfectly correctly: gently mocking his side while giving the benefit of the doubt to the other. In the world of the school story, his behaviour would have made perfect sense: in wartime Europe it seemed a betrayal" (ibid.: 99). But again, the broadcasts are more evocative of Wodehouse's later work than his school stories, the first one having a certain Bertie Wooster tone to it as well as making a direct reference to the character. By in a way conflating these two things, the takeaway appears to be that Wodehouse's fiction is the type of insensitive fiction that a man who was foolish enough to have broadcast for the Nazis would write, and the association is not very productive, particularly if it forestalls analysis – it adds nothing to the work itself. Additionally, while the self-deprecating lightheartedness of the broadcasts was perhaps likely to be misinterpreted by British citizens in wartime, it was William Connor's accusatory column that caused outrage at the time – not the contents of the pieces themselves. It was assumed by many that Wodehouse was another William Joyce or John Amery, which he certainly was not. In hindsight, on the level of the contente of the broadcasts, the problem

[33] "Wodehouse's letters are usually clad in the epistolary equivalent of Bertie's heliotrope pyjamas, carefully buttoned up to disguise true feeling. The 'cladding', for Wodehouse, has always been his extraordinary written style" (Ratcliffe, 2013: 4).

can only be a supposed lack of sensitivity inherent in adopting a humorous tone and a comic perspective at a complicated and tragic moment – one whose horrors we are well aware of. This is not something we can say about the saga – it refers to no such particular reality. We may argue that the reality Wodehouse experienced was so singular that something written with more pathos would have done it more justice, or been a more valuable contribution – but there is a bathos to every pathos, and Wodehouse's contribution was comedy. Having said that, despite the controversy the pieces generally come across as humorous and harmless, with a great deal of irony and some criticism behind its lightness (as well as some generosity towards individual Germans), all in all in keeping with this excerpt:

> All the German I know is "Est ist schönes Wetter." […] One day an official-looking gentleman with none of the geniality of the Labour Corps came along and said he wanted my car. Also my radio. And in addition my bicycle. That was what got under the skin. I could do without the car, and I had never much liked the radio, but I loved that bicycle. I looked him right in the eye and I said "Est ist schönes Wetter," and I said it nastily. I meant it to sting. And what did he say? He didn't say anything. What else could we have said? P.S.: he got the bicycle. (Sproat, 1981: 108-109)

This will later be briefly returned to apropos the distinction between comedy and satire.

As we have seen, certain aspects of schoolboy fiction and public-school life have had an influence in the choice of characters of the Jeeves saga and their respective backgrounds. An obvious influence may be one of language. Bertie's narrative style as well as his dialogue is exactly the kind of slang-ridden, cultural-reference-laden-heteroglossia in which Victorian (and later) schoolboys often communicated – levelling hierarchical distinctions between references and playing hard and fast with forms of speech. One example would be these excerpts from letters written by Wodehouse to a school friend, Eric George, in 1899, while both were still at Dulwich: "Jeames of me boyhood's hours, best congraggers on the commission to illustrate a real live book. Thou art the first of the 3 genii to set thy beetle-

crusher on the ladder of Fame!" (Wodehouse *apud* Ratcliffe, 2013: 46). Another example would be:

> I heard yesterday that Shakespeare was not alive. It steeped me in profound gloom. But I thought eftsoons that I was alive so it was all right for the Literature of the World. I am writing a 9-act tragedy called *Julius Othello* or *Lycidas regained*. Talking of Browning, Jeames, (not that we were talking of him), he is not nearly so obscure as a bloke called Henley. (*ibid*: 43)

Compare this to an ordinary sample of the speech of Psmith, one of Wodehouse's first successful characters who spearheaded his crossover from the schoolboy fiction of *Mike* to the comedy of *Psmith in the City*:

> I thought that a few weeks here might restore that keen edge to my nervous system which the languor of the past term had in a measure blunted. I wished my visit to be a tonic rather than a sedative. I anticipated that on my return the cry would go round Cambridge, 'Psmith has been to New York. He is full of oats. For he on honey-dew hath fed, and drunk[sic] the milk of Paradise. He is hot stuff. Rah! (Wodehouse, 1923: 12)

This quote in particular makes use of the last two lines of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (1797): "For he on honey-dew hath fed/And drank the milk of Paradise" (Coleridge, 2006: 11). As convincingly argued by authors like Maha Nand Sharma, Psmith is in many ways a precursor to Bertie Wooster and Jeeves (Sharma, 1982: 209). He is a pre-existing amalgam of both. Psmith is to the underwhelming straight man Mike what the infinitely resourceful and intelligent Jeeves is to Bertie Wooster. He is also, like Bertie, the source of over-the-top comedy and slang. With Bertie and Jeeves, these roles were for the most part split in half, creating the opportunity for a double-act. Rather than having a character that is strictly a straight man react, like the reader, to Psmith's flamboyant and intellectual nature, Bertie's speech is energetic and garrulous – slang-ridden, contemporary, silly – while Jeeves' is terse,

formal, intellectual, old-fashioned, both off-setting and grounding Bertie's, as in this exchange:

> 'But how did Gussie get out of stir?'
> 'The magistrate decided on second thoughts to substitute a fine for the prison sentence, sir.'
> 'What made him do that?'
> 'Possibly the reflection that the quality of mercy is not strained, sir.'
> 'You mean it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven?'
> 'Precisely, sir. Upon the place beneath. His Worship would no doubt have taken into consideration the fact that it blesseth him that gives and him that takes and becomes the throned monarch better than his crown.' (Wodehouse, 2008g: 83)

Another example of Jeeves' subtle, contrasting humour, is the following:

> 'Rosie is the dearest girl in the world; but if you were a married man, Bertie, you would be aware that the best of wives is apt to cut up rough if she finds that her husband has dropped six weeks' housekeeping money on a single race. Isn't that so, Jeeves?'
> 'Yes, sir. Women are odd in that respect' (Wodehouse, 2008k: 24)

What Richard Usborne referred to as the "magpie" mind of Bertie Wooster has partly to do with this same practice of playfully absorbing and rearranging literary references (Usborne, 1988: 178). Wooster often draws from his interest in detective stories and musical comedies in order to convey his narratives, yet he combines them with a literary education half-remembered – partly standard public-school fare, partly the fiction an English child or young adult of the time would be exposed to on a private level:

> When I was a kid, I used to read stories about knights and Vikings and that species of chappie who would get up without a blush in the middle of a crowded banquet and loose off a song about how perfectly priceless they thought their best girl. I've often felt that those days would have suited young Bingo down to the ground (Wodehouse, 2019: 152)

In *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*, references to detective stories which affect the way Bertie sees the events around him, abound:

> I passed a restless and uneasy evening. In no mood for revelry at the Drones, I returned home early and was brushing up on my *Mystery of the Pink Crayfish* when the telephone rang, and so disordered was the nervous system that I shot ceilingwards at the sound (Wodehouse, 2008d: 71)

While *The Mystery of the Pink Crayfish* is sadly not a reference to real title, there is still a significant amount of allusions to actual detective fiction: "I mean, imagine how some unfortunate Master Criminal would feel, on coming down to do a murder at the old Grange, if he found that not only was Sherlock Holmes putting in the weekend there, but Hercule Poirot, as well" (Wodehouse, 2008c: 44). There are arguably just as many references to musical comedy or vaudeville, as in *Right-Ho Jeeves*, where a direct reference to musical comedy/vaudeville is used to describe an interaction between Bertie and his Aunt Dahlia:

> At this point, Aunt Dahlia, who had taken one nibble at her whatever-it-was-on-toast and laid it down, begged us – a little fretfully, I thought – for heaven's sake to cut out the cross-talk vaudeville stuff, as she had enough to bear already without having to listen to us doing our imitation of the Two Macs. (Wodehouse, 2019: 45)

And everywhere quotations jostling in a crowd, without distinctions between highbrow and low, as in *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit,* where one finds a famous garbled quotation of Shakespeare and Henley used to convey Bertie's attitude towards hardship:

> It is pretty generally recognized in the circles in which he moves that Bertram Wooster is not a man who lightly throws in the towel and admits defeat. Beneath the thingummies of what-d'you-call-it his head, wind and weather permitting, is as a rule bloody but unbowed, and if the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune want to crush his proud spirit, they have to pull their socks up and make a special effort. (Wodehouse, 2008d: 210)

The last quotation of course illustrates the ubiquitous presence in the saga of what we now consider to be classics of English literature: Shakespeare (mixed with William Ernest

Henley, in this case), the Romantic poets and Dickens, to name a few. As for the public-school syllabus and its effect on Wodehouse, it did not yet focus heavily on English literature (particularly of the 19th century) in his time, but mainly on Scripture and the Classics, both of which have clearly also influenced Wodehouse. The study of the English language in school itself was in 1894 a recent development, having only begun in earnest well into the nineteenth century (Palmer, 1965: 5)[34]. Even then, a certain resistance to the relevance of English and English literature remained:

> [W]hen in 1864 the Clarendon Commission reported on the nine public schools, they endorsed the continued supremacy of Latin and Greek with the view that there should be 'some one principal branch of study, invested with a recognized, and, if possible, a traditional importance, to which the principal weight should be assigned'. Indeed, when Dr. Kennedy of Shrewsbury School was asked by the commissioners if he were satisfied with his pupils' knowledge of English literature, he replied that he had not the time to give to the subject, and that to teach English would fritter away his power. (Palmer, 1965: 43)

And again, in Wodehouse's day, we can be sure that the study of English and English literature was somewhat limited. Robert McCrum, for one, describes Wodehouse as having studied: "English literature – from *The Knight's Tale* to *The Faerie Queene*" (McCrum, 2005: 30).

According to Usborne, Wodehouse's proficiency in Latin (and Greek) profoundly affected the structure of his sentences (Usborne, 1988: 3). Partly to this point, while Wodehouse claims he did not come across the romantic comedies of Terence and Plautus at Dulwich, he did admit to reading Aristophanes:

[34] "[T]he grammar schools and universities pursued a purely classical curriculum until the nineteenth century, despite Thomas Sheridan's enlightened proposal in 1763, that young gentlemen at the universities should acquire 'a grammatical knowledge of our mother tongue, and a critical skill therein, together with the art of reading it with propriety, and reciting it publicly with judgment and grace'" (Palmer, 1965: 5).

> [T]hough in my time at Dulwich we read a great many authors, for some reason neither Plautus nor Terence came my way. Why would this be? Because P and T were supposed to be rather low stuff?... But we read Aristophanes, who was just as slangy as the best of them. (Wodehouse *apud* McCrum, 2005: 30)

William Townend, another Dulwich pupil and Wodehouse's longtime friend, recalls Wodehouse writing "a series of plays after the pattern of the Greek tragedies, outrageously funny, dealing with boys and masters" (Townend *apud* McCrum, 2005: 30), which both suggests a certain influence and a tendency to parody well established works of fiction. As we will later see, both New Comedy and Old Comedy were to have an influence in the structure and tropes of the Jeeves saga, either directly through the original source, or through their influence on the works of musical comedy or farce that Wodehouse was exposed to as a young man[35]. The influence of the King James Bible is also prevalent: it not only creeps unassumingly into Bertie's casual speech, supposedly owing to his having won a Scripture Prize when at school, but is very frequently consciously alluded to. In this first example, the reference to Genesis 19 is readily recognisable:

> I don't know if the name of Lot's wife is familiar to you, and if you were told about her remarkable finish. […] She looked, and – *bing* – a pillar of salt. And the reason I mention this now is that the very same thing seemed to have happened to Uncle Percy. (Wodehouse, 2008f: 179)

In this second reference to the Book of Daniel 3:8-25, Wodehouse already assumes that the reader has a certain familiarity with the story of the throwing of three Hebrew men into the fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia due to their faith in God: "We both took a look at it. I shook my head. He shook his. Wee Nook was burning lower now, but its

[35] Perhaps the most famous and enduring example of farce, although it perhaps uses its techniques for the purpose of subtle but pointed satire (Davis, 2001: 142), is Oscar Wilde's The *Importance of Being Earnest*, which Wodehouse certainly knew, and which Christopher Hitchens suspects played a decisive role in shaping Wodehouse's narratives, as we will see below (cf. Hitchens, 2011).

interior was still something which only Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego could have entered with any genuine moment" (Wodehouse, 2008f: 101). In this brief third reference, the allusion is much subtler: "Why interfere with life's morning? Young man, rejoice in thy youth! Tra-la! What ho!" (Wodehouse, 2008b: 71), a nod to Ecclesiastes 11:9.

As for English literature – or fiction and poetry – it was, as in other European countries, common practice in the Victorian school system to teach literature through what Clarke Olney refers to as "memory passages" (Olney, 1962: 393) – the habit of making students, through endless repetition, memorise certain passages from "canonical" works of fiction. These make their way constantly into Wodehouse's work, and the author himself confessed to resorting to books such as *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* in order to refresh his memory (although an occasional misquotation reveals that they were often actually jotted down *from* memory[36])[37]. Sources include:

> Such allusions are everywhere on the pages of P.G Wodehouse. They range from Milton to Robert W. Service, from Byron to the Bible. Longfellow is the principal source among the American poets, with Whittier another favorite. One finds allusions to Burns, Cowper, Coleridge, and Conan Doyle, Scott, Swinburne, Tennyson, and Shakespeare, of course, as in most matters, reigns supreme (*ibid*, 395)

Other occasional sources include Marcus Aurelius, George Bernard Shaw, as well as frequent use of Browning and the occasional obscure reference to Thomas Otway. In his own study, Usborne remarks:

[36] In *Jeeves in the Offing*, Jeeves renders part of Robert Burns' poem "To A Mouse" in the following way: "As the poet Burns says, the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley" (Wodehouse, 2008b: 147), whereas the original reads "the best laid schemes" (Burns 1970, 61-62).

[37] "I took a room at the Hotel Duke in Greenwich Village and settled in with a secondhand typewriter, paper, pencils, envelops and Bartlett's book of *Familiar Quotations*, that indispensable adjunct to literary success. I wonder if Bartlett has been as good a friend to other authors as he has been to me. I don't know where I would have been all these years without him. It so happens that I am not very bright and find it hard to think up anything really clever off my own bat but give me my Bartlett and I will slay you" (Wodehouse, 1981: 497).

> The Latin tags that he remembered and the Sixth-Form English – Shakespeare, Tennyson, Longfellow – Wodehouse gave thriftily to Jeeves. The Bible that he had studied in 'Divinity' and heard Sunday after Sunday from lectern and pulpit in Chapel at school and Church in the holidays gave him parsonical rhythms and references for his frequent clergymen. (Usborne, 1988: 3)[38]

According to Pollack-Pelzner: "the 1870 Education Act required English schoolchildren to recite Shakespeare passages for their exams, establishing Shakespeare quotation as a form of nationally socialised identity" (Pollack-Pelzner, 2018: 136). Curiously, although not surprisingly, both the sources of Wodehouse's intertextuality as well as the sources of his heteroglossia reflect the most enduring and widespread linguistic and literary influences on the English language. As Jane Austen remarks in *Mansfield Park*: "We all talk Shakespeare, use his similes, and describe with his descriptions" (Austen, 2005: 391). One could add that, in English, we did at one time and to an extent still do, frequently talk King James Bible. Perhaps to a lesser degree, or at least to a less conscious degree, the same applies to Burns, Wordsworth, Byron and others to whom Wodehouse frequently resorts for his allusions and some of whose writings have become, through the teaching of memory passages or not, canonical and – at times unconsciously – idiomatic.

On the subject of heteroglossia, a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin – to whom I will later resort more fully on the subject of comedy – Wodehouse once again intersperses his English with two other languages with which, historically, it is inextricably bound: Latin and French[39]. Not only that, but he mixes the Latinate variety of formal or technical English with terms of Anglo-Saxon origin as well as contemporary slang. Often, he will mix British English and American English. A particularly interesting example is a monologue by the

[38] Bertie also makes frequent use of Biblical references, often boasting about how he won a prize for scripture knowledge at school (Wodehouse, 2008i: 180).
[39] By heteroglossia (raznorečie) Bakhtin was referring to "a diversity of social speech types, sometimes even diversity of languages, and a diversity of individual voices." For Bakhtin, a novel is essentially this diversity of voices, "artistically organized" (Bakhtin, 1981: 263).

French cook Anatole which very clearly reflects the London (and Shropshire), New York and Paris/French Riviera triangle of the narratives:

> In the chats I have had with this wonder man, I have always found his English fluent, but a bit on the mixed side. If you remember, he was with Mrs. Bingo Little for a time before coming to Brinkley, and no doubt he picked up a good deal from Bingo. Before that, he had been a couple of years with an American family at Nice and had studied under their chauffeur, one of the Maloneys of Brooklyn. So, what with Bingo and what with Maloney, he is, as I say, fluent but a bit mixed.
>
> He spoke, in part, as follows:
>
> 'Hot dog! You ask me what is it? Listen. Make some attention a little. Me, I have hit the hay, but I do not sleep so good, and presently I wake and up I look, and there is one who make faces against me through the dashed window. Is that a pretty affair? Is that convenient? If you think I like it, you jolly well mistake yourself. I am so mad as a wet hen. And why not? I am somebody, isn't it? This is a bedroom, what-what, not a house for some apes? Then for what do blighters sit on my window so cool as a few cucumbers, making some faces?' (Wodehouse, 2018i: 236-237)

The structure of the syntax is for the most part French, and there is some purposeful language transfer or L1 interference[40] in elements such as "make some attention" (*fait-attention*), "Me, I have" (*moi, je me suis)*, "convenient" used as the French *convenable,* "isn't it" (*n'est ce pas?*) and "for what" (*pourquoi*). The American slang would be chiefly "hot dog!", "hit the hay", "sleep so good" and "cool as a cucumber". The upper-class Britishisms Anatole has picked up include "presently" "dashed", "jolly well", blighters", and "mad as a wet hen", which in this case is doubly interesting because it conflates the British expression "mad as a wet hen", in which mad – as in normal British usage – means insane, with the American use of mad, which is synonymous with "angry". It is partly due to this constant mixture of varied sources, exactly the same sources that have had a historic formative influence on the English language, that Robert A. Hall has written "[i]t would, I believe, be found that Wodehouse

[40] By language transfer or L1 interference I mean the transfer, in this case, of syntax and expressions native to the French language, Anatole's first language, to English.

jaws on almost all the phenomena known – at first hand or through extensive reading – to a well-educated member of the modern English-speaking world." (Hall, 1974: 108).

In the Jeeves saga, words and quotations are ripped from their contexts, garbled and weaved together into a playful tapestry, what Lawrence Dugan refers to as Bertie's baroque style: "[i]t is a unique, vernacular, contorted, slangy idiom which I have labeled baroque because it is in such sharp contrast to the almost bland classical sentences of the other Wodehouse books" (Dugan, 2010: 228). Admittedly, this captures the playful, schoolboy mixture of sources, styles and languages, and how densely packed with moments of humour the narratives are. Yet the term baroque can be misleading: it appears to imply a superfluousness of style that glosses over the accuracy of Wodehouse's comic writing, and as argued by Sarah Säckel, is potentially unhelpful term for further analysis (Säckel, 2012/2013). Dugan takes his cue from Borges' definition of the baroque as a style that "borders on self-parody", or in the original "*que lida con su propria caricatura*"– the purpose of which is self-parody (Borges, 2015: 9). The Jeeves saga, as we will see, is certainly aware of its fictionality and contains elements of parody. The Anatole tirade for instance, undoubtedly showcases its densely intricate, over-the-top comic style. But to call it baroque is perhaps to suggest an excessively ornate style, funny due to its attempt at being grandiose. In addition, there is a certain use of "baroque" that can easily be equated with "camp", and the Jeeves saga, despite its treatment *as* camp by Robert F. Kiernan in *Frivolity Unbound* (1990), is not camp in the sense of Sontag's famous 1964 essay "Notes On Camp". That is, it is not self-aware in its over-the-top ridiculousness; artificial. It does not have about it a "seriousness that fails" – no more than humour is tendentially the bathos to any pathos (Sontag, 2009: 83). If anything, its seriousness, a comic seriousness, merely lacks solemnity. The Jeeves saga does, however, share what Sontag and Kiernan see as camp's playfulness

of language, lack of political commitment and comic detachment. In addition, this quotation by Sontag, while referring specifically to camp, nevertheless offers a glimpse of what will later be an essential point about comedy in this thesis: "Camp proposes a comic vision of the world. But not a bitter or polemical comedy. If tragedy is an experience of hyperinvolvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, or detachment" (*ibid*: 288).

While Bertie's magpie mixture of languages and references could be described as over-the-top, there is no true love for dramatic excess in the characters or the narratives, and this circumspection regarding it is personified by Jeeves, whom Geoffrey Jaggard referred to as "the Stoic Philosopher of our day" (Jaggard, 1984: 83). As in the example of Anatole, heteroglossia is used meticulously and in a complex fashion with a direct view to the comic, and not for tangential comic effect while rejoicing in flights of fancy. In all other respects but language, a sober, comic suspicion of snobbery, sentimentality and ridiculousness permeates the behaviour of the characters: that of Jeeves above all, particularly regarding conventions of attire, but also that of Bertie whenever he expresses his repulsion towards Madeline Bassett, the works of Rosie M. Banks and statuettes of the Infant Samuel at Prayer – a famous piece of Victorian sentimentality. Above all, perhaps the Jeeves saga lacks what is so often the mark of the Wildean sense of humour: a certain humorous disdain for the game of life – the masquerade, as we will later see apropos Bergson's thoughts on humour. While the World of Jeeves and Wooster is comic and thus comes with a comic perspective on life, its detachment is nevertheless committed to the game of life and its conventions – the books are, like much comedy, a force *for* life.

This will be further explored in another chapter.

1.1.3 Clichés

> Wodehouse enjoys the cliché he kills, and enjoys killing it.
> (Medcalf, 2010: 241)

The use of memory passages that Olney speaks of in the teaching of literature easily leads to the creation of clichés, and clichés are a central aspect of the Jeeves saga. On the whole, as we have seen, intertextuality is at all times a constant in the narratives, whether acknowledged or not. *The Code of the Woosters,* for instance, opens with an immediate reference to the poem "To Autumn" by John Keats[41], quickly followed by a simile which involves a Biblical reference to Jael, wife of Heber. Bertie will also frequently use clichéd expressions, such as "the scales fell from my eyes" (Wodehouse, 2008c: 12) "an impending doom" (Wodehouse, 2008c: 11), "the bitter awakening" (Wodehouse, 2008f: 36) or referring to people (and himself) as "men of iron" (Wodehouse, 2008c: 8). As Kristin Thompson has observed, Wodehouse constantly recycles and deflates clichés by resorting to humorous techniques which simultaneously poke fun at the practice of memory passages – engendering an alienating effect which dismantles what the meaning of those passages is taken to be – and reactivate them for current usage:

> Perhaps the most compelling reason for studying Wodehouse closely, however, lies in his extraordinary complex play with convention, repetition, and cliché. […] Wodehouse was intensely aware of his own participation in the popular literary scene. He used the conventions of the popular literature of his day in a unique way: exaggerating and displaying clichés and repetitive formulas. Most authors with any pretention would be likely to avoid cliché or use it to parody other literary works. Although there is an element of parody about Wodehouse's use of cliché, he is doing something far more ingenious with it. Specifically, he systematically uses familiar phrases, character types, and situations, foregrounding their formulaic nature until we are forced to notice them *as clichéd*. […] He *defamiliarizes* these most familiar of literary conventions. As a result, he does not parody any one particular literary work; he parodies nineteenth century literature itself. (Thompson, 1992: 4-5, italics in the original)

[41] Not surprisingly, Keats' "To Autumn" is a celebration of Autumn as a new spring – which certainly fits with the reoccurring theme of spring throughout the Jeeves saga.

The result is, at the very least, an increased awareness of language and its humorous incongruities. But this is also a kind of parody that validates – the defamiliarization that Wodehouse achieves invites a fresh gaze which is not entirely parodical. Wodehouse's treatment of cliché and convention in general, as we will see, often brings the cliché to where its strength originally lay. And Wodehouse's intertextuality is not exclusively bound to the nineteenth century, as we have seen and will see regarding the Classics. According to Pollack-Pelzner:

> Wodehouse brings the Shakespearean negotiations of Dickens, Eliot and Hardy to a head: his narrative voice summons the authority of Bardolatrous quotation while also spoofing the reverential practice of attributing everyday speech to the Bard. It's a dialectic common to nineteenth-century Shakespeare burlesques, which irreverently dug up the now-hallowed ground of Shakespeare's language. (Pollack-Pelzner, 2018: 150)

The explanation, in terms of humorous technique, is what Freud referred to as "taking faded phrases in their full meaning" (Freud, 2002: 72), which is to say toying with the literality of – most frequently – a metaphor or simile. An example would be frequent lampooning of Shakespeare's use of "fretful porpentine" in *Hamlet*, in the scene where the Ghost of Hamlet's father addresses him: "I could a tale unfold whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood, make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres, thy knotted and combined locks to part and each particular hair to stand on end like quills upon the fretful porpentine" (Shakespeare, 2019: 112). Bertie's use of the expression, of course, differs significantly:

> His face was flushed, his eyes were bulging, and one had the odd illusion that his *hair was standing on end—like quills upon the fretful porpentine*, as Jeeves once put it when describing to me the reactions of Barmy Fotheringay-Phipps on seeing a dead snip, on

> which he had invested largely, come in sixth in the procession at the Newmarket Spring Meeting. (Wodehouse, 2008c: 148-149, my italics)

The humour resides, of course, in the grandiose tone of the Shakespearean quotation – and in its archaic use of porpentine to signify porcupine – in contrast with the "reality" of a "dead snip" at a horse race, but also in the absurdity of the original in its use of an animal such as the porpentine for the purposes of pathos[42]. In other occasions, the quote is deconstructed further:

> 'I shall shortly be telling Uncle Percy things about himself which will do something to his knotted and combined locks which at the moment has slipped my memory.'
> 'Make his knotted and combined locks to part and each particular hair to stand on end like quills upon the fretful porpentine, sir.'
> 'Porpentine?'
> 'Yes, sir.'
> 'That can't be right. There isn't such a thing'. (Wodehouse, 2008f: 185)

In this example, the porpentine so often alluded to makes an appearance in the narrative itself – in the flesh:

> It was not immediately that the tired eyelids closed in sleep, for some hidden hand had placed a hedgehog between the sheets – practically, you might say, *a fretful porpentine*. Assuming this to be Boko's handiwork, I was strongly inclined to transfer it to his couch. Reflecting, however, that while this would teach him a much needed lesson it would be a bit tough on the porpentine, I took the latter into the garden and loosed it into the grass. (Wodehouse, 2008f: 259, my italics)

According to Pollack-Pelzner, "Wodehouse authorises Shakespeare quotations without ever naturalising them" (Pollack-Pelzner, 2018: 154). Yet it is perhaps more complicated than that. According to Laura White:

[42] An effect referred to as a "descending incongruity", more on which is said *infra*.

> [Wodehouse's] sort of discovery is not antagonistic toward English literary traditions, since these very traditions supply the language that Wodehouse refurbishes for comic effect. His is a recombinatory genius, in which the modernist love of linguistic innovation is yoked to a love of language's traditions. (White, 1994: 127)

This is to say that the prose does evince a scepticism of "Bardolatry" and the solemn authority that comes with it, yet at the same time the passages are often reactivated both in their formal, aesthetic effect and the funniness that arises from using them not within their context or strictly analogously, but as literal advice, such as when Bertie checks himself to see if the "sleave of care" [sic] had been "knitted up":

> Waking from this some little time later and running an eye over myself to see if the ravelled sleave [sic] of care had been knitted up—which it hadn't—I was told that I was wanted on the telephone. (Wodehouse, 2008e: 58)

Wodehouse is at the very least restating the quotability of these sentences by reminding us of their musicality – a strong reason for their aptitude as memory passages, or for being absorbed by a magpie mind. The fact that the ridiculous fretful porpentine truly makes an appearance in the flesh is both ridicule and reassertion: there is, perhaps, such a thing as a fretful porpentine for one to compare oneself to, albeit one lacking the intended grandeur of pathos. This is even clearer when a *cliché* is used consciously, yes, and in that sense parodically to an extent, but simultaneously in earnest and with little defamiliarization. A suitable example would be when, in *Thank You Jeeves*, Bertie sacrifices himself and agrees to spend the night in prison in order to secure a happy ending for his friends and family. Jeeves then reappropriates the famous last words of *A Tale of Two Cities* character Sydney Carton as he heads to the guillotine to tell Bertie: "It is a far, far better thing that you do, than you have ever done, sir" (Wodehouse, 2003: 256). Once more, a certain mixture of parody (in the invocation of a famous literary tragedy applied to Bertie's night in prison) and

reassertion are present, since the quote is used with earnest, affectionate affect. Similarly, in *Jeeves in the Offing*, after Bertie sacrifices his own interests in order to please his aunt Dahlia, Jeeves conveys his thoughts by first alluding to Longfellow's "The Village Blacksmith": "Something attempted, something done, has earned a night's repose. You have the satisfaction of having sacrificed yourself in the interests of Mr Travers" (Wodehouse 2008e: 199, Longfellow, 1906: 31)[43].

Stephen Medcalf describes Wodehouse's relationship with the cliché along similar lines, by claiming that "Wodehouse enjoys the cliché he kills, and enjoys killing it" (Medcalf, 2010: 241), attributing this enjoyment to the author's

> duality of acceptance and sharp criticism. It is a dual innocence: an innocent wisdom which goes straight to the point, and preternaturally innocent gullibility. Either side can be uppermost, and we flash from one to the other with a rapidity which is a great part of the humour. The language depends on exploiting the gap between what words mean and what they might mean – the characters […] are eternally taken in by life, while the sceptic and the cynic cast out. (Medcalf, 2010: 243)

There thus appears to be, in Wodehouse, a desire to accept incongruities, to engage them in play, to integrate them from within. The clearest humorous incongruity that arises from this kind of play is perhaps the one between reality and our expectations of a pre-Wittgensteinian language: that is to say, an ideal, purely logical language where contradictions do not arise – a language where flammable and inflammable cannot possibly mean the same thing[44]. When Medcalf speaks of the constant flashing between wisdom and gullibility, he observes that "either side can be uppermost" (Medcalf, 2010: 243). It is perhaps common to both

[43] The stanza to which Jeeves alludes goes, appropriately, though comically applied to a drone rather than a worker, reads: "Toiling, rejoicing, sorrowing,/Onward through life he goes;/Each morning sees some task begin,/Each evening sees it close;/Something attempted, something done,/Has earned a night's repose" (Longfellow, 1906: 31).
[44] More on this *infra*.

Wodehouse's language-play and to the life within the Jeeves saga – to the actual interaction between the characters – that contradictions are to be noted, laughed at, and ultimately heuristically integrated into everyday behaviour. The meaning of words is conventional, it fluctuates according to convention. Ideas, too, fluctuate in their relation to reality, whatever reality may be, and so do – on the grand scale of things – facts, or our perception of them. Yet this playfulness does not eliminate contradiction and side absolutely with a realist objectivity. Nor does it follow a modernist tendency to lose oneself in what often feels like a life built on disorienting subjectivity. Instead, a complicated comic alchemy is accomplished. While everything is malleable and incongruous, we remain on a heuristic route towards a happy ending. After all, the meticulously planned farcical plots of the Jeeves saga – which are by no means a ubiquitous feature of comic novels[45] – ensure that there is an overarching plausibility that feeds the necessary suspension of disbelief. Although Jeeves ultimately operates as a *deus ex machina*, he does so only to an extent that guarantees sustained interest and an element of surprise in the ending. This navigation of the potentially absurd or contradictory towards a happy ending – this move from chaos to cosmos – is perhaps what has led Richard Carlson to comment that "Wodehouse has always known of the curious comfort his stories give to the modern-day reader who has been treated to a world of culture that has been and is, at best, erratic" (Carlson, 1973: 158). The Jeeves saga is chaotic, yes, and accepts such chaos, but is ultimately not erratic – its chaos is contained.

Yet although he conveys clichés through language, it is not merely the occasional clichéd expression that Wodehouse lampoons. Frequently, he will also send up visual clichés as well as those of narrative or characterization, and how they – and literature in general – stylistically differ from reality:

[45] Historically, comic novels had been structured along episodic lines, in the vein of the picaresque.

> The sun shone, and a blackbird, I remember, was singing in an adjoining thicket. No reason why it shouldn't have been, of course. I mention the fact merely to stress the general peace and tranquillity of everything. And I must say it did strike me as a passing thought that the sort of setting a job like this really needed was a blasted heath at midnight, with a cold wind whistling in the bushes and three witches doing their stuff at the cauldron. (Wodehouse, 2008f: 195)

In this example there is again no obvious defamiliarization at work, merely a passing reference to the cliché of the three witches of Macbeth. But there is an indication that Bertie is viewing life through the pathetic tropes of that particular play and finding said life wanting in consistent dramatic effect. For Bertie, the kind of situation he is describing – in this case the tension leading up to him kicking young Edwin in the backside in front of his sister Florence – *typically* comes with more pathos in literature, with more dramatic trappings than those that he can see before him. The weather refuses to adapt to the tension in his mind, and there is consequently no union between his humanity and the elements, a union which often takes place in literature, where weather and landscape are often part of an aesthetically unified, meaningful whole. This is wholly in line with what we have seen from Frye and Zunshine above. To add to the complexity of the situation, Bertie's "desire" for a suitable objective correlative – in T. S Eliot's terminology (cf. Eliot, 1920) – is in part prompted by Jeeves, who referring to Bertie's upcoming tasks, quotes Cassius' famous lines from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: "There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune" (Shakespeare, 1965: 94).

Northrop Frye sees this union, this tendency for artists to employ the objective correlative, as a feature that showcases the influence of ritual over literature. For Frye, literature's analogical mimesis is an imitation of the "total dream of man" (Frye, 1973: 119) – that is, the expression of a desire to identify the outside world with oneself. Rituals, imbued

with magical thinking, were very directly intended to sway the elements to suit human purposes: "[T]he impetus of the magical element in ritual is clearly toward a universe in which a stupid and indifferent nature is no longer the container of human society, but is contained by that society, and must rain or shine at the pleasure of man" (Frye, 1973: 120). In literature, in more or less sublimated fashion, such a tendency would persist, partly in order to create an intelligible mood that reflects or foreshadows the thoughts and deeds of the characters. The tension between the literary intertextuality of the books and how the narratives constantly frustrate Bertie's equally literary expectations, or obviate the discrepancy between the reality he describes and the quotations he uses to describe it, is a central parodic aspect in the saga. It conveys an awareness of the fact that the sustained pathos of the epic or of tragedy is literary and is typically not to be found in life. On the other hand, the reader is all too aware that Bertie's goings-on do not merit such a pathos, even as he or she surely suspects that similar incidents in their own lives are equally un-literary. That Bertie should think so while simultaneously knowing reality is otherwise is equally humorous – and telling ["no reason why it shouldn't have been, of course" (Wodehouse, 2008f: 195)].

Writing about Bertie Wooster's language, Richard Usborne (Usborne, 1988: 22) states that Wodehouse must have been influenced by F. Anstey's Baboo Jabberjee character and his particular brand of English – that is, the English of the "examination wallah" who has learned to speak the language entirely through books, and thus expresses himself, less than Anatole but much like Bertie, in a mixed way[46]. This would be a fitting example of an average sentence by Baboo:

[46] "The element of Psmith's language that was hived off later for the use of burblers such as Bertie Wooster is babu-English, and I'd like to take a few minutes here to have a look at F. Anstey's 1897 book, compiled from pieces of Punch in 1896, called *Baboo Jabberjee*. (…) Wodehouse read all Anstey's stuff as a boy, including,

> But, heigh-ho! *surgit amari aliquid*, and his condescending patronage was dolefully alloyed with the inevitable dash of bitters which, as Poet Shakspeare [sic] remarks, withers the galled jade until it winces. (Anstey, 1898: 1)

Baboo, like Bertie and Jeeves – and Wodehouse as a schoolboy – is an inveterate quoter. Yet the central quality that these three characters share is not exactly related to how they are positioned, culturally, towards English[47], but rather related to how they mediate their reality through literature. As an agent in the narrative, as well as its narrator, not only does Bertie constantly mediate his thoughts and actions through literature and literary examples, but he is also conscious of the craft of writing itself, which gives the Jeeves saga a certain self-awareness – lends it contours of (like we have seen with *Mike*) metafiction. White observes that this may have more to do with the nineteenth century practice of the intrusive narrator (White, 1994: 128) than it does with Modernism or Post-Modernism. One may add that this was a common practice even before, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) being a paradigmatic case of the comically intrusive narrator – or rather, a narrator whose end-goal is to constantly frustrate the reader's expectations regarding plot by toying with its conventions. And indeed there are similarities between the Jeeves saga and other comic characters that constantly make references to literature. These characters include Sancho Panza and Don Quixote who, despite not being narrators like Bertie is, are also constant quoters of proverbs and chivalric romance novels respectively; or Tom Sawyer, who constantly models his adventures, as well as what "is done" and "is not done", on the fiction

as is obvious from his school stories, *Vice Versa*. But *Baboo Jabberjee* (which is quoted by name in [Wodehouse's] *Love Among the Chickens*) was powerfully seminal to Psmith and the quintessential Wodehouse style of false concords" (Usborne, 1988: 132).

[47] There is of course common ground between Baboo and Bertie in the sense that both indulge in a certain amount of the heteroglossia typical of the schoolboy, and the playful spoofing of literary references.

he has read[48]. It can be argued that by doing this, in his "life" Sawyer is chiefly concerned with imitating art. So is Quixote, and in his own fashion so is Bertie, as this quote illustrates:

> I don't know if you know that sort of feeling you get on these days round about the end of April and the beginning of May, when the sky's a light blue, with cotton-wool clouds, and there's a bit of a breeze blowing from the west? Kind of uplifted feeling. Romantic, if you know what I mean. I'm not much of a ladies' man, but on this particular morning it seemed to me that what I really wanted *was some charming girl to buzz up and ask me to save her from assassins or something*. (Wodehouse, 2019: 3, my italics)

Here Bertie finds himself swayed by a romantic feeling and immediately has the desire to imitate a clichéd situation typical of either a romance or of pulp fiction. Considering the motif of the lady in distress, the Quixote comparison is especially apt, as it is also a common theme in chivalry novels and the driving force of many of Quixote's dunderheaded adventures. Once more about Bertie and Don Quixote, Usborne writes:

> On another level you may see Bertie Wooster as a modern Don Quixote, constantly setting out on adventures to help his friends and constantly making an endearing ass of himself. Don Quixote has a wiser *vade mecum* in Sancho Panza; Bertie has the wiser Jeeves. Bertie, like Don Quixote has his brain curdled with romance. Don Quixote's romance came from books of knight-errantry; Bertie's from Edwardian fiction and a regular diet of detective novels. (Usborne, 1988: 178)

The origin of Bertie's outlook and social ineptitude is much the same as Quixote's: a lifelong relationship with literature. But in Bertie's case, as we have seen, literature of a varied kind. This literature shapes the views and expectations of these characters, leading to an idealised view of life that constantly, and comically, clashes with the social life around them. In his *Mimesis*, Auerbach claims that with Don Quixote, Cervantes transformed the world into a "gay stage" (Auerbach, 2003: 351), and an object of "merry play" (Auerbach, 2003: 354),

[48] Tom Sawyer is not interested, however, in following a previous course of action because it is portrayed as advisable in a work of fiction, but because it carries the excitement, the romance of fiction – because it is emulating adventure and thus (but not quite) having an adventure.

the only criticism in which is directed towards bad literature and its effect on susceptible minds[49]. Yet even this is ultimately more complex than it would seem, as Quixote, despite his tragic end, is taken by Panza, other characters and by many of Cervantes' readers as foolish, but also idealistic and worthy of sympathy and admiration.

In the Jeeves saga we find a similar perspective: Bertie clings to antiquated notions of honour and adventure of dubious literary origin, but despite their unreality, they endow him with an innocence of outlook that appears to be incompatible with the real world – at least without Jeeves' more pragmatic assistance. As with Quixote and Panza, and to a degree Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, the relationship between Bertie and Jeeves is, as we have seen earlier regarding their dialogue, one of complementing opposites. Their opposite forms of expression play off each other, one garrulous, the other typically circumspect (with the occasional comic reversal). So do their characters: one carefree, uninterested in convention, innocent; the other wily, organised, a lover of rules.

Dwelling on the subject of the master and servant in literature, W.H. Auden writes:

> A dialogue requires two voices, but, if it is the inner dialogue of human personality that is to be expressed artistically, the two characters employed to express it and the relationship between them must be of a special kind. The pair must in certain respects be similar, i.e., they must be of the same sex, and in others, physical and temperamental, polar opposites—identical twins will not do because they inevitably raise the question, 'Which is the real one?'—and they must be inseparable, i.e., the relationship between them must be of a kind which is not affected by the passage of time or the fluctuations of mood and passion, and which makes it plausible that wherever one of them is,

[49]Auerbach makes other valuable comments about *Don Quixote* as comic literature. Among them, and in what appears to be an exception to Auerbarch's declared concern with social problems: "Above all, Don Quijote's adventures never reveal any of the basic problems of the society of the time" (Auerbach, 2003: 345). This appears to be, for Auerbach, part and parcel of the comic novel. But Auerbach goes further: "Reality willingly cooperates with a play which dresses it up differently every moment. It never spoils the gaiety of the play by bringing in the serious weight of its troubles, cares, and passions. All that is resolved in Don Quijote's madness; it transforms the real everyday world into a gay stage" (*ibid.:* 351). Finally, in a recognition of the delicate path trod during the analysis of comedy and its relation to real life: "I have tried to interpret as little as possible. In particular, I have pointed out time and again how little there is in the text which can be called tragic and problematic. Take it as merry play on many levels, including in particular the level of everyday realism" (*ibid*. 354).

> whatever he is doing, the other should be there too. There is only one relationship which satisfies all these conditions, that between master and personal servant. (Auden, 1962: 110)

While one could dispute the necessity for these exact requisites, the idea that an inner human dialogue between two conflicting sides of a personality is taking place appears to ring true in relation to literary "double acts" such as Quixote and Panza and Bertie and Jeeves. Quixote's demanding idealistic code and vision of life are offset, as well as encouraged, by Sancho Panza's common sense and materialism. Bertie, although contradictory, is a good-hearted young man-about-town, raised on canonical memory passages, public-school stories and pulp-fiction, keen on revelling and fine-dining but lacking in practical skills and wary of responsibility of any kind – namely marriage – although resolutely adhering to the "Code of the Woosters": "never let a pal down" (Wodehouse, 2008b: 254). While not actively questing like Don Quixote, when duty calls Bertie attempts to model his behaviour on literary archetypes, such as fictional detectives like Sherlock Holmes or the *parfait genteel knight*[50]. His lack of practical skills, however, does not allow him to succeed without the intervention of Jeeves. Although Jeeves is the authority in literary matters and does not entirely scoff at popular fiction such as that of the fictional romance writer Rosie M. Banks, he relies on literature merely to describe and make sense of the reality before him. In accordance with what Kristin Thompson refers to as his Machiavellian side (Thompson, 1992: 262), that is, in order to engender the best possible state of affairs through whatever means possible, Jeeves resorts to practical knowledge, that of "the psychology of the individual" (Wodehouse, 2003: 233)[51]. In doing so he often deviates from the dictates of

[50] Bertie often uses this term, as well as *preux chevalier*, to imply a certain standard of behaviour. *Parfait genteel knight* is most likely a reference to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, "The Knight's Tale" in particular. Both are terms used in connection with chivalry.

[51] This Machiavellian is even more salient in the short story "Bertie Changes His Mind", the only one narrated by Jeeves.

ethical behaviour, at one point remarking, after lying about the presence of Aunt Agatha in the environs in order to frighten Uncle Percy to release Bertie from his grasp: “I fear I was guilty of a subterfuge. I regretted the necessity, but it seemed to me essential in the best interests of all concerned” (Wodehouse, 2008f: 295). In other situations, Jeeves will also resort to giving someone “a Mickey Finn”, a drink with an incapacitating agent, as well as coshing someone and rendering them unconscious, or impersonating a policeman. While Thompson sees this as revealing a sinister side to Jeeves’ personality, this is where the analogical nature of literature, as well as the perspective of an inner dialogue symbolised by the interaction between two different, fictional characters proves valuable: Jeeves is not a flesh-and-blood man whose actions and moral outlook are dubious, a dubiousness which Thompson underlines, but a symbolical counterpoint to inept innocence (Thompson, 1992: 128). He is Machiavellian perhaps in the sense that he recognises the pragmatic need for crossing the line of conventionally moral behaviour in order to achieve a higher goal. A counterpart to Jeeves who is just as resourceful but who is rigid in outlook and action as well as fundamentally suspicious and unamiable is Rupert Baxter, “The Efficient Baxter”, who is constantly foiled in his attempts to control and manage Lord Emsworth’s affairs in the Blandings saga. The nature of Jeeves and Wooster’s relationship of mutual encouragement, despite constant rifts, is once again touched upon by Auden in “Balaam and his Ass”, apropos a snippet of dialogue between Bertie and Jeeves, beginning with Bertie’s praise of the latter:

> ‘—All the other great men of the age are simply in the crowd, watching you go by.’
> ‘ —Thank you very much, sir. I endeavor to give satisfaction.’
> So speaks comically—and in what other mode than the comic could it on earth truthfully speak?—the voice of Agape, of Holy Love. (Auden, 1962: 231)

Auden is referring to a holy love of Jeeves for Bertie, but perhaps also to a deity's love of innocence and uncalculated goodness – of those without guile. Jeeves' practical, Machiavellian side allows this to be preserved.

1.1.3.1 Metafiction

As argued before, Bertie is not only aware of literature as his main reference for conduct and description: he is also aware of producing it. The opening of *Right Ho, Jeeves* is a glaring example of the kind of intrusive narration that can easily lead to comparisons with modern and postmodern metafiction:

> I don't know if you have had the same experience, but the snag I always come up against when I'm telling a story is this dashed difficult problem of where to begin it. It's a thing you don't want to go wrong over, because one false step and you're sunk. I mean if you fool about too long at the start, trying to establish atmosphere, as they call it, and all that sort of rot, you fail to grip and the customers walk out on you.
>
> Get off the mark, on the other hand, like a scalded cat, and your public is at a loss. It simply raises its eyebrows, and can't make out what you're talking about. (Wodehouse, 2019: 9)

As we have seen, White is correct in identifying this as a staple of literature much before Modernism or Postmodernism, claiming that, although Wodehouse's language, in its intertextuality and heteroglossia, may be considered somewhat in line with modernist literary practices, the structure of his narratives is "essentially realist" (White, 1994: 123). While his narratives were anachronistic to a degree and have grown ever more so as the years have gone by (their relation to *real* time is out of joint) the elements that constitute the narratives are clear and coherent:

> In Wodehouse's work we always know where we are in terms of the plot; his characters are firmly placed along the axes of time and space. Wodehouse's plots are in this sense historicist; that is, they assume the steady pace of time and the accrual of event moving forward to a presumed most recent past. Time is never disjointed in a Wodehousian narrative […]. Wodehouse's respect for the Aristotelian unities also means that we are always firmly set in the landscape. […] In Wodehouse we know where and when we are, even in the homeliest of details. Such strategies are both comic and relentlessly realist, because the humor lies partly in our knowing more than we need to know about our placement in space and time, an ethos directly opposed to the relativistic uncertainties about space and time spawned by Einstein and relished by literary modernists. (*ibid*: 122-123)

The uncertainties that we may have about Bertie's ability to convey his reality accurately are not the doubts we have about the subjective biases or intentions of the famously unreliable narrator of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, whose motivations and character are unreliable, but rather the doubts we may have about Bertie's mental abilities and, perhaps the ones he himself has about the craft. It is easily established, too, that while at any one moment Bertie is likely to misjudge a certain situation or his ability to surmount it, it is his appraisal of a situation that is comically jarring in that it differs from the much likelier interpretation that the reader will make of it. An example would be Bertie's reaction to Madeline Bassett comparing him to Cyrano de Bergerac, due to Bertie's insistence that she marry Gussie Fink-Nottle rather than him:

> 'You remind me of Cyrano.'
> 'Who?'
> 'Cyrano de Bergerac.'
> 'The chap with the nose?'
> 'Yes.'
> I can't say I was any too pleased. I felt the old beak furtively. It was a bit on the prominent side, perhaps, but, dash it, not in the Cyrano class. It began to look as if the next thing this girl would do would be to compare me to Schnozzle Durante.
> 'He loved, but pleaded another's cause.'
> 'Oh, I see what you mean now.' (Wodehouse, 2018: 252)[52]

[52] Another example would be:

"'Why are you got up like a policeman?'
'I am a policeman.'

Bertie conveys a certain situation intelligibly despite not entirely grasping it, and the rote predictability of the narratives ensures that the reader always knows where he or she is, excluding of course the particular details that must be omitted in order to keep them interested.

In addition, Bertie is a participant narrator, which limits his scope to what, at any moment and in hindsight, he can know as an acting agent in the narrative – some of Jeeves' actions, for instance, and the inner thought processes of other characters are inaccessible to him. As in *Don Quixote* – and despite Bertie being the narrator, which neither Quixote nor Sancho are – we constantly know what the reality of the narrative or situation is and we can make a guess as to how Bertie is misjudging it. And while we cannot say whether Wodehouse ever read Cervantes, we do know that he read Fielding (and was not impressed), as well as Smollett (cf. Ratcliffe, 2013: 492), who certainly read *Don Quixote*, having translated the novel into English and subsequently admitted to writing under its influence (Smollett, 2008: xxxiv). The similarities may thus not be entirely due to happenstance. Yet they are indeed similarities of characterisation, rather than of structure. There is a fundamental structural distinction between picaresque comic novels such as *Don Quixote* and, say, *Tom Jones* or *The Adventures of Roderick Random*, in that these picaresque narratives are episodic and looser in structure than Wodehouse's abovementioned clockwork

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'A policeman?'
'Yes.'
'When you say "policeman",' I queried, groping', 'do you mean "policeman"?'
'Yes.'
'You're a policeman?'
'Yes, blast you. Are you deaf? I'm a policeman.'
I grasped it now. He was a policeman" (Wodehouse, 2008f: 70).

plots modelled on the three-act structure typical of farce, a subject which I will develop in a subsequent chapter.

To summarise the above, the Jeeves saga contains a strong streak of parody: Wodehouse makes use of long-established tropes, much like he does with clichés or with comic allusions to established works of fiction widely known to his audience, in such a way that both challenges their conventionality and allows the reader to enjoy it afresh. This is a practice long known even at the time of Cervantes' *Quixote*, which is rife with playful allusions to the clichés of chivalry novels while nevertheless allowing the reader to cherish its main character's outdated idealism.

1.1.3.2 Englishness, Myth and Nostalgia

All in all, the most glaring underlying cliché that the Jeeves saga is imbued with – a subject faintly touched on in this thesis apropos Richardson's discussion of the public-school code in Wodehouse – is that of Englishness. But after all, what is Englishness? For one, it is a concept broad to the extent that, even more than usual, it defies definition in abstract terms. More than simply "the quality of being English", it is a faint aura of something which is simultaneously aesthetic and behavioural – both lived and mythologized. Perhaps above all, it is a concept employed chiefly from the outside-in, so to speak, in order to describe what appears, to the rest of the world, to be a particularly English sensibility. Yet English thinkers have often attempted to define Englishness themselves. Apropos the existence of an English sense of humour, for instance, and before reaching his own conclusions about it, Anthony Easthope writes that all uncertainties aside, "English humour" seems to be above all very readily recognisable by the non-English:

> French writers recognize it immediately when they come across it. *Pariscope*, the weekly publication listing entertainment in the city (‘*une semaine de Paris*’) in its brief notices refers to *4 mariages et 1 enterrement* as ‘*delicieuse et very British*’ (English original) while Monty Python’s *La vie de Brian* is said to contain ‘*un humeur trés britannique*’. (Easthope, 1999: 163, italics in the original)

The statement that something is very “English” or, more mystifyingly, very “British”, relates Englishness to the identification of several readily recognisable tropes. Among them: the bowler hat, the Union Jack, lords and ladies, servants, silliness, irony, outlandishly long surnames pronounced only faintly like they are spelled[53], clubs, gentlemen, sports or “games”, betting, Oxbridge[54]. In another famous essay, “England, Your England” (1940), Orwell at one point highlights the lack of a sense that an English person might have for the Englishness around them until it dawns on them by contrast:

> But talk to foreigners, read foreign books or newspapers, and you are brought back to the same thought. Yes, there is something distinctive and recognizable in English civilization. It is a culture as individual as that of Spain. It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own. Moreover it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature. What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840? But then, what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece? Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person. (Orwell, 1982: 36-37, my italics)

In the very same year, in a wholly more patriotic tone, Dorothy Sayers voices a similar sentiment in her 1940 speech and essay “The Mysterious English” (cf. Sayers, 1946). Much earlier than 1940, however, during the upsurge in nationalism of the 19th century and before

[53] See the Monty Python sketch where the name “Raymond Luxury Yacht” is spelled as is, but pronounced “Throatwobbler Mangrove”. Wodehouse’s own name (pronounced *Wood-house*) would be another suitable – if subtler – example.

[54] All in all, these as well as most of the trappings that Orwell ascribes to public-school fiction and which could, to a great degree, also describe the general atmosphere of Hogwarts from the much more recent book series *Harry Potter* are a part of this constructed Englishness (Orwell 1971: 95-96)

"Englishness" was used by foreigners to describe a certain sensibility, notions of Englishness began to preoccupy a number of thinkers – particularly in the form of an interest in folklore and, as we will see, the idea of a Merry England, an ancestral cultural core of Englishness. An early example would be William Hazzlit's essay "Merry England" (1819), where the author etches a portrait similar to that of Orwell, attempting however tactfully to connect it to an ancient, Merry England. According to Hazzlit, "[t]his old fashioned epithet [Merry England] might be supposed to have been bestowed ironically, or on the old principle—*Ut lucus a non lucendo*. Yet there is something in the sound that hits the fancy, and a sort of truth beyond appearances" (Hazzlit, 1841: 66).

How does this Englishness relate to the Jeeves saga? On this subject, Wodehouse wrote:

> If only these blighters would realize that I started writing about Bertie Wooster and comic Earls because I was in America and couldn't write American stories and the only English characters the American public would read about were exaggerated dudes. It's as simple as that. (Wodehouse *apud* Ratcliffe, 2013: 444)[55]

By pivoting to his audience's needs and his own circumstances, Wodehouse simplifies the details and results of his process. Yet he also admitted that he had inclinations of his own: "*I avoided the humorous story, which was where my inclinations lay*, and went in exclusively for the mushy sentiment which, judging from the magazines, was the thing most likely to bring a sparkle into an editor's eyes. It never worked" (Wodehouse, 1981: 480, my italics). Or rather, if we take both of these quotes together, Wodehouse admits that from the beginning his was a tendency to write in a comic vein and that he simply wrote about what

[55]Likewise: "It's what I always feel about my work – viz. that I go off the rails unless I stay all the time in a sort of artificial world of my own creation. A real character in one of my books sticks out like a sore thumb" (Wodehouse, 1981: 342).

he was able to give life to, providing enough context for an American audience. Such an audience's primary contact with Englishness would have most likely been that of stage Englishmen from musical comedies and English literature up to the nineteenth century in general, perhaps with a certain emphasis on Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. This stereotypical nature of Wodehouse's writing, far from being mere pandering, is inherently comic – it is a consequence of the application of comic formulae to a new context. By definition, the characters of comedy require, as we will later see, a degree of stereotypification.

Yet while writing these comic plots Wodehouse was toying with mythologised notions of England that still hold strong today: ideas that converge into the concept of "Merry England" – an England of the past, be it Edwardian, Elizabethan or medieval, where life is conceived to have been simpler, more meaningful, filled with joy and in harmony with Nature. The focus on a harmonious social life as well as the relationship between humanity and Nature brings Merry England close to other instances of utopian nostalgia such as that of the Classical Arcadian myth, to which the myth of the Garden of Eden is related. Unsurprisingly, authors such as Waugh and Auden have connected Wodehouse with Eden, with Waugh famously describing his work as set in a reality that precedes the "Fall of Man":

> For Mr. Wodehouse there has been no fall of Man; no "aboriginal calamity." His characters have never tasted the forbidden fruit. They are still in Eden. The gardens of Blandings Castle are that original garden from which we are all exiled. The chef Anatole prepares the ambrosia for the immortals of high Olympus. Mr. Wodehouse's world can never stale. He will continue to release future generations from captivity that may be more irksome than our own. He has made a world for us to live in and delight in. (Waugh, 1983: 567)

Auden, in turn, crowned Wodehouse one of the leading English experts on Eden[56] (Auden, 1962: 411), a thought also echoed by Stephen Medcalf:

> But having in particular consideration the degree to which the perfection of the Wodehouse world is a creation of art, I should also offer a comparison with the Arcadia of Virgil's Eclogues – a golden world, largely created by a perfection of style and a living observant humour. (Medcalf, 2010: 247)

The Jeeves saga, or the "golden world" in which it is set cannot be said to be utopian in the sense that with it Wodehouse has created a reality which is structurally or morally ideal; the complexity of an ideal political system for life is absent from his books. Yet it is utopian, as Medcalf argues, in its beauty – its comic joy, its unfailing commitment to play. It is utopian in the sense that it is art that elevates life aesthetically. This Eden, Arcadia or utopia of Wodehouse's is, once again, steeped in a mythical Englishness, and as one of the building blocks of the Jeeves saga, the tropes and characteristics of this Englishness and its relation to the Jeeves saga are worthy of a brief examination.

In *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams criticises the notion of a pastoral English golden age as a romanticised view of a past that has never truly existed, the memory of which is not so much of a rural, pre-Industrial past, but of simpler times, before the complex vagaries of social life; a notion which is perhaps instead connected to each individual's idealised memories of childhood and to Freud's sense of the "oceanic feeling" – the purported feeling of oneness a child has before it develops its ego in contrast with the world (Freud, 2004: 2). According to Williams, if we were to take a tour through England's past we would see that every age differs from its imagined, mythical counterpart and

[56] "The four great English experts on Eden are Dickens, Oscar Wilde, Ronald Firbank and P. G. Wodehouse." Auden 1962, 411)

simultaneously holds another inaccurate, mythologised past close to its heart, all the way through to the paradise of the Garden of Eden (Williams, 1975: 11-12). And indeed, looking even beyond the myth of Eden and at Hesiod's *Work and Days*, written around 700 BC, Williams finds that such a pastoral Arcadia already appeared to be in a distant past – perhaps because it never existed, and is indeed a myth of total harmony between Humanity and Nature – much like the one highlighted by Frye while drawing up similarities between ritual and literature. Williams rightly wonders if this nostalgia for a non-existent past may simply be an imaginary stick with which "to beat the present" (Williams, 1975: 12). And indeed, folklorist Roy Judge readily admits that "[Merry England] is a world that has never actually existed, a visionary, mythical landscape, where it is difficult to take normal historical bearings" (Judge, 1991: 131). During the late Victorian period an enthusiastic revival of interest in the then waning English folklore and folklore practices clearly emerged in a bid, again, for a return to a simpler past. The following 1891 quote by Reverend Peter Hempson Ditchfield of the Church of England expresses this:

> We remember that our land once rejoiced in the name of 'Merry England' . . . Our nation has become grave and serious, and likes not the simple joys which diversified the lives of our forefathers, and made England 'merry'. . . . Let us try to revive the spirit which animated their festivals. (P.H. Ditchfield *apud* Judge, 1991:139)

While this period is exactly that of Wodehouse's childhood, no clear nostalgic fervour for maypoles, Morris dancing or May Queens can be directly found in the Jeeves saga. And inasmuch as the plots follow the structure of farce we cannot say that its narratives are utopian – they are almost entirely concerned with a frenetic tangling and disentangling of romances, the doings of impostors and the playful subversion of rules, limits and authority. Before a harmonious, happy ending is achieved, the world of Jeeves is one where everything

that can go wrong certainly will. But there are occasional pastoral elements[57]: references to spring as a force of its own connected to romance; the gardens of country estates; feudalism; knight-errantry; and the occasional direct reference to "Arcady" as connected to childhood, such as that which takes place when Bertie, while bonding with Roderick Glossop about shared moments of childish rebellion when at public-school, asks: "So you too have lived in Arcady?" (Wodehouse, 2008e: 103). Part of the cultural baggage of the Jeeves saga is pastoral or medieval, revolving around kings, knights, servants. Part of its appeal must also lie therein. The question would be whether that is somehow dangerously perpetuating a misapprehension about the existence of an ideal past, or whether another view should be taken, one which echoes folklorist Keith Thomas's thoughts on the nostalgia around Merry England:

> It is, I think, a relatively common experience to find out that what we write about the past has very little effect upon the historical conceptions of ordinary people .... These historical myths have an imaginative utility and a social function, ratifying as they do our deepest assumptions. People hold on to outdated images of the past because they need them. (Thomas *apud* Judge, 1991: 144)

While the nostalgia for a golden past that never was can lead to bad history and bad politics, it may very well be that it is not entirely amiss in literary fiction, which reflects human qualities and desires perhaps even in the very way that it is styled and structured. That is, in the way it makes use of writing to evoke sounds and visuals for aesthetic and affective purposes. If the golden past is one where things used to flow "as if naturally", where the conventionality of social life did not "gang aft agley"[58] (Wodehouse, 2008e: 147), then

[57] The pastoral elements in Wodehouse are even more conspicuous in the Blandings Castle saga than in the Jeeves saga.

[58] "It is merely a feeling, sir, due probably to my preference for finesse. I mistrust these elaborate schemes. One cannot depend on them. As the poet Burns says, the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley." (Wodehouse 2008e, 147).

there are startling similarities with the central theme of the desire conveyed by the presence of the objective correlative in literature: that Nature should mirror what is within human minds, that it "should rain or shine at the pleasure of Man" (Frye, 1973: 120). Once more, as we have seen above, Frye's work on literature and ritual and Lisa Zunshine's work on theory of mind partly point to this parallel.

In *Joy in the Morning*, as we have seen, Bertie desires that Nature should conform to Shakespearean aesthetics when he finds himself filled with foreboding before setting off to kick his fiancée's younger brother in the behind. Paradoxically, and this is where the narratives point out the gap between ideal and real, Bertie's desire is conveyed but not fulfilled, and is meant to be relatable yet comically absurd. Other elements that contribute to convey this desire of harmony with Nature are of course more explicitly pastoral, or directly related to Nature and rurality. An example would be the use of the country estate and its gardens – its humanised Nature – as the main setting for the unfolding of the farcical plots centred on love won and lost, a setting which is also influenced by an overarching *leitmotif* of Spring and its maddening effects. The country estate functions as the Green World of Wodehouse's narratives: the place where Nature engenders chaos among humans and yet conspires to, ultimately, set things right. The explicit use of the Green World, particularly in Shakespearean plays such as A *Midsummer Night's Dream,* ultimately analogically reflects

> the dream world that we create out of our own desires. This dream world collides with the stumbling and blinded follies of the world of experience, of Theseus' Athens with its idiotic marriage law (…) and yet proves strong enough to impose the form of desire on it. (Frye, 1973: 183-184)

In this respect the Jeeves saga conveys a human desire that is in different gradations present in much literature in different ways and to different degrees: the identification of the self

with its surroundings. It does so through satisfying a yearning for simplicity and innocence that is personified by Bertie Wooster and his relationship with Jeeves. Simultaneously, it points out that absolute harmony between the self and the outside world is a rigid conception of perfection by repeatedly plunging the characters into chaos and subjecting them to constant negotiation. Raymond Williams is entirely right to be suspicious of nostalgia as the desire to return to an idyll that has never existed and as a dishonest rhetorical device with which to bemoan and berate the present. But the expression of this desire in literature, as opposed to history, politics or even literary criticism, provides particular insight into what it is to be human, as observed by Iser, and underlines a key aspect of the human condition: that of the difference between our expectations and reality.

Yet there is neither mere fanciful nostalgia nor a rejection of the present in the Jeeves saga. Luckily, as with other clichés, Wodehouse goes about his peculiar operation of undermining and validating. The elements of pastoral Englishness and the play between literature and reality are palpably fictional in the Jeeves saga, a fictionality heightened by devices such as metafictional elements and anachronism. There is no absolute glorification of the past nor of childhood in the saga. Children, as we will see, are typically portrayed more in the Buster Brown line than in that of Little Lord Fauntleroy – that is, as pests. Instead, there is a humorous rendering of a discrepancy between human desire and reality, as well as the turning of chaos into cosmos through good humour, hardship, and compromise. Ultimately, the happy endings suggest a tendency towards or a possibility of eventual harmony.

Furthermore, the anachronism of the Jeeves saga operates in such a way that while Bertie and his friends, relatives and frenemies endure, change is perpetually around the corner: the young couples-to-be of the narratives always triumph over the older authority

figures standing between them – a clear sign of the usual comic vein – but modernity itself is constantly in the offing. This change, this feeling of "things about to end" comes through in the constant references to capitalist clichés such as American magnates, franchises, novelty products, cars, as well as to the impoverishment of the landed gentry and technological innovations such as the atom bomb[59]. Yet if the narratives constantly signal change but never undergo changes much beyond those of vocabulary or reference, where does this leave us? I would argue that the saga's complex relationship with time is, of course, above all a result of what Orwell described as continuing to explore a good vein once it has been struck. But one result of its constant slight variations on the same theme and characters is the feeling that change never exactly *is*, but it is always incoming, and that the core aspects of human nature reach back into the past certainly as far back as when the nostalgia for a golden past first reared its head.

In conclusion, the Jeeves saga has an intricate relationship with tradition and clichés. While Wodehouse respects traditional structures and visions of time and space in keeping with Aristotelian unities, he uses these conventions, much like he uses intertextuality, as the shared context on which his humour dwells – a context, as we will see, known to many for various reasons. Yet he does not question the legitimacy of this context or whether it merits change, but merely presents it as both ridiculous and enthralling in its way. This partly explains the anachronistic nature of the books: while their context remains to whatever extent relevant (and it seems it has) there is no need for further change. Like Quixote and Panza, Bertie and Jeeves, through dialogue and interaction, symbolise certain things about life as lived within the narratives – how it is imperfect, but also simply *is*. This life ultimately relates

[59]"'You know what this house wants?' he proceeded. 'An atom bomb, dropped carefully on the roof of the main banqueting hall'" (Wodehouse, 2008j: 23).

to our own. Inasmuch as this acceptance and navigation of the imperfect is a kind of metaphysical resignation, the question would be if this is problematic or facile to any degree.

1.1.4 Beyond the Context – Shortcoming or Advantage?

> In saying this I am led immediately to the first criticism made of Wodehouse, which deplores the unreality or artificiality of his characters and their circumstances. The answer to this is that it is partly false and to the extent that it is true it does not matter. (…) [T]hey are exaggerated versions of something recognisable.
>
> (Quinton, 1986: 14, BL Loan M.S 129/9/37)

While in essence agreeing with White that Wodehouse's potential Modernist flair is at the very least anchored in an older tradition, as well as generally correctly identifying the core aspects of Wodehouse's fiction, Kathy MacDermott questions the value of that tradition as well as of Wodehouse's work and its relationship with clichés. She classes him as a "Conservative Anti-Realist" alongside those such as humorists and frequent *New Yorker* contributors Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley and S. J. Perelman. In doing so MacDermott once more amplifies the political angle in a discussion about Wodehouse, raising a question which is somewhat related to Orwell's concerns about school stories: are there moral or aesthetic perils to detaching this reality, these buildings blocks, from their grimmer side for the purposes of comedy?

Simply put, MacDermott classifies Wodehouse as one who, like the modernists, was reacting to the mimetic power of 19th century literary realism, yet not because its limits came from adopting an objective point of view rather than a subjective one, but because literature is inevitably art, and art cannot possibly be life. Realism would then become a moot point.

Art, for the Conservative Anti-Realist, should militantly espouse the clichés and conventions of its craft for its own sake rather than break their bounds and explore subjectivity:

> The overall function of clichés [in Conservative Anti-Realism], then, is simply to textualize the subject under discussion, to remove it from referentiality, to turn it into Art. (…) Such anti-realist texts are ultimately bound to signify, more or less explicitly, 'this is not-Life.' (MacDermott, 1987: 41)

In so doing, according to MacDermott, art conveys a dangerously reactionary view of life, the dark side of which it does not attempt to change (*ibid:* 49). As a Conservative Anti-Realist, Wodehouse would then be cynically and emptily rehashing previous ideologically charged realist conventions in order to, one supposes, better sell:

> The determining difference between a Wodehouse text and a morality play is that in the former the value terms do not in fact signify values. Phrases like "fiends in human shape" displace their own significance, their own pretences to reference or reflection, and instead signify literariness (cliché), comedy (cliché which recognizes itself) and a happy ending (cliché which recognizes itself as part of a benign pattern). (MacDermott, 1987: 46).

MacDermott's argument has a few problems, however. The first would be that (admittedly, as we will see below) it assumes a cynical authorial intention. Against a line of reasoning that appears to portray Wodehouse as somewhat mercenary in relation to the demands of the literary market – to the effect of which MacDermott quotes some practical advice that Wodehouse dispensed to his friend William Townend – here are Wodehouse's own words about writing for profit[60]:

[60] William Townend was a life-long friend of Wodehouse's who, although less successful, was an author in his own right, but struggled with finding both his voice and journals or publishing houses who were interested in his work. MacDermott quotes a piece of advice that Wodehouse gives his friend to the effect of what he saw as a pernicious ambiguity in the latter's work. Townend was perhaps neither writing fairy stories nor going deep into life and "not giving a damn":

> It's a funny thing about writing. If you are a writer by nature, I don't believe you write for money or fame or even for publication, but simply for the pleasure of turning out the stuff … What makes a writer write is that he likes writing. Naturally, when he has written something, he wants to get as much for it as he can, but that is a very different thing from writing for money (Wodehouse, 1981: 361).

The second shortcoming in MacDermott's argument would be that the reasoning behind both that intention and her criticism itself does not seem entirely clear. Focusing on her treatment of Wodehouse, I will challenge the general charge of cynicism and defeatist reactionism.

A part of Wodehouse's authorial intention, which I believe can only matter incidentally and as far as it can be divined, was once summarised by the author himself in this famous statement:

> I believe there are only two ways of writing a novel… one is mine, making the thing a sort of musical comedy without music[61] and ignoring real life altogether; the other is going right down deep into life, and not caring a damn. (Wodehouse, 1980: 313)

This appears to be in line with MacDermott's thoughts regarding Wodehouse's personal suspicion of both the objective realism of the realists and the subjective realism of the Modernists. According to her, Wodehouse's musical comedy without music simply follows the conventions of a genre to a tee (which to a great extent it does) thereby providing a product that is commercial as well as one that actively naturalises dissatisfaction. In short, a

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"You have your heroes struggling against Life and Fate, and what they [the popular magazines] want are stories about men struggling with octopuses and pirates. You make your reader uneasy. He feels, "Well, maybe this poor devil will struggle through all right, but what a wretched thought it is that the world is full of poor devils on the brink of being chucked out of jobs and put on the beach." You make them think about life and popular magazine readers don't want to. (…) A man in the position of your heroes can't be anything but dead serious. This tends to make a story heavy: it lifts it, in fact, into a class of literature in which your intended public simply doesn't belong" (Wodehouse, 1981: 263).

[61] Importantly, another version reads "fairy-story", rather than "musical comedy without music" (Wodehouse *apud* Ratcliffe, 2013: 8).

product that provokes the capitulating laughter that the Frankfurt School – namely Adorno and Horkheimer – attributed to the Culture Industry:

> Conciliatory laughter is heard as the echo of an escape from power; the wrong kind overcomes fear by capitulating to the forces which are to be feared. It is the echo of power as something inescapable. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1994: 140)

What exactly provides a laughter that nourishes or provides catharsis – a *eutrapelia*, following Aristotle – rather than a laughter that kowtows to oppression and is reactionary in nature is never made to be particularly clear in the perspective of these authors. In all fairness, this is a truly difficult distinction to make in abstract, without specific objects in mind. There is also no doubt that, then as now, the Culture Industry has produced worthless, facile entertainment that has merely rehashed tired formulas in inept ways. It is relatively clear, however, and particularly in MacDermott's criticism, that laughter usually deserves critical praise only if it is directly *referential*; if it is "accurate" political satire rather than being inscribed deeply within the conventions of comedy as a genre:

> Humour is a notoriously difficult element to isolate; but it is arguable that the humor in Wodehouse's style lies in the bipartite or tripartite levels on which reality is signified (high culture/mass culture/sensationalism) and in the shift of attention between these discontinuous constructions. In terms of each other, the conventions are incongruously inadequate, overstated or understated, melodramatic or banal. But nevertheless, the juxtaposed levels of signification don't deconstruct each other; they simply unrealize each other and release the comic vertigo of the distance between the realities they produce. (…) *[S]atire is suppressed because reference is suppressed—in this case because parody or parodic mimicry are displaced by simple citation.* (MacDermott, 1987: 48, my italics)

Wodehouse's work would then be far too inconsequential, too insular, to matter – mere playing with convention. But for MacDermott this insularity, this *self*-referentiality in a literary context must necessarily be actively – and negatively – political: "[b]y not just

unrealizing the text but by strategically signifying unrealism, anti-realism brings out the cynicism, the expectation of dissatisfaction, which is the latent underside of wish fulfilment" (*ibid*.: 50). For MacDermott, Wodehouse's desire to write "musical comedies without the music", or "fairy stories", comes with an aura of cynical self-awareness, with the realisation that life is otherwise than art, but also the encouragement that it should remain so – that life should not aspire to the loftiness of art:

> What conservative anti-realism naturalizes is a view of Life which is reactionary and even defeatist in its implications. 'Life isn't a fairy tale'; 'you can't expect happy endings in real life'; 'don't wait for a knight in shining armor to turn up'—all this is patently true because Life isn't Art. And because Life isn't Art any attempt to change it, to rewrite in practice 'human nature' or social relations is clearly and repeatedly diagnosed as 'unrealistic'. Conservative anti-realism associated itself with 'natural' dissatisfactions (…) which it simultaneously naturalizes and assuages with the artificial but innocent and well-earned 'binges' of comedy. (MacDermott, 1987: 50)

This is an assumption that is hard to understand. What Wodehouse is claiming, when discussing his method or authorial intention – which speaks directly to MacDermott's fairy tale point – is this: there is a palpable difference between his work, where tragic contemporary goings-on are at the very best occasionally alluded to, and that of works of literature that delve deeply into distressing subjects and find their beauty or potential for catharsis therein. In addition, there is no shortage of distressing imagery or references rendered harmless through humour in Wodehouse, especially the many comically exaggerated allusions to violence, particularly Biblical, from the actions of King Herod, to Jael's driving a spike through Sisera's head, to tearing people "limb from limb". To assume that the comforting lightheartedness of Wodehouse's work comes with a statement of its own impossibility in real life is perhaps understandable, although it is a simultaneously reductive and uninteresting vision of literature's relation to reality. But it is an entirely different thing to take something which draws from both life and, chiefly, from literature in

order to create a dense and complex playful object that is aware of its own fictionality, and to claim that its very existence is a statement about the impossibility of a better life. MacDermott's argument seems to be: that which naturalises conformity with Life's ills is reactionary. Following literary conventions and eschewing blatant referentiality naturalises conformity with Life's ills. Consequently, Wodehouse's fiction is, by conforming to and perpetuating literary traditions which eschew referentiality, conforming to one of Life's ills, and is thus reactionary. But the question would be: what are these traditions that Wodehouse perpetuates? How are they so obviously in conflict with "reality"? And how does this naturalise dissatisfaction?

MacDermott begins her argument by claiming that, as opposed to its progressive European counterpart, the American criticism of late 19th century realism, was by and large conservative, regaling us with an excerpt where American journalist and writer Opie Read acerbically writes off the then nascent realism of Henry James and W.D Howells:

> The recent school of American novelists, represented mainly by Howells and James, is endeavouring to work a reform in fashion. Instead of in a Dickens or Thackeray manner finishing a story, Mr Howells especially amuses himself by chopping it off, leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions. This is certainly very accommodating, but it is not art. (Read, *apud* MacDermott, 1987: 38)

MacDermott's use of this quote itself immediately showcases a few problems. Throughout her article, she conflates stylistically "conservative" attitudes with political conservatism or reactionism. Bearing that in mind, and in relation to the quote above, it is difficult to understand what these American critics, who it seems favoured Dickens and Thackeray rather than James and the lesser-known Howells, necessarily have in common with political conservatives, which none of these writers were (MacDermott, 1987: 38). If these critics may have been somewhat hidebound in terms of style preference – conservative, if you will,

in that sense – this does not necessarily suggest a political connotation of any sort, nor does it suggest that life should thoroughly abide by quainter notions drawn from deeper in the past. Dickens, for one, was highly committed to social reform, and quite explicitly so in his work, while simultaneously earning criticism for writing about stagecoaches in what was already the age of steam (Engels, 1986: 58)[62]. Secondly, among these writers who MacDermott claims "were prepared to displace the realist claim to be referential by emphasizing instead the transformative strategies of Art: style and the fictionalizing devices of plot, characterization and setting" (MacDermott, 1987: 39), Dorothy Parker for instance was in fact – often and not without reprisals – associated with left-wing movements. She openly and publicly praised Republican Spain during the Spanish Civil War (Parker, 1976: 589) and was briefly placed on a Hollywood blacklist in the 1950s (Meade, 1991: 343). If her *writing* can ever seriously be dubbed conservative anti-realist, then certainly in her life – and the effect on "Life" is what MacDermott is concerned about – she was a peculiar conservative, one closely associated with communist movements and one who, like Wodehouse, was as far as we know never personally swayed by Fascist ideology before (or after, as discussed above) World War II. This cannot be said for many British and American "conservatives" of the time[63]. It thus seems that this so-called conservative anti-realist style does not necessarily come hand in hand with a desire to naturalise dissatisfaction and stifle social progress, or new ways of living. One may add that Wodehouse's fiction did not

[62] This is of course not to stay that stagecoaches and trains never coexisted and that Dickens was writing about an absolutely bygone era, but simply to point out that dwelling on that which is apparently outdated does not imply conservatism or reactionism.

[63] When, apropos public-school education and the broadcast controversy, Caleb Richardson claims that "few other Dulwich alumni misjudged Nazism so profoundly" (Richardson, 2016: 88), he may have a point, but Dulwich was certainly not the only public-school of its kind, and the roster of public-school boys includes people such as Oswald Mosley, leader of the British Union of Fascists, as well as Prince Charles Edward, William Edward David Allen, Gerard Wallop, J. F. C. Fuller, cricketer and Dulwich alumnus Arthur Gilligan; Josslyn Hay and Hastings Russell, all of whom attended public-schools and were at one point associated with fascism, Nazism or right-wing authoritarianism in general. Perhaps, then, not so few and comparatively not so profoundly.

particularly ingratiate him to the grand, Leavisite approach to literature[64], and Leavis himself thought of it as puerile exercise in slang:

> [Mr. Wodehouse's] humour is a cross of Prep-school and Punch, his invention puerile, the brightness of his style the inane, mechanical and monotonous brightness of the worst schoolboy slang (the whole point of which, in so far as it has any, lies in its shamefaced rejection of the standards of maturity. (Leavis, 1940: 208-209)

Although the happy endings of Wodehouse's narratives may be a trope consciously used in order to neatly wrap up a self-aware literary object in the vein of a long, enduring tradition, it is a logical leap to assume that it absolutely denies the existence of happy or happier endings in life, or more realistically, changes regarding economic inequality and an oppressive class-system. But in Wodehouse's case in particular, this turning away from some of reality's complexities and the tendency towards harmony in the narratives often appears to be steeped with a certain sincerity of purpose embedded particularly in the endings of the narratives, and one that is at odds with MacDermott's observations about the conventional nature of Wodehouse's characterisation:

> The baffled baronet, the young struggling writer (but not of Literature), the dreamy peer, the haughty aristocrat, the millionaire's lively and adventurous daughter, the warm-hearted motherly ex-barmaid—all are characters whose behavior is certified by cliché rather than by any more sophisticated conventions of psychological realism. There is no nature, only culture; people are born good or bad; a change of heart is a change of role. (MacDermott, 1987: 46)

In this quote, MacDermott sweepingly denies the validity of the comic approach, a topic which I will later develop further. But more than that: she misreads the particulars of Wodehouse's work. It is not immediately clear how exactly psychological realism hinges

[64] This is not to say that Leavis was absolutely conservative in matters of style, however.

entirely on nature rather than culture, for one. Secondly, and paradoxically, claiming that people are either good or bad in Wodehouse appears to gainsay the idea that there is no nature but only culture in the narratives. Thirdly, love is indeed treated almost as a force of nature in his work, one that cannot be controlled, and is strongly equated with Spring, a connection made obvious by the title of the 1949 Jeeves novel *The Mating Season*, but which is also conspicuously ubiquitous throughout *The Inimitable Jeeves*. Neither can it be said that Wodehouse's villains, stereotypical though they are, are truly bidimensional. They are as a rule constitutionally grumpy – or have become so – more than anything else. A particular reason is often offered for their grumpiness: they are, for example, often dyspeptic, or on a diet, and their function as serious curmudgeons and spoilsports is typically offset by the eventual revelation of an inner child[65]. One of Bertie's main nemeses, brain specialist Roderick Glossop, who believes that Bertie is clinically insane, becomes a friend of Bertie's after *Thank You, Jeeves* (1934), when they bond over finding themselves in a similarly difficult predicament. Later, in *Jeeves in the* Offing (1960), when they seem to have inexplicably fallen out again, they bond once more over having both, as children, been caught stealing biscuits from their headmaster at school (Wodehouse, 2008e). Roderick Spode, the Oswald Mosley parody and leader of the fascistic group The Black Shorts, is revealed to be a designer of ladies' underwear, which suggests that his obnoxious over-the-top masculinity and politics is merely a misguided compensation mechanism against the prejudices of the time. He is also revealed to have a somewhat honourable side in his dealings with Madeline Bassett, with whom he is infatuated, and to have a certain amount of common ground with Bertie in the matter of pinching policemen's helmets. In the Jeeves saga there is certainly no overarching theme of characters who are, without any nuance or any chance

[65] "In both [Wodehouse and Rabelais] villains are usually unhappy" (Bowen, 1976: 65).

of redemption, born good or born bad – which is not even to say that this is always necessarily the mark of bad literature in and of itself. This is perhaps, without particular piety, in line with what Auden has described as a "Christian comedy", one opposed to the classical variety:

> But Christian comedy is based upon the belief that all men are sinners; no one, therefore, whatever his rank or talents, can claim immunity from the comic exposure and, indeed, the more virtuous, in the Greek sense, a man is, the more he realizes that he deserves to be exposed. Greater in depth because, while classical comedy believes that rascals should get the drubbing they deserve, Christian comedy believes that we are forbidden to judge others and that it is our duty to forgive each other. In classical comedy the characters are exposed and punished: when the curtain falls, the audience is laughing and those on stage are in tears. In Christian comedy the characters are exposed and forgiven: when the curtain falls, the audience and the characters are laughing together. (Auden, 1962: 177)

This is indeed Wodehouse's basic assumption: that all villains ultimately have an ounce of relatability, a reason for their villainy, or at the very least – like Aunt Agatha – embody an impending doom that hangs over Bertie and are somewhat removed from the narratives. Ultimately, the character who is more frequently punished is Bertie himself – he is the *pharmakos*, but one whose self-sacrifice and ultimately expulsion are also rewards.

We have already discussed the anachronistic nature of the Jeeves saga above. It draws from an immediate reality but also draws heavily from literary traditions in order to craft its own aesthetic unity and create its own world. This world consists of the details of lives severed from the real historical outcome and socio-economic consequences of the context which Wodehouse drew from, but also contains veiled topical references to contemporaneity in order to acknowledge its audience's reality, as well as constantly providing context about previous narratives or for certain references. References to Clara Bow, Jimmy Durante, the political instability in the Balkans, Jeeves having "dabbled" in a "previous conflict" provide

lively, though few, lifelines to reality, mostly because their shelf-life is limited[66]. Is this relationship with literary tradition one that necessarily reflects or promotes reactionary values? Or is it potentially the realisation that the fictional mimesis, as argued by Frye, is often imitating something which is at the circumference, rather than at the centre of our reality? Is it not perhaps the conscious use of tropes – from those of a Merry England, to those of comedy, to those of school stories, the plays of Shakespeare and 19th century English literature in general – that somehow retain an appeal and speak directly to an audience, even though they are not, we realise, an up-to-date, fact-by-fact reflection of reality? Surely the fact that they do speaks to their relevance, although that is always a matter of how aptly they are shaped into an aesthetic whole, and here Wodehouse's language betokens a special case.

As for his supposed insularity, the language in Wodehouse differs from, for instance, that of Baboo Jabberjee in the sense that it is also, as alluded to before, very attuned to contemporary usage and particularly jargon or slang – mostly British and American – that is to say, English as it was spoken, not merely written. A good example would be the Anatole monologue from *Right Ho, Jeeves*, quoted *supra*, which is not laden with intertextuality but is instead composed of a heteroglossia of American, British and French colloquial speech. The English slang in particular was at that point (1934), as per McCrum, still somewhat Edwardian: "This was the Edwardian world whose slang 'old man', 'cove', 'blighter', 'snifter', and 'chump' – subtly transposed, would pepper the conversations of Bertie Wooster and Bingo Little" (McCrum, 2005: 50). But at least up to a certain point, far past the Edwardian age, the slang of Wodehouse's characters in the Jeeves saga changes as the years go by and adapts, though never absolutely, to current usage. The Edwardian "cove",

[66] Arguably, not only is the direct reference to contemporary pop-culture or events likely to be topical to the point of ephemerality, but it may occasionally underline the anachronism of the narratives to a point where the necessary suspension of disbelief is at risk.

for instance, used very frequently in the short-stories, is later preponderantly dropped, and is entirely absent by *Right Ho, Jeeves* (1934), cropping up later only once in the 1954 *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*. And as observed by Usborne:

> Bertie Wooster's age stays put at about twenty-four, but you can spot certain changes in his slang styles as the publishing years advance. He stopped saying 'chappie', 'dear boy' and the parenthetical 'don't you know' in the 1920s. He stopped saying 'rattled' (meaning pleased), and 'rotten' as a universal pejorative, in the 1930s. By the middle 1930s he had virtually made his own language, and it became frozen and timeless to the last (Usborne: 1988: 183).

The vocabulary of the stories also changes slightly in the course of the narratives, due to character development as a result of the interaction between Bertie and Jeeves, as Robert A. Hall comments: "Bertie gradually sheds most of his British "stage dude" vocabulary of the 1920s, and comes to use many more learned expressions and quotations which he has picked up from Jeeves" (Hall, 1974: 28). On the subject of the American slang often used by Wodehouse, David Damrosch highlights the *transatlanticism* of his works and language:

> Wodehouse found new markets in New York, but he also found something even more valuable to him as a writer: a polyglot exuberance of styles of speech—Midwestern American English, German-American English, Yiddish-American English, Italian-American English, Brooklynese, Upper-East-Side-ese, and other varieties in between. To his British ear, this dialectical riot spelled a golden opportunity, and he gradually began to exploit what he was hearing and the incongruity of his own position as an observer from the outside. (Damrosch, 2003: 210)

For Damrosch, Wodehouse's work is not hermetic in a reactionary sense; it is instead born of the author's "cultural double vision", which is to say that, particularly as comedy, contextualisation and stereotypification were required, but a lived reality was keenly observed, and its details – with emphasis on those of speech – heavily and accurately drawn from:

> Wodehouse's fiction operates differently: it is closely tied to the concrete realities of modern British and American life, but these cultures are written about *as if from outside*. He could write so well for foreign readers in part because he himself was so foreign to each of his environments. Almost the opposite of a cosmopolitan or citizen of the world, Wodehouse was out of place in fundamental ways everywhere he went, even in England, though he should have been entirely at home in Lord Emsworth's environs. (*ibid*, 211)

A distancing effect is at stake, and one that, as we will see, is in tune with the idea of the humorist seeing the world out of focus. MacDermott observes, rightly, that Wodehouse's work dwells on the conventions of literature itself – and more than that, that perhaps a referential angle will yield little when dealing with Wodehouse, but she appears to forget that there are conventions – of speech and of procedure – that Wodehouse equally draws from, and perhaps with the same lack of concern for reverence as when he referred to William Ernest Henley as an "obscure bloke" in the correspondence cited *supra* (p. 46)[67]. These conventions, as exploited in his fiction, are also a part of the world of the Jeeves saga. They are part of something that – as Damrosch has argued – can be read ethnographically, but also as something which has the potential to resonate on a personal level with a broad spectrum of readers – as recognizable context for the purposes of comedy (Damrosch, 2003: 218).

This is not to say that the entirety of Wodehouse's work can be easily apprehended solely through the context that he provides, no matter the background of the reader. But to the extent that they can be accounted for, readers of Wodehouse are somewhat varied. There are currently Wodehouse Societies in the United Kingdom, in Australia and several chapters in the United States, but also in Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Finland, France,

[67] Henley was of course not at all obscure at the time, and his poem *Invictus* remains staggeringly popular today, even though the popularity of the rest of his work has perhaps waned.

India, Pakistan and Russia. Several of Wodehouse's works have also been translated into over thirty languages worldwide, including Portuguese, Japanese, Hungarian, Burmese, Simplified Chinese, Farsi, Turkish, Hebrew and Korean. The intricacies and difficulties inherent to the translation of Wodehouse's particular linguistic humour are extraneous to this thesis, but these numbers are relevant to the extent that they illustrate a certain translatability and a certain interest across borders. Yet if we look, for instance, at the countries where there are Wodehouse Societies, we will quickly realise that for the most part they have a fertile common history with the United Kingdom. While India and Pakistan, as Southeastern Asian countries, could at first glance seem like the most salient outliers in the list above, their presence can of course be partly explained by the historical influence of the British Empire and the English language on their cultures. Wodehouse's potential popularity in Africa could also be partly attributed to that kind of exposure. Nigerian author Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's declared childhood predilection for Wodehouse's books appears to speak to that (Chatterjee, 2010). On the subject of India and Pakistan, Wodehouse's popularity potentially clashes with claims of inherent reactionism: while modern India's relationship with its past as a British colony is intricate, fans of Wodehouse are not limited to nor even necessarily coincidental with those who may be nostalgic for the British Raj and who would, if they could, see it reinstated.

Yet another Asian country where Wodehouse has attained a certain level of recognition and whose relationship with the United Kingdom is more detached is Japan. In 2018, Empress Michiko of Japan created a spike in the sales of the Jeeves saga in the country by announcing that, after her husband's abdication, she hoped to indulge in her Jeeves collection (Demetriou, 2018). Before that, a *manga* adaptation of the Jeeves saga titled *Please, Jeeves*, was serialised from 2008 to 2014, and may have led to a broader awareness of Wodehouse's

works. Russia too appears to be an unlikely candidate for Jeeves fanship, but the influence of English literature on Russian literature is well known, namely that of Byron on writers such as Pushkin and Lermontov, or of Scottish poet Robert Burns on the latter and others. A certain latent Anglophilia was present even during the days of the Soviet Regime, where a penchant for "quintessentially English" character Sherlock Holmes resulted in a series of television movies directed by Ivan Maslennikov, starting in 1979 (Gryspeerdt, 2014), and during which Agatha Christie's books were at one point translated into Russian and made available to the public (in limited fashion). Wodehouse's books, initially available in the 1920s, were subsequently forbidden in the 1930s as bourgeois literature. They only resurfaced on a grand scale in the 1990s, mostly due to the work of translator Natalya Trauberg (Blomfield, 2007). The television adaptation of the Jeeves saga, *Jeeves and Wooster* (1990-1993) also aired on Russian television at the time (Blomfield, 2007). Still, it cannot be denied that the fact that literature in English is widely read and publicised and that English is *de facto* the *lingua franca* of the modern world has contributed to Wodehouse's popularity. This remains true even if he was skilled at writing his books from the position of an insider-who-is-outside and at providing sufficient context for the humour to stand on its own as much as possible – although again, a humour that thrives particularly *as* language humour in English.

MacDermott misses, to my mind, what could be valuable about "a stylized world whose realistic details are ludicrously exfoliated into an increasingly conventionalized system of their own" (Damrosch, 2003: 217) – a Wodehousian method which is, as Damrosch notes, similar to that of Kafka, the early scholarship on whom dealt with his works chiefly as displaced and decontextualised. Damrosch describes what appears to be the common ground between these two authors, who created "closed societies whose arcane

rules are gradually laid bare for the reader, often through the efforts of an intruder or impostor; […] unique cultures whose rituals nonetheless speak to us of the human condition at large" (*ibid*.). It is perhaps no surprise that all the writers who MacDermott accuses of being defeatist and reactionary (Wodehouse, Perelman, Parker, Benchley) are writers of comedy, which Kafka was not, despite having and making use of a keen sense of humour. In MacDermott's eyes, perhaps the solemnity of Kafka would redeem him of any accusation of naturalising dissatisfaction, or of capitulating to oppression, despite the unresolved helplessness and confusion that tinge most of his narratives – both finished and unfinished. My argument is that comedy requires a different approach, one that – against the worrying trend underlined by White – cannot merely view a humorous tone and a happy ending as not being "remotely mimetic of experience" (White, 1994: 116) and thus sees it as worthless wish-fulfilment: a wish-fulfilment that results in escaping from the real world and passively accepting one's lot rather than striving for change. Instead of the purported sense of moral responsibility that this kind of criticism shields itself behind, perhaps it is the case that – according to White – a certain over-seriousness, a certain scepticism towards play, originally diagnosed by Johan Huizinga as modernity's "fatal shift towards over-seriousness" (Huizinga, 1980: 198), is inhibiting us from seeing comedy as a practice worth our while – a practice which pokes fun at convention *as* convention, be it literary or social, without suggesting a practical alternative or an ideal state of things[68]. Perhaps a misapprehension about the analogical relationship between reality and fiction is also at stake. Indeed, instead

[68] This is a difficult point, because there is no obvious moment at which attitudes towards humour changed, nor is it exactly clear that there was once a humorous past and now a humourless reality. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the changes in the reception of Rabelais' work signified a change in attitude towards humour and a denial of the value of its roots in carnival. Yet this change that Bakhtin claims took place could be observed mostly in academic and religious circles. Still, without glorifying a purported humorous past, one can claim that since its inception, academia has historically lacked enthusiasm for humour in a critical context. Simultaneously, while P.G Wodehouse's work remains relevant, the tendency by and large seems to be to toy noticeably with the contrast between humour and despair, as we will see at the conclusion of this thesis.

of a change in our ability to take things in stride and sustain a sense of humour, it may have become the case that literature is attracting the attention that certain social or political problems deserve.

A clear example of an excerpt from the Jeeves saga that requires a nuanced approach, rather than the descrying of reactionism, would be the following humorous exchange from *Right Ho, Jeeves* regarding a lovers tiff; one which could easily be read by MacDermott as promoting a reactionary, defeatist worldview:

> 'A very great shock. Angela and Tuppy…Tut, tut! Why, they seemed like the paper on the wall. Life is full of sadness, Jeeves.'
> 'Yes, sir.'
> 'Still, there it is.'
> 'Undoubtedly, sir.'
> 'Right ho, then. Switch on the bath.'
> 'Very good, sir.' (Wodehouse, 2018: 65)

This will later be dealt with at length.

To conclude this chapter, I would agree with MacDermott as well as White before her,that the metafictional aspects of Wodehouse's work are not exactly Modernist in their origins, but owe much to a preexisting tradition, common particularly to comic novels, whereby the narrator is to a fault intrusive, self-reflective and self-undermining. Both this tradition and the building blocks of Wodehouse's work are well known to a wide audience partly due to the cultural outreach of the British Empire in the past and the dominance of the English language today. MacDermott is also right in her assessment that Wodehouse's work is scarcely referential or written in a realist style (although it follows realist structures); that is, that it does not intend to provide a critical portrait of a segment of a society at a particular point in time, nor does it aim to directly explore the subjectivity of reality itself. But unlike White, she performs a logical leap in saying that Wodehouse's adherence to literary

convention – a comic one at that – implies a message to the effect that an individual should never strive for social change, as life cannot aspire to the joy of his art; she exaggerates the lack of relation between Wodehouse's work and its real counterpart, at least stylistically speaking; and she misrepresents the nature of comedy which is not explicitly, politically and socially critical – which is to say, she mistakes comedy for satire.

In the following section, I will explore this distinction, as well as the concept of play, the practice of humour and the genre of comedy in relation to the Jeeves saga.

II. Humour, Comedy, and Life in the Jeeves Saga[69]

2.1 Play

Before dwelling on the subject of humour and comedy at length in relation to the Jeeves saga I will, by way of an introduction, dedicate a few words to the play element within culture by. In his book, aptly titled *Homo Ludens*[70], Dutch historian Johan Huizinga made the case that the practice of play is at the very root of human culture, and no less at the root of language and literature:

> The great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play from the start. Take language, for instance. (…). In the making of speech and language the spirit is continually 'sparking' between matter and mind, as it were, playing with this wondrous nominative faculty. Behind every abstract expression there lie the boldest of metaphors, and every metaphor is a play upon words. Thus in giving expression to life man creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature. (Huizinga, 1980: 5)

In Huizinga's view, play is perceived as being at odds with the "reality" of life – it has an artificial, simulated, nature. But in actual fact, it is exactly this playful artificiality that is at the root of our social reality: "in its earliest phases culture has the play-character (…) it proceeds in the shape and mood of play" (*ibid*. 46). Even events that we associate with the opposite of play – with solemnity – such as rites and official ceremonies are permeated by the "here-different-rules-apply" nature which Huizinga claims is originally of the playground. The conventional, artificial, or second-nature element so central to play then appears to extend to most things in social life. Consequently, the conception of "reality" as

[69] The contents of this section have partly been addressed in my Master's Thesis, "Humour is a Laughing Matter: The Existential Humour of Saki, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and Monty Python's *Life of Brian*" (Simões, 2018).

[70] The Latin verb *ludere* has no direct translation to English but may be translated as play or recreation for these purposes.

something that flows naturally and which is devoid of artificiality – partly the nostalgia that shapes Merry England – becomes, in Raymond Williams's vein, a kind of fantastical abstraction. The "state of nature" is a mere mirage or, once again, at best a harkening back to Freud's "oceanic feeling", to a supposed feeling of unity between the self and the world before the developing of the ego (Freud, 2004: 2). Ultimately, both the solemn and the playful moments in society – collective moments – are guided by conventional, "artificial" rules.

Humour or laughter are particularly imbued with play. That said, perhaps the irreconcilable incongruity of life that comedy both underlines and accepts – as we will see – is the recognition that social life at times appears to be no more than "mere" play: what Bergson referred to as the "*mascarade sociale*" (Bergson, 1911: 34), that is, an empty assortment of conventions. Our tendency to view human life with inherent dignity and purpose considered, the thought that quite a lot of it functions along the lines of play: a game, a masquerade of sorts apparently artificially imposed on "the truth" or "nature" (or what we wish them to be) is ripe material for humour and comedy. Comedy sees this as an inevitability that carries a certain beauty – and potential for enjoyment. If the solemnity that comes with conventionality can also be seen as play, then perhaps it can be enjoyed just the same. All of this is present in the Jeeves saga.

But one may go a step further: the very stuff of the Jeeves saga is, undoubtedly, language. And it is not only in its plots that we find a "play" aspect, but in the language itself. As alluded to above, in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) Wittgenstein conceived of language as a game (or series of games): not the most agonistic of games, but one which, like all games, rests almost entirely upon convention and is therefore very different from the language we expect: an ideal language, in which words have finite uses

and names have definite correspondences to reality; a logical language with no paradoxes or contradictory meanings – a language, as mentioned before, where flammable and inflammable cannot possibly mean the same thing:

> [I]n philosophy we often compare the use of words with games, calculi with fixed rules, but cannot say that someone who is using language *must* be playing such a game. –But if someone says that our languages only *approximate* to such calculi, he is standing on the very brink of a misunderstanding. For then it may look as if what we were talking about in logic were an *ideal* language. […] The most that can be said is that we *construct* ideal languages. But here the world 'ideal' is liable to mislead, for it sounds as if these were better, more perfect, than our everyday language; and as if it took a logician to show people at last what a proper sentence looks like. […] [I]t will also then become clear what may mislead us (and did mislead me) into thinking that if anyone utters a sentence and *means* or *understands* it, he is thereby operating a calculus according to definite rules. (cf. Wittgenstein, 2009: 43e, italics in the original)

In reality, such a calculus can hardly be said to be taking place, and shifts in meaning brought about by changes in usage, for instance, make it all the more likely that, under close scrutiny, logical inconsistencies will surface in a sentence that can otherwise still be easily understood. By conjuring up similes such as "he looked like a sheep with a secret sorrow" (Wodehouse, 2019: 29), Wodehouse is toying with the very nature of language, both underlining the absurdity of the comparison (and thus the limits of language as a logical tool that we supposedly use to describe reality), as well as highlighting its peculiar effectiveness: making barely tangible sense out of nonsense, and allowing the reader to recognise and delight in the incongruities of language as in the incongruities of life. If play is central to human activity there is no reason why Wodehouse's playfulness should not analogically provide insight into our own lives or into the nature of our existence.

2.2 Satire and Comedy

As previously mentioned, the criticism of Wodehouse – particularly of the more negative sort, such as MacDermott's – tends to hinge on a question of ideology and, ultimately, of genre: the difference between satire and comedy. It is difficult to make hard and fast distinctions in matters of literary genre, and there is certainly a mutual influence between these two – above all, they share a use of humour. However, one fundamental distinction – one of perspective – allows us to establish a palpable difference: while satire portrays the reality within its pages as having fallen so short of an ideal that it has become unbearably ridiculous, or inhuman, comedy accepts its reality as a mere iteration of an inevitably flawed reality[71]. A observed by Auden:

> Satire and comedy both make use of the comic contradiction, but their aims are different. Satire would arouse in readers the desire to act so that the contradictions disappear; *comedy would persuade them to accept the contradictions with good humor as facts of life against which it is useless to rebel*. (Auden, 1962: 388, my italics)

This is exactly where Comedy runs the risk of being accused of capitulating to oppression: were we to accept every misgiving as something against which it is useless to rebel, we would be admitting that there is no possibility of improvement. In Wodehouse's particular case, his sin of naturalisation would consist in smoothing out the unseemly edges of Victorian and Edwardian politics and its class system. Yet there is a caveat to Auden's definition: when dwelling and underlining contradictions, comedy is not encouraging us to accept those particular contradictions, but instead to accept that there *will be* contradictions that cannot be resolved. Instances of contradiction then become placeholders, as we will see,

[71] The absurdity of *Gulliver's Travels* speaks to this, and the despair that is tinged by, and which tinges much satire, is explained by this diagnosis of excess ridiculousness.

for the larger contradictions inherent in human nature. In analysing comedy, and Wodehouse's in particular, this sometimes appears difficult to reconcile. Even words of praise such as those of Robert Kiernan in *Frivolity Unbound* can easily be turned into criticism of the relevance of Wodehouse's work: "The most fundamental pleasure of such a world is that it affords the audience a holiday from conscience" (Kiernan, 1990: 108). For authors such as MacDermott, in a parallel with Orwell's criticism of the short stories of *The Gem* and *The Magnet*, by providing "a holiday from conscience" Wodehouse would be reproducing certain codes of behaviour, among them the public-school code, as well as certain views of the world which are antithetical to progress and which naturalise dissatisfaction. We have already suggested that, in Wodehouse's case, particularly related to the latter claim, these concerns are somewhat exaggerated in their anticipation of a negative, discouraging effect. Yet Wodehouse is indeed reproducing convention in order to toy with it, and mostly *not* in a satirical way that is driven by the desire to both make people laugh and also to elicit outrage and, potentially, change. As unforgiving satires, the stories of the Jeeves saga would be toothless failures[72]. But satires they are not.

Another way in which Wodehouse is indirectly accused of not being satirical enough is by highlighting how the comic resignation in Wodehouse's fiction had a controversial effect when applied to the author's life and, indirectly, revealed an ambivalent attitude towards the misgivings of wartime England during a sensitive time in World War II. As discussed above, Caleb Richardson explains Wodehouse's stiff-upper-lip conduct during his

[72] Some would disagree that Wodehouse's work is not satirical, and Orwell in particular highlights an interesting encounter with an Indian Nationalist during WWII: "Some time after the broadcasts from Berlin I was discussing them with a young Indian Nationalist who defended Wodehouse warmly. He took it for granted that Wodehouse had gone over to the enemy, which from his own point of view was the right thing to do. But what interested me was to find that he regarded Wodehouse as an anti-British writer who had done useful work by showing up the British aristocracy in their true colours" (Orwell, 1946: 235). Interesting though it is, it is, as Orwell himself points out, a misapprehension.

imprisonment by the Nazis at a time of war through his adherence to the public-schoolboy code. This adherence resulted in a conduct that generally prized playing by the rules, avoiding the direct expression of emotion and duly retreating into humour and not complaining:

> He dealt with life in the internment camp the same way his schoolboy heroes and their literary antecedents did: by taking nothing seriously, by keeping a stiff upper lip, by maintaining a form of 'school spirit', and by respecting authority. (Richardson, 2016: 98)

While this was to prove effective in allowing him to navigate a traumatic situation – and by all accounts Wodehouse often went days without food and was forced to sleep in dire conditions (McCrum, 2005: 280) – it may have partly led him to act in too willingly collaborative a way:

> [A]ccording to the schoolboy code, he was behaving perfectly correctly: gently mocking his own side while giving the benefit of the doubt to the other. In the world of the school story, his behaviour would have made perfect sense: in wartime Europe it seemed a betrayal. (Richardson, 2016: 99)

This stands to reason. But Richardson goes further, and as we have seen, appears to also attribute the outlook of Wodehouse's fiction to his Dulwich education and the public-school code; to his younger self's love of schoolboy fiction, which comes through clearly in the less comedic school novels of the beginning of his career, such as *The Pothunters, The Gold Bat* or even *Mike*. It is no surprise that Wodehouse's education and formative reading should have somehow influenced both his controversial conduct and, to an extent, the best (and worst) of his fiction. But as I have argued above, Wodehouse's alleged failure in his personal conduct at a time of War cannot be said to be a failure of literature. The person who wrote the Jeeves saga is indeed the same person who foolishly decided to broadcast on Nazi radio,

and who was then vilified in sensational terms by someone who at no point quoted or paraphrased the actual contents of the broadcasts. But has little bearing on the saga itself. Apropos comic ambivalence, it is perhaps fitting to recall Sontag's definition of comedy as an experience of underinvolvement (Sontag, 2009: 288). Perhaps even more to the point, Kierkegaard distinguished between drama and comedy by claiming that "from the point of view of pathos, a single second has infinite value; viewed comically, 10,000 years are but a foolish trick" (Kierkegaard, 2009: 78). As we will see, this is the perspective of comedy, and successfully done its impropriety can only be circumstantial, rather than absolute.

The influence of this comedy of underinvolvement, of tragedy as a mere, foolish trick, can be seen in the quotation with which I closed the preceding chapter:

> "A very great shock. Angela and Tuppy…Tut, tut! Why, they seemed like the paper on the wall. Life is full of sadness, Jeeves.
> "Yes, sir."
> "Still, there it is."
> "Undoubtedly, sir.
> "Right ho, then. Switch on the bath."
> "Very good, sir." (Wodehouse, 2018: 65)

A certain amount of emotional "cladding", which Bertie typically attributes to Jeeves and which critics such as Sophie Ratcliffe rightly attribute to Wodehouse, is undoubtedly present in reacting to the sadness of life with "there it is" and taking a bath (Ratcliffe, 2013: 4). Yet one cannot say that this reaction is merely in earnest – the incongruity is salient. The same applies to the following, similar excerpts:

> I'm not absolutely certain of my facts, but I rather fancy it's Shakespeare who says that it's always just when a fellow is feeling particularly braced with things in general that Fate sneaks up behind him with the bit of lead piping. (Wodehouse, 2008b: 60*)*

> And, in an exchange with Jeeves:

> "[A]s I dressed for dinner that night, I was conscious of an impending doom.
> 'Jeeves,' I said, 'have you ever pondered on Life?"
> 'From time to time, sir, in my leisure moments.'
> 'Grim, isn't it, what?'
> 'Grim, sir?'
> 'I mean to say, the difference between things as they look and things as they are.'
> 'The trousers perhaps a half-inch higher, sire. A very slight adjustment of the braces will effect the necessary alteration. You were saying, sir?" (Wodehouse, 2008k: 26)

Covert and overt references to a treacherous fate, an impending doom and the sadness of life, if typically phlegmatic, abound. The idea of an impending doom is what edges all of the narratives along: "it is so hard to get a good menace for Bertie – I mean the doom which is hanging over him which Jeeves averts" (Ratcliffe, 2013: 286). Particularly interesting for the purposes of this thesis is the reference to "the difference between things as they look and things as they are" (Wodehouse, 2008k: 26) – that is, to an existential incongruity.

2.3 Humour and Existentialism

The idea of the difference between things as they look and things as they are suggests that there is an incongruity at the core of the human experience: one between reality and our perception of it. As William Hazlitt wrote in the introduction to his book *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*:

> Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be. We weep at what thwarts or exceeds our desires in serious matters: we laugh at what only disappoints our expectations in trifles. (Hazlitt, 1841: 1)

In humour theory, this perspective is generally referred to as the incongruity theory of humour, which posits that humour arises from or thrives off the incongruity between our

expectations and reality. The incongruity theory was perhaps more famously outlined by Henri Bergson in his book *Le Rire: essai sur la signification du comique* (1900). But the observation that incongruity is an important factor in the creation of humour can be traced back to Plato's *Philebus*, a Socratic dialogue in which a connection is made between the ridiculous and laughter, the ridiculous consisting in a failure to act in accordance with oneself:

> [C]onsider the facts about the nature of what we ridicule. (…) [The ridiculous] is always a failing, one that takes its name from a state of character, and is that specific form of failing with the characteristic quite opposed to what the oracle at Delphi recommends". (Plato, 1975: 47)

It could then be argued that what is at stake is the perception that a certain individual is not acting in accordance with herself, or with what is expected of her. But it was perhaps in the 18th century that incongruity began to take on a more central role, particularly as a response to the superiority theory as formulated by Hobbes, traces of which can be easily found in Plato's *Philebus*. Hobbes believed that laughing at the ridiculous was due to a feeling of self-congratulatory superiority on the behalf of the one laughing in relation to the one laughed at:

> *Sudden glory,* is the passion which maketh those *grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. (Hobbes, 1998: 38)

But writers such as James Beattie, Hazlitt and Francis Hutcheson disagreed that such a feeling of superiority, of self-applause, was necessarily the motive, and instead focused on

the actual process taking place whenever laughter occurs – what prompts it and how. According to Beattie,

> Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them". (Beattie, 1778: 347)

Hazlitt makes a similar observation:

> The essence of the laughable then is the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another. The first and most obvious cause of laughter is to be found in the simple succession of events, as in the sudden shifting of a disguise, or some unlooked-for accident, without any absurdity of character situations. (Hazlitt, 1841: 7)

And Hutcheson himself expressed a similar view:

> That then which seems generally the cause of laughter is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea: this contrast between ideas of grandeur, dignity, sanctity, perfection, and ideas of meanness, baseness, profanity, seems to be the very spirit of burlesque; and the greatest part of our raillery and jest is founded upon it. (Hutcheson, 1973: 109)

Hutcheson further comments that the source or subject of humour, to an extent, is an incongruity within the human condition itself, much in line with Hazlitt and foreshadowing aspects of Bergson's work:

> We generally imagine in mankind some degree of wisdom above other animals, and have high ideas of them on this account. If then along with our notion of wisdom in our fellows, there occurs any instance of gross inadvertence, or great mistake, this is a great cause of laughter. (Hutcheson, 1973: 110-111)

This shift from greatness to meanness is something that was later taken into account by Herbert Spencer when he explained the necessity of a "descending incongruity" for laughter to take place – from high to low, from the grand to the puerile: "[l]aughter naturally results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small – only when there is what we may call a *descending* incongruity" (Spencer, 1904: 7570). This would be exactly what Bertie is referring to in the quote above: the incongruity resides in looking from our expectations of perfection down to a complex, often base – at times grotesque – reality. The result may indeed be grim, as stated by Bertie, in the sense that it is a disappointment, but if enough emotional distance is at play, then it can become pleasurably jarring. This is the tone of the Jeeves saga. And for the incongruity theory, the difference between things as they look and things as they are is the subject of all humour.

In *Le Rire* Bergson touches on this. While he ultimately conceives of laughter as a tool for correcting inattentive or rigid behaviour, his conception of incongruity is particularly interesting. For Bergson, laughter is an exclusively human phenomenon: not only do animals not laugh, but when humans laugh at animals or even inanimate objects, they are laughing because of their projection of human qualities onto the behaviour or appearance of these animals or objects: "*[o]n rira d'un chapeau; mais ce qu'on raille alors, ce n'est pas le morceau de feutre ou de paille, c'est la forme que des hommes lui ont donnée, c'est le caprice humain dont il a pris le moule"* (Bergson, 1938: 3)[73]. This is something we have partly discussed in reference to literature, particularly apropos Frye and Zunshine. An obvious contemporary example would be that of the famous internet "personality", Grumpy Cat, a cat whose physiognomy called to mind that of a grumpy person. Another, and perhaps even more to

[73] "You may laugh at a hat, but what you are making fun of, in this case, is not the piece of felt or straw, but the shape that men have given it, -- the human caprice whose mould it has assumed" (Bergson, 1911: 3).

the point, would be "Henri, the existential cat", who is made to appear to be reflecting on the emptiness of life via editing and apposite music. An example from the Jeeves saga, by way of an anthropomorphic comparison, would be the aforementioned quote, where we are led to imagine a sheep with personal grief: "he looked like a sheep with a secret sorrow" (Wodehouse, 2019: 29). Secondly, Bergson claimed that laughter is always a social phenomenon: "*[n]otre rire est toujours le rire d'un groupe*" (Bergson, 1938: 6), which is to say that expectations of normalcy and the notion of ridiculousness are informed by what a group of people thinks, not merely an individual, and that there can only be collective laughter where there is a group of people that is aware of certain norms or patterns of behaviour. But more than that, for Bergson laughter resides in an incongruity in the human condition: that we are (or think we are) more than physical matter, more than mere machines, yet often act in the rigid, inadaptable way that is characteristic of machines[74]. Earlier, in a lecture on Rabelais, Jonathan Swift and Laurence Sterne, Samuel Taylor Coleridge had made the same point by observing that "there always is in a genuine humour an acknowledgment of the hollowness and farce of the world, and its disproportion to the godlike within us" (Coleridge, 1914: 261). For Bergson, human nature is flexible and ever-attentive – godlike in that sense. Machines, on the other hand, are developed for specific tasks, can only operate under certain conditions and cannot adapt to happenstance. Our laughter, or humour, is then directed at these instances of ridiculousness: at moments when, through rigid behaviour, whether physical or mental, we are acting not like human beings, but mere weighty husks. When this happens, it is as if the body is a limit imposed on what we think is a limitless soul:

[74] Writing in 1900, Bergson was particularly aware of a certain anxiety around the subject of machines. His writing also conveys what machines were then: prone to malfunction, incapable of adapting – characteristics which remain salient, but less obvious at the current rate of technological innovation.

> *Du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant, voilà encore notre point de départ. D'où venait ici le comique ? De ce que le corps vivant se raidissait en machine. Le corps vivant nous semblait donc devoir être la souplesse parfaite, l'activité toujours en éveil d'un principe toujours en travail. Mais cette activité appartiendrait réellement à l'âme plutôt qu'au corps. Elle serait la flamme même de la vie, allumée en nous par un principe supérieur, et aperçue à travers le corps par un effet de transparence. Quand nous ne voyons dans le corps vivant que grâce et souplesse, c'est que nous négligeons ce qu'il y a en lui de pesant, de résistant, de matériel enfin; nous oublions sa matérialité pour ne penser qu'à sa vitalité, vitalité que notre imagination attribue au principe même de la vie intellectuelle et morale. Mais supposons qu'on appelle notre attention sur cette matérialité du corps. Supposons qu'au lieu de participer de la légèreté du principe qui l'anime, le corps ne soit plus à nos yeux qu'une enveloppe lourde et embarrassante, lest importun qui retient à terre une âme impatiente de quitter le sol. Alors le corps deviendra pour l'âme ce que le vêtement était tout à l'heure pour le corps lui-même, une matière inerte posée sur une énergie vivante. Et l'impression du comique se produira dès que nous aurons le sentiment net de cette superposition.* (Bergson, 1938: 38)[75]

The norms of social interaction would then be yet another set of limitations that weigh the soul down, thus easily giving the impression of being a mere masquerade, lacking any truth or purpose:

> *Le côté cérémonieux de la vie sociale devra donc renfermer un comique latent, lequel n'attendra qu'une occasion pour éclater au grand jour. On pourrait dire que les cérémonies sont au corps social ce que le vêtement est au corps individuel : elles doivent leur gravité à ce qu'elles s'identifient pour nous avec l'objet sérieux auquel l'usage les attache, elles perdent cette gravité dès que notre imagination les en isole. De sorte qu'il suffit, pour qu'une cérémonie devienne comique, que notre attention se concentre sur ce qu'elle a de cérémonieux, et que nous négligions sa matière, comme disent les philosophes, pour ne plus penser qu'à sa forme. […] Dès que nous oublions l'objet grave d'une solennité ou d'une cérémonie, ceux qui y prennent part nous font l'effet de s'y mouvoir comme des marionnettes*. (Bergson, 1938: 45-46)[76]

[75] "Our starting point is again 'something mechanical encrusted upon the living.' Where did the comic come from in this case? It came from the fact that the living body became rigid, like a machine. Accordingly, it seemed to be that the living body ought to be the perfection of suppleness, the effervescent activity of a principle always at work. But this activity would really belong to the soul rather than to the body. It would be the very flame of life, kindled within us by a higher principle and perceived through the body, as though through a glass. When we see only gracefulness and suppleness in the living body, it is because we disregard in it the elements of weight, of resistance, and, in a word, of matter; we forgot its materiality and think only of its vitality, a vitality which we regard as derived from the very principle of intellectual and moral life. Let us suppose, however, that our attention is drawn to this material side of the body; that so far from sharing in the lightness and subtlety of the principle with which it is animated, the body is no more in our eyes than a heavy and cumbersome vesture, a kind of irksome ballast which holds town to earth a soul eager to rise aloft. Then the body will become to the soul what, as we have just seen, the garment was to the body itself—inert matter dumped down on living energy. The impression of the comic will be produced as soon as we have a clear apprehension of this putting the one on the other." (Bergson, 1911: 49-50)

[76] "The ceremonial side of social life must, therefore, always include a latent comic element, which is only waiting for an opportunity to burst into full view. It might be said that ceremonies are to the social body what

This is because, as Hutcheson said, we have "high ideas" of ourselves, and, as Schopenhauer[77] later wrote, we view our existence with a certain vanity that cannot ever be truly reconciled to the limits of a temporary and physically limited corporeal existence (Schopenhauer, 1908:18)[78]. This can be a constant source of dissatisfaction, which for Schopenhauer could be truly resolved only through suicide. Partly in reaction to Schopenhauer, Albert Camus also addresses suicide as a solution to this struggle that arises in the absence of perfection. For Camus, suicide is a reaction to the perceived ridiculousness of life – to the absurdity of the gap between our expectation of meaning and the bewildering aspects of social life:

> *C'est au bout de ce chemin difficile que l'homme absurde reconnaît ses vraies raisons. A comparer son exigence profonde et ce qu'on lui propose alors, il sent soudain qu'il va se détourner. (...) Mon raisonnement veut être fidèle à l'évidence qui l'a éveillé. Cette evidence, c'est l'absurde. C'est le divorce entre l'esprit qui desire et le monde qui déçoit, ma nostalgie d'unité, cet univers dispersé et la contradiction qui les enchaîne.* (Camus, 1942: 71)[79]

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clothes are to the individual body: they owe their seriousness to the fact that they are identified, in our minds, with the serious object custom associates them, and when we isolate them from imagination, they forthwith lose their seriousness. For any ceremony, then, to become comic, it is enough that our attention be focused on the ceremonial element in it, and that we neglect its matter, as philosophers say, and think only of its form. (…) For, as soon as we forget the serious object of a solemnity or a ceremony, those taking part in it give us the impression of puppets in motion" (Bergson, 1911: 45-46).

[77] "This vanity finds expression in the whole way in which things exist; in the infinite nature of Time and Space, as opposed to the finite nature of the individual in both; in the ever-passing present moment as the only mode of actual existence; in the interdependence and relativity of all things; in continual Becoming without ever Being; in constant wishing and never being satisfied; in the long battle which forms the history of life, where every effort is checked by difficulties, and stopped until they are overcome" (Schopenhauer, 1908: 33).

[78] Unsurprisingly, in referring to the gloomy disposition of his gastrically-challenged uncle Tom Travers, his aunt Dahlia's husband, Bertie compares his outlook to that of Schopenhauer, "a grouch of the most pronounced description". He quips: "Well, Uncle Thomas, when his gastric juices have been giving him the elbow, can make Schopenhauer seem like Pollyanna" (Wodehouse, 2008b: 229) Pollyanna is the protagonist of an eponymous children's novel who is known for her optimistic outlook, which she refers to as "The Glad Game".

[79] "Only at the end of this difficult path does the absurd man recognize his true motives. Upon comparing his inner exigence and what is then offered him, he suddenly feels he is going to turn away. (…) My reasoning wants to be faithful to the evidence that aroused it. That evidence is the absurd. It is that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together" (Camus, 1979: 49-50).

On another level, the depths of which are extraneous to this thesis, suicide can be the reaction to a lack of faith through the deferral of perfection to another plain – an afterlife. Bergson centers the matter on the existence of a soul, but it can be argued that whether or not one believes in a soul, we do not truly, fundamentally believe in our own mortality, and in that sense we may assume the existence of something that is beyond our physical existence. But Camus dwells specifically on the idea that suicide can only be an answer to the feeling that life is not worth living, and on whether the absurdity of life necessarily dictates that life is not worth living. Camus' own version of Bergson's apparent masquerade is the "*pantomime privé de sens*" (Camus, 1942: 29) or "meaningless pantomime" (Camus, 1979: 21). That is, it is the carrying on of daily life with all its conventions in the face of a basic incongruity: "*cette confrontation entre l'appel humain et le silence déraisonnable du monde*" (Camus, 1942: 44)[80]. Though Camus dedicates very little time to humour in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, this brings us partly back to it: if, through various humorous techniques, a certain emotional distance is present, an "*anesthésie temporanée du coeur*", in Bergson's words, this discrepancy between our expectations of perfection and the flawed reality of social and bodily life can provoke laughter:

> *Essayez, un moment, de vous intéresser à tout ce qui se dit et à tout ce qui se fait, agissez, en imagination, avec ceux qui agissent, sentez avec ceux qui sentent, donnez enfin à votre sympathie son plus large épanouissement: comme sous un coup de baguette magique vous verrez les objets les plus légers prendre du poids, et une coloration sévère passer sur toutes choses. Détachez-vous maintenant, assistez à la vie en spectateur indifférent: bien des drames tourneront à la comédie. (*Bergson, 1911: 4*)*[81]

[80] "This confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus, 1979: 32).
[81] "Try, for a moment, to become interested in everything that is being said and done; act, in imagination, with those who act, and feel with those who feel; in a word, give your sympathy its widest expansion: as though at the touch of a fairy wand you will see the flimsiest of objects assume importance, and a gloomy hue spread over everything. Now step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy" (Bergson, 1911: 4-5).

But this emotional distance that Bergson speaks of does not, as Noel Carroll observes, denote the absence of an emotional response (Carroll, 2014: 30), merely of one that absolutely detracts from laughter. This is what Sontag's experience of underinvolvement refers to: while ridicule can of course be used by a group to exclude others and while that exclusion is possible because certain individuals are indifferent to or emotionally detached from those whom they are about to exclude, the underinvolvement that humour requires is simply one that allows for a situation to be viewed as play, as one with few enduring negative consequences. In that sense, to view life humorously is to view it as a type of game that we are playing yet where there is no true opportunity to ultimately and definitively win. Adopting a humorous perspective, as we will later see, is perhaps akin to Camus' exhortation to live through the incongruity of life and even derive enjoyment from it – to see our lives as that of a happy Sisyphus. By adopting a comic perspective, we can perhaps imagine Sisyphus to be ultimately happy, or at least capable of happiness, while still remaining aware of an incongruity (Camus, 1979: 111). When, in *Concluding Unscientific Postcript*, through the voice of alter-ego Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard observes that "humour is the last stage in existence-inwardness before faith", he recognises humour as a mark of maturity and as an ability "to take on (…) the amusing aspect [of the paradoxes of life]" (Kierkegaard, 2009: 244). This is to an extent the perspective of comedy, one that does not necessarily deny the disheartening aspects of the fundamental incongruity, but which allows us to at least temporarily surmount them, partly by viewing our own life in a detached manner, as if it were simply a game with little other purpose than to be enjoyed. In Bertie's words, at the conclusion of *Thank You, Jeeves*: "Tush, Jeeves! I was a mere pawn in the game" (Wodehouse, 2003: 259).

There is of course a level of resignation to this perspective. In an essay titled "Humour" (1927), Freud describes an aspect of what, in *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) he had already referred to: the relief brought about by humour. He tells the joke where a man led to the gallows offhandedly observes that his week is off to a bad start (Freud, 1961). This man's use of humour does not stave off his inevitable death – but it allows him to rise, temporarily, above it.

2.4 Comedy – Tropes, Stock Characters and The Happy Ending

> After so long grief, such nativity!
> (Shakespeare, 2015: 125)

While humour can be considered a practice, comedy is above all a literary genre – or specifically, a subgenre. What are its defining characteristics? As a genre, for one, it typically employs humour on a cellular level and is as a rule distinctly aimed at providing humorous incident at every turn. This is particularly the case in farces, the clockwork structure of which is purely meant to unite character and situation in constant comic incident (cf. Davis, 2001). This aspect of farce influenced Wodehouse's writing greatly, and it is evident in the novels of the Jeeves saga. But among other specifics that we can attribute to comedy there is at least one element that does not immediately have much to do with humour, at least not necessarily: the happy ending. The fact that Dante christened his masterpiece *Commedia,* (later *La Divina Commedia*, or *The Divine Comedy*) though it was not a work of humour nor in the comic mode throws light on this disjunction. In that instance the term was in all likelihood used chiefly because, though it has little humour, it has a happy ending. According to Matthew Bevis, "Medieval definitions of comedy tended to be strongly end-oriented: according to Uguccione da Pisa's *Magna Derivationes* (c.1200), tragedy ends badly, comedy ends well"

(Bevis, 2013 110). Though the genre classification of "comedy" is still often applied to signify works consisting mostly of humour in general, it is typically used to signify works of humour which, in a traditional vein, culminate in a happy ending.

Yet to add the opposite of Dante's disjunction to the mixture, a quick survey of 20th century literature in particular allows us to conclude that to end on a wholly positive note is not a prerequisite of a work that overwhelmingly consists of humour. A comparatively recent example would be Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979-1992), which ends with what is ostensibly the end of humanity and of Planet Earth[82]; but also the comedy television series *Blackadder*, whose final season ends with the lead characters finally abandoning their trench and "going over the top" and towards their death in No Man's Land during World War I[83]. Nevertheless, the happy ending appears to have been by and large the tendency in works designed to provoke laughter, and one that we can trace historically.

In his study of Attic comedy, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (1934), Francis MacDonald Cornford observes that the trope of the happy ending was already a staple in Ancient Greece, at least as far back as the so-called Old Comedies whose texts have survived until today – that is, the comedies of Aristophanes[84]. These comedies usually ended with a *Kômos*, that is, a boisterous, rowdy procession involving both characters and Chorus[85]:

[82] The unexpected bleakness of the book's ending, however, was considered somewhat uncharacteristic of the genre and met with some criticism.
[83] Tellingly, the ruined battlefield that we are shown is subsequently turned into a green field in modern Flanders, signalling eventual harmony born out of tragedy, albeit with a solemn tone.
[84] There were other famous writers of Old-Comedy, by all accounts just as popular as Aristophanes, but none of their work has survived: Cratinus, Hermippus, Eupolis and Telecleides are some.
[85] The *kômoi* were not merely stylistic devices, but appear to have been drunken processions once organised to celebrate different events, such as weddings or military victories: "Α κῶμος; is a moving procession, mostly of male revellers, but also of entertainers (mainly musicians), behaving in anything from a happy to a violently wild manner. It is usually performed during a celebration of a successful event or person, or in honour of a god, especially Dionysus. Its participants are either quite intoxicated or pretending to be so. They are typically depicted as singing and mocking other people" (Pütz, 2003: 156).

> The plays regularly end with a procession in which the Chorus marches out of the orchestra, conducting the chief character in triumph and singing a song technically known as the *Exodos*. The hero, moreover, is accompanied in this *Kômos* by a person who, perhaps because she is (except in one play) always mute, has attracted less notice than she deserves. what is fundamentally the same incident—this marriage with its *Kômos*— ends almost every play of Aristophanes, no matter what its subject may be. (Cornford, 1914: 8)

Old Comedy was more episodic in structure than the romantic comedies we know today. As Cornford indicates in the quote above, the *Kômos* arrives somewhat unexpectedly and is not a logical conclusion to the narrative that precedes it. That the plays of Aristophanes, the looser plots of which draw from subjects other than romantic love, should end in a *Kômos* with understated themes of revelry and marriage does not appear to make immediate sense[86]:

> The plays of Aristophanes—and the same is true of all fifth-century Comedy at Athens, so far as we know it—are entirely free from any conception of romantic love. The hero is normally an old man (γέρων*)*, who is married already and has grown-up children. The youthful and romantic heroine is conspicuously absent. (Cornford, 1914: 17)

By contrast, the New Comedies that were to follow (and co-exist with to a degree) the Old Comedy period were tightly plotted in order to reach a particular romantic *denouement*:

> The formula of the romantic plot in modern comedies and novels, reduced to its barest and most abstract form, would be something of this sort. Two young lovers, prevented by circumstances from attaining their desires, are, after various dangers and adventures which bring them to the brink of despair, at last united by a sudden turn of good fortune and live happily ever afterwards. (Cornford, 1914: 16)

According to Cornford, despite the fact that both share a happy ending with overtones of romantic union, the "organic" culmination of an entire narrative in the natural consequence

[86] "No one, setting out to read a series of comedies dealing with social and literary themes of this sort and totally devoid of love-interest, would dream of expecting that nearly all of them would end with a *Kômos*-Procession and a marriage" (Cornford, 1914: 17).

of a happy ending that we find in New Comedy, typically consisting in an engagement or marriage, is simply a parodical take on the tightly plotted works of Tragedy, and particularly those of Euripides:

> [I]f we seek to trace its ancestry still farther back, we shall find that its essential elements—the conception of romantic love itself, and the various plot motives, such as the child lost or exposed in infancy or captured by pirates and other evil-doers—are derived, not from the stock-in-trade of Aristophanes and his predecessors, but directly from the Tragedy of Euripides. (Cornford, 1914: 17)

The fact that the *Kômos* is nevertheless present in Old Comedy, apparently without literary precedent, leads Cornford to believe that the preexisting precedent for the happy ending in comedy is not literary or theatrical but ritualistic. The mimes that potentially preceded Old Comedy as performances with a theatrical, entertaining bent had no such elements, and were if anything looser than Old Comedy in structure. Cornford's investigation of the ritualistic origin of this happy ending is thus the central aspect of *The Origin of Attic Comedy*.

Briefly put, Cornford's conclusion is that, as first stated by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, this origin – and thus the origin of the happy ending – lies in a fertility ritual performed in the countryside in Attica during spring, the *Phallika*: "This is true of tragedy as well as of comedy: the former began with the leaders of the dithyramb, and the latter from the leaders of the phallic singing that is a tradition that still survives in many cities." (Aristotle, 2013: 1449a15-20). During the *Phallika,* a *Kômos*-like procession was carried out in order to invoke good or life and expel evil or death: the first through carrying a statue of a phallus, the second through engaging in invective in iambic:

> [T]he phallic procession, with its sacrifice and Kômos, belongs to a well-known class of rites, to be found all over Europe and in many other regions, and intended to secure the fertility of the earth and of man and beast. […] Besides the distribution of benign influence, […] these processions have also the converse magical intent of defeating and

> driving away bad influences of every kind. The phallus itself is no less a negative charm against evil spirits than a positive agent of fertilisation. But the simplest of all methods of expelling such malign influences of any kind is to abuse them with the most violent language. (Cornford, 1914: 48-49)

This would potentially explain both the phallic adornments reportedly worn by some actors while performing in Aristophanes's plays and the perhaps an older form of jesting about misgivings – in this case, obtaining relief by personifying death and minimising it through over-the-top abuse:

> There can be no doubt that the element of invective and personal satire which distinguishes the Old Comedy is directly descended from the magical abuse of the phallic procession, just as its obscenity is due to the sexual magic; and it is likely that this ritual justification was well known to an audience familiar with the phallic ceremony itself. (ibid.: 50)

It is of course no coincidence that the *Dionysia* in Athens, where Aristophanes and his fellow comedians would compete in front of an audience for the prize of the best Comedy, also took place in the spring – arguably just as the *Phallika* took place in several villages throughout the countryside. The fact that both of these elements – the fertility element and artful invective – appear to have already been combined in a ritual procession intended to invoke life gives ballast to Northrop Frye's view of the connection between literature and ritual – at least partly in intention – and to the idea of comedy as the mythos of spring (Frye, 1973: 154). The fact that they appear to have remained combined in New Comedy, which focused more on narrative cohesion and a natural *denouement*, speak to their power. In both Old Comedy, New Comedy and beyond we can without difficulty find elements that point towards a theme of spring. Again, the very presence of the *Kômos* in Old Comedy, with its origins in springtime ritual, attests to this. The theme of young love against stern,

consolidated authority in the New Comedy that came after it – though structurally modelled on tragedy – retained a sublimated version of this trope:

> New Comedy normally presents an erotic intrigue between a young man and a young woman which is blocked by some kind of opposition, usually paternal, and resolved by a twist in the plot which is the comic form of Aristotle's "discovery," and is more manipulated than its tragic counterpart. At the beginning of the play the forces thwarting the hero are in control of the play's society, but after a discovery in which the hero becomes wealthy or the heroine respectable, a new society crystallizes on the stage around the hero and his bride. (Frye, 44: 1973)

The focus is on dissipating rigidity and allowing for inevitable change to take its course – Spring after Winter, and each season in succession in perpetual change. The marriage, the engagement, the feast, signal this. The stock characters that we see in Old Comedy and New Comedy are *humours* in the Jonsonian line: single-minded characters, rigid in their behaviour and outlook that are in that sense – in a Bergsonian vein – behaving rigidly, unnaturally – against life. This is an idea at least as old as Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*:

> Men are born soft and supple;
> dead, they are stiff and hard.
> Plants are born tender and pliant;
> dead, they are brittle and dry.
> Thus whoever is stiff and inflexible is a disciple of death.
> Whoever is soft and yielding is a disciple of life.
> The hard and stiff will be broken.
> The soft and supple will prevail. (Tzu, 2006, 76)

Single-minded behaviour of course also ensures predictability and facilitates the creation of a cohesive, logical narrative. As stated by White, "this static world of motivation and action requires a purely traditional employment of character" (White, 1994: 124). Or according to Bowen: "All Wodehouse people are 'stock' characters in the sense that they are created to fill a certain function in the plot. They all behave consistently in recurring

circumstances" (Bowen, 1976: 70). But the inherent ridiculousness of stock-rigidity in comedy is also implied criticism. Following Davis on the subject of the stock characters of farce:

> The targets of aggression and violence are presented as largely responsible for inviting their own fate (being misfits, killjoys, selfish, mean, hypocritical, exploitative and/or just plain stupid enough to fall for being fooled). They are frequently iconic figures, representative of general groups (such as parents, members of the opposite sex, country yokels lacking civilized manners, unsympathetic guardians, rival lovers of both sexes, self-invited visitors, over-educated, boring ped-ants and professionals, masters and bosses, or just plain annoying wimps). They receive their punishment on behalf of a much wider set of offences than those they present personally. And always they lack self-consciousness, being totally unaware of their own limitations. Over their fluid humanity is plastered the restrictive plating of self-absorption, so that communication with them only takes place on their own terms and warnings go unheeded. (Davis, 2001: 4)

But a certain amount of plausibility and likability, the latter typically derived from their funniness, from the fact that their rigidity entertains (like Lord Emsworth's endearingly perpetual forgetfulness in the Blandings Series), ensures that it is not simply criticism that is at stake. Specifically on the subject of Wodehouse, Frances Donaldson connects the character-types of his books to those of the 19th-century English stock company:

> The Juvenile Lead and the Leading Lady, the Low Comedian, the Heavy Father, the Chambermaid (later known as a soubrette), and Walking Ladies and Gentlemen, later to be known as supers. Playwrights of the nineteenth century had to write plays which included parts for the salaried stock company, and the playwrights of the early twentieth century were their immediate descendants. (Donaldson, 1982: 10)

The repertoire of these stock companies included everything from tragedy to farce, and the latter is of course particularly suited to the stock character. Although the books and stories of the Jeeves saga cannot exactly be considered farces due to the fact that the latter is a theatrical subgenre, and thus relies on a number of visual and physical gags that novels cannot reproduce, they were undoubtedly heavily permeated by its influence. Wodehouse

wrote a significant amount of plays in collaboration with Guy Bolton and Jerome Kern during his successful spell on Broadway (and beyond), and is known to have often structured his stories like three act plays (Hall, 1974: 48) and to have treated his characters like actors in a play[87]. In addition, Wodehouse's characters themselves frequently make direct references to the ins and outs of farce, music hall and musical comedies, often using terms such as "heavy" and "hero" to describe others and themselves. Yet even these stock characters can be traced back to those of *commedia dell'arte*, such as Harlequin, Pulcinella and Pierrot, and the origin of the practice, as far as can be ascertained, may lie perhaps even beyond Old and New Comedy in the farcical playlets once possibly produced in Megara (Davis, 2001: 3)[88]. In fact, the way authors such as Jessica Milner Davis describe farce very much aligns with the comic *ethos* of Wodehouse's work:

> The fundamental jokes around which a farce plot turns are probably the inescapable facts that all human dignity is at the mercy of the human body and its appetites and needs; and that those human bodies themselves are imprisoned by the space/time continuum. If there is a meta-message or a moral here, it is the acknowledgement that we are all leveled down by our common humanity. No airs and pretences – and no exceptions—allowed. But no preaching for a revolution, either. (Davis, 2001: 3)

In "Wodehouse and Latin Comedy", written in 1934, George McCracken was perhaps the first to make the claim, albeit briefly, that there is a connection between characters such as Bertie, Jeeves and Aunt Dahlia and the stock characters of Latin Comedy: "The most striking similarity is to be found in the use of stock characters, Mr. Wodehouse differing

[87] "The principle I always go on in writing a long story is to think of the characters in terms of actors in a play. I say to myself, when I invent a good character for an early scene, 'If this were a play, we should have to get somebody darned good to play this part, and if he found he had only a short scene in act one he would walk out. How therefore can I twist the story about so as to give him more to do and keep him alive till the fall of the curtain?" (Ratcliffe, 2010: 158).

[88] In *Italian Popular Comedy: A Study in the Commedia Dell'arte, 1560-1620, with Special Reference to the English Stage* Katherine M. Lea traces the Shift from *commedia dell'arte* to farce.

from his forerunners in that he repeatedly uses the same character in story after story" (McCracken, 1934: 612). McCracken sees Bertie as the *adulescens*, often the lead character of Latin Comedy, and Jeeves as the *servus*; and while he claims that the *senex* figure is absent, he does observe that the aunts in the narratives such as Aunt Agatha often perform that role. In *Joy in the Morning*, as we will later see, Uncle Percy, Lord Worplesdon, is a more traditional *senex* and a stand-in for Aunt Agatha, in contrast to whom he is humanised, as he himself fears her wrath. In fact, in the narrative itself, Boko Fittleworth refers to him as "the heavy": "Suppose (…) I were to save the heavy's home from being looted by a midnight marauder, that would make him feel I had the right stuff in me, I fancy. He would say 'Egad! A fine young fellow, this Fittleworth!' would he not?" (ibid.: 116). Northrop Frye directly mentions Jeeves in *The Anatomy of Criticism* as a descendent from the *eiron* of Greek comedy. White further develops that point, adding that Bertie functions as an *alazon*:

> Jeeves operates as *eiron*, a figure who has an ironic perspective on events and manipulates them for his own advantage and for that of those he serves […], a particular sort of *eiron*, the *servus dolosus* or tricky slave found in Roman New Comedy and later in Sancho Panza or Sam Weller. Bertie plays a deluded *alazon* to Jeeves's *eiron*. As *alazon*, Bertie is as commonly mistaken about his competencies and the consequences of his actions as are Don Quixote and Pickwick. (White, 1994: 124)

The character of Bertie poses a few challenges in terms of stock character categorisation. Wodehouse generally provides slight twists to his characters which tend to be easy to reconcile with the tropes of each stock character. It is not difficult to see that aunts function as the *senex* figure, for instance, and the characters are naturally made to suit certain English types. But as a rule the reader cannot access the inner workings of the mind of a theatrical stock character, except through the occasional monologue. Bertie being the narrator, it is from his perspective that we read the entire narrative, which leaves ample room for personal remarks that shed light on an intricate character. McCracken is correct in his assumption that

Bertie is to a degree the *adulescens* of Latin Comedy – irresponsible, professionally idle. But White is also correct in stating that Bertie has moments in which he functions as the *alazon* to Jeeves' *eiron*: specifically the ones in which Bertie sees himself as a detective, *preux chevalier* or *parfait genteel knight*. His role as *alazon* is even clearer when he doubts Jeeves' abilities and decides to strike out on his own, judging his own abilities as far greater than they are:

> It wasn't two minutes after I had parted from Aunt Agatha before the old fighting spirit of the Woosters reasserted itself. Ghastly as the peril was which loomed before me, I was conscious of a rummy sort of exhilaration. It was a tight corner, but the tighter the corner, I felt, *the more juicily should I score off Jeeves when I got myself out of it without a bit of help from him*. (Wodehouse, 2019: 45, my italics)

But unlike Quixote, who perfectly embodies the *alazon* up until just before the very end, Bertie is in turn deluded, accurate and excessively self-effacing about his personal qualities. This can be explained by the constant need for surprise and variety in humour and comedy, but it also leads him to break the bounds of the stock-character somewhat. Additionally, he is imbued with an innocence that further endears the reader to him. Nevertheless, like the entire cast of characters – Jeeves less so to keep the surprise effect – Bertie acts predictably.

We have seen that comedy makes use of stock characters, verbal or physical humour and happy endings. Why are they such a consistent combination? For one, they perfectly illustrate Bergson's *mascarade sociale*: by pitting single-minded, stereotypical machine-like characters against each other in a constant game of motivation versus motivation, comedy highlights the fundamental incongruity between the importance of social convention and its artificiality. Subsequently, it concludes by restating the importance, not of a particular set of rules – not, say, of the oppressive, nonsensical marriage law of Athens in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, circumvented by the end of the play – but of convention as a practice, of *a*

convention, although never in rigid fashion, never to the point of oppressive ridiculousness. The happy ending, in turn, is in tune with comedy's potential origins in fertility ritual, that is, with its role as a force for good cheer and, consequently, for life.

2.4.1 Ambivalent Laughter

In 1534, French Polymath Rabelais wrote *Gargantua*, the second book of his five-volume novel *Gargantua et Pantagruel*. In it we follow the life and adventures of the giant Gargantua, the son of King Grandgousier, which culminate in his victory in a war against the enemy king, Picrochole. At the end of the book, Gargantua and the rumbustious Frère Jean read and interpret a sprawling prophetic riddle. The former sees in it a solemn description of the future of the human race which nevertheless underlines the persistent quality of divine truth. Frère Jean, however, reads it as a description of a tennis match:

> *- Par sainct Goderan (dist le moyne), telle n'est mon exposition; le stille est de Merlin le Prophète. Donnez y allégories et tant graves que vouldrez, et y ravassez, voust et tout le monde, ainsy que vouldrez. De ma part, je n'y pense aultre sense enclous q'une description du jeu de paulme soubz obscures parolles. Les suborneurs de gens sont les faiseurs de parties, qui sont ordinairement amys, et, aprés les deux chasses faictes, sont hors le jeu celluy qui y estoyt e l'aultre y entre. On croyt le premier qui dict si l'esteuf est sus ou soubs la chorde. Les eaulx sont les sueurs; les chordes des raquestes sont faictes de boyaux de moutons ou de chevres; la machine ronde est la pelote ou l'esteuf. Après le jeu, on se refraischit devant un clair feu, et change l'on de chemise, et voluntiers bancquette l'on, mais plus joyeusement ceulx qui on guaingné. Et grand chere! (*Rabelais, 1972: 437-439)[89]

[89] "By St. Goderan," said the Monk, "that's not how I understand it. The style is that of Merlin the Prophet. You can put as many serious allegories and interpretations on it as you want to. For my part, I think that the only meaning enclosed in it is the description of a real tennis-match under a veil of dark words. Those who suborn all sorts of people are those who set up the matches – they're usually friends. And after two services, the one who was in court, serving, goes off, and the other comes in. They believe the first one who says whether the tennis ball has gone above or below the rope. The water is the sweat. The racket strings are made of the guts of sheep or goats. The round machine is the ball. After the game, they enjoy a drink in front of a blazing fire and change their shirts. And they're glad to tuck into a feast – those who have won being particularly happy.

Similarly, Erasmus of Rotterdam ends his *Praise of Folly* with "So fare you well; clap well; live well; drink well – you famous devotees of Folly!" (Erasmus, 2018: 115). Thus two wholly different perspectives, those of drama and comedy – the "one-second versus 10,000 years" of Kierkegaard – are applied to the same source material, and ultimately, to life itself. Where Gargantua sees a future of trials and tribulations, Frère Jean positions himself in an ambivalent position where he views human strife as a mere game – a tennis match where one party wins and the other party loses, subsequently accepting their lot with the best cheer possible – the victor being somewhat more cheerful than the loser. Frère Jean's perspective is that of a detached observer, while Gargantua's is not. Yet Frère Jean is not detached in his attitude: joy, good cheer. His last words, which conclude the novel, can be interpreted as a toast to the futility or to the ultimate simplicity of human life – but a futility that one is resigned to, and which ceases to be a source of grief if enough detachment is present that joy is allowed to come to the fore. Frère Jean does not despise the tennis match – he is, despite its fundamental irrelevance, happy to play.

In his groundbreaking study of Rabelais' novel, *The World of Rabelais* Mikhail Bakhtin claimed that all of its volumes were written in the spirit of ambivalent laughter – a philosophical laughter that is less tangible than a systematic worldview, and which is perhaps its opposite: which constantly calls to mind the more mundane aspects of life when faced with excessive loftiness or "petrified narrow seriousness" (Bakhtin, 1984: 149). The reference to petrification, of course, suggesting a connection to Bergson's concerns with

Cheers!'" (Rabelais, 2018: 300).

rigidity[90]. Bakhtin dubs Rabelais' particular style of conveying this ambivalent laughter "grotesque realism", because the mundane reality often used by Rabelais as a humorous foil for fustian and pretentiousness is that of the unseemly: humour which involves comic excess, jokes about bodily functions, cartoonish violence. In Rabelais, the "descending incongruity" goes from the heights of the conception of a limitless human soul to that which we cannot deny yet make efforts to both hide and transcend. The grotesque reflects our base humanity on one hand, but also inserts an element of change and fertility in the narratives – it reminds us of the body, of our existence as limited physical objects, but also of our potential continuity through adaptation: reproduction and change.. The ambivalence lies not in a lack of empathy towards the characters, but in the bringing together of incongruous conceptions, none of which truly triumph over the other in absolute terms.

Bakhtin traces the roots of the ambivalent laughter of Rabelais to a popular medieval practice, one at first heavily associated with Christian liturgy, where the solemnity of the religious ceremony was also offset by comic revelry. Thus, before they were forbidden after centuries of strong criticism by members of the clergy, there came into being such events as the feast of fools or the "feast of the ass" where even religious doctrine, practices and figures were a subject for parody:

> For the Medieval parodist everything without exception was comic. Laughter was as universal as seriousness; it was directed at the whole world, at history, at all societies, at ideology. It was the world's second truth extended to everything and from which nothing was taken away. It was, as it were, the festive aspect of the whole world in all its elements, the second revelation of the world in play and laughter. (Bakhtin, 1984: 84)

[90] Although Bakhtin seems to have some knowledge of Bergson's work, he only refers to it as an analysis of laughter which "bring[s] out mostly its negative functions" (Bakhtin, 1984: 71). This, as we have seen, is true of Bergson's conclusion, but his observations are useful for the understanding of humour nonetheless.

And specifically about the grotesque, Bakhtin suggests that "nearly all the rituals of the feast of fools are a grotesque degradation of various church rituals and symbols and their transfer to the material bodily level: gluttony and drunken orgies on the altar table, indecent gestures, disrobing" (Bakhtin, 1984: 75). In the medieval world, alongside the oppressive world of feudalism and the Church – or rather, as its flipside – a second, topsy-turvy world of merriment was always around the corner, providing much needed relief: "Having on the one hand forbidden laughter in every official sphere of life and ideology, the Middle Ages on the other hand bestowed exceptional privileges of license and lawlessness outside these spheres: the marketplace, on feast days, in festive recreational literature" (Bakhtin, 1984: 71). This was a relief from the pressures of solemnity imposed by the dicta of feudal, Christian convention.

To show just to what extent the idea of the second world was widespread in Medieval Europe, Bakhtin quotes a circular letter of the Paris School of Theology from 1444, where it is argued that celebrations such as the feast of the fools and the feast of the ass should take place "so that foolishness, *which is our second nature and seems to be inherent in man,* might freely spend itself at least once a year" (Bakhtin, 1984: 75, my italics). The letter further reads: "All of us men are barrels poorly put together, which would burst from the wine of wisdom, if this wine remains in a state of constant fermentation of piousness and fear of God. We must give it air in order not to let it spoil" (*ibid*). This second world has survived until today in the celebration of Carnival, the festival where convention is temporarily suspended and human passion allowed to flow. Far from something that was once merely a part of liturgy, Carnival has deep roots which can be traced back at the very least to the Roman festival of Saturnalia:

> The seasonal festivals of a Saturnalian character celebrated the return, for a brief interregnum, of a primitive innocence that knew not shame, and a liberty that at any other time would have been licentious. Social ranks were inverted, the slave exercising authority over the master. At Rome each household became a miniature republic, the slaves being invested with the dignities of office. A mock king was chosen to bear rule during the festival, like the mediaeval Abbot of Unreason or Lord of Misrule. (Cornford, 1914: 33)

And in turn maybe Saturnalia too can be traced to the revelling of the *Phallika* that lay even further in the past. Carnival is in a sense the bringing forth of a second world that does not necessarily threaten the first, but underlines the ridiculous artificiality of its conventions and provides escape and relief – the latter tying in with Freud's theory of humour as a mechanism that allows for both relief in the face of solemnity, as well as a triumph of the ego in the face of adversity:

> Like jokes and the comic, humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation, which is lacking in the other two ways of obtaining pleasure from intellectual activity. The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world, it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. (Freud, 1961: 162)

Saturnalia functioned in much the same way: roles were reversed and human passions allowed vent – pleasure was momentarily unbridled. Yet Saturnalia was held in honour of the God Saturn, and had a very distinct connection with the idea of recreating a second world which is a return to the "truly" real: to the golden past presided by Saturn, one of peace, innocence, and pastoral harmony with Nature. In short, we see the very same thing that we have seen at work behind the myth of Arcadia, of Eden, of Merry England. Comedy thus invokes this second world of pleasure – this palpable break with artificiality that convention must be tempered with. In short, a momentary return to our imagined golden past.

The Jeeves saga is not, unlike *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, infused with the grotesque. Yet as noted by Barbara C. Bowen, although it is unlikely that there was ever any direct influence from Rabelais on Wodehouse[91] (Bowen, 1976: 63), there are relevant similarities between the two authors: "an astonishing, and instructive, similarity of literary method between a Renaissance Evangelical humanist and a twentieth-century English gentleman" (*ibid.*). Bowen enumerates several similarities between the two authors. Among them are the recycling of the same, intricate plot structures "which turn on objects, to be defended, stolen or otherwise manipulated" (Bowen, 1976: 67) such as the silver cow creamer in *The Code of the Woosters* and the *fouaces* of *Gargantua*; the direct addressing of the reader both by Rabelais's narrator and Bertie Wooster, and their half-serious talk of readers as "customers". Common to both authors too are the feasting, which is ubiquitous in Rabelais, but which can also be found in the Jeeves saga in the references to food and drink as well as in the tomfoolery of the Drones; and their indulging in "intellectual parlor-games" (Bowen, 1976: 70). By parlour games Bowen is referring to the use of parodical intertextuality by both authors, which perhaps stems from their similar educations. Despite otherwise different backgrounds, both Rabelais and Wodehouse studied the Classics, were well versed in the Bible and read and wrote in Latin. Also of note is their common delight in language play and in the juxtaposition of different styles and languages – colloquial, formal, technical. Their penchant for the comic simile; their use of comic hyperbole, evident in Wodehouse's comic similes and in Rabelais through the sheer proportions and quantities involved; the use of recurring catchphrases or clichés by the characters; all these are techniques that the two authors share.

[91] "Sir Pelham was kind enough to inform me, in a private letter, that he had no very clear recollection of Rabelais, and that he thought their "stuff" was probably very unlike" (Bowen, 1976: 63).

None of these similarities are entirely coincidental. On the one hand, there are obvious stylistic differences between these two "comedians", so to speak, chief among them being the ubiquity of the grotesque in Rabelais and its almost absolute absence in Wodehouse. But in terms of comic technique, it should be no wonder that both authors simply engage in elaborate play with the real-life elements that they know. While the feasting giants of Rabelais are more barefacedly unrealistic than Wodehouse's drones, they stand in the same relation to real life – the life within them relates, in comic analogy, to reality. The fact that both authors share similar educations only makes their characters' common use of heteroglossia, that is, the mixture of several different "languages", and the other common particularities of their language-play, more obvious. The most interesting common trait that they share is perhaps that they are

> at the same time authentic and parodic, and both derive from the epic. Rabelais writes an epic which is also a pastiche of the epic, like Folengo before him, so that we can simultaneously care about characters and appreciate their effectiveness as satiric weapons. In the storm scene of the *Quart Livre* (18-24), Panurge is a hilariously comic coward *and* the incarnation of the faults which Stoic and Evangelical heroes must avoid. We sympathise with Bingo Little's romance with Rosie M. Banks, at the same time as we enjoy the satire of the 'bilge' Rosie writes. (Bowen, 1976: 64, italics in the original)

Or as Bakhtin puts it, both write in the spirit of ambivalent laughter. This laughter lampoons without suggesting an alternative: it is merely the consequence of the recognition that convention of whatever kind, whether or not it is more or less appropriate, is both necessary and ridiculous. This contradictory duality is reconciled through the use of humour. The idealistic nature of characters such as Don Quixote and Bertie Wooster is both ridiculous and admirable. It is both out of place in reality, unadjusted to its difficulties and demands, and a triumph over it. When Kierkegaard wrote that humour was not antithetical to faith, and particularly to the Christian faith (Kierkegaard, 2009: 244), he perhaps had the humour of

ambivalent laughter in mind: one which does not completely level that at which it is aimed, but which, taking a long view of things, is not sufficiently concerned with the particular to suggest specific changes. Instead, it is of the persuasion that a certain balance must be reached, and that the excesses of either zealotry or absolute abandon are perhaps not advisable, but more than that, should they take hold, will not be eternal. Before Kierkegaard but along similar lines, in *In Praise of* Folly, Erasmus of Rotterdam, not without a certain element of the tongue-in-cheek, praises Folly and likens Christianity itself to a kind of comical madness – though one perhaps worth achieving (Erasmus, 2018: 114). The origin of the idea as related to Christianity can be traced at least to 1 Corinthians 1, where humanity is established as naturally foolish in the light of God's wisdom. Laughing at ourselves does not then necessarily imply laughing at a deity – it may indeed be acknowledgement of its relative superiority.

The issue of balance is perhaps the reason why the Jeeves saga contains little of the grotesque. Part of it has to do with the propriety of all of its immediate influences, including school stories, as we have seen above. But what Rabelais accomplishes through constant, very direct descents from loftiness to the body proper and its supposedly unseemly characteristics, Wodehouse accomplishes in indirect ways. In a return to the exchange on the disappointing nature of life quoted above:

> "[A]s I dressed for dinner that night, I was conscious of an impending doom.
> 'Jeeves,' I said, 'have you ever pondered on Life?"
> 'From time to time, sir, in my leisure moments.'
> 'Grim, isn't it, what?'
> 'Grim, sir?'
> 'I mean to say, the difference between things as they look and things as they are.'
> 'The trousers perhaps a half-inch higher, sire. A very slight adjustment of the braces will effect the necessary alteration. You were saying, sir?" (Wodehouse, 2008k: 26)

In this bit of dialogue Bertie's existential gloom is immediately undercut not by a grotesque reminder of the body and of his humanity, but by a subtler, less likely to shock reference to trousers, which are simultaneously a descent to the body proper and an allusion to the body social and its conventions. Elsewhere, a similar exchange is boiled down to the same subject:

> 'There are moments, Jeeves, when one asks oneself: "Do trousers matter?'
> 'The mood will pass, sir.' (Wodehouse, 2008c: 107)

In "Problematic Menswear in P.G Wodehouse and Dornford Yates", Kate Macdonald analyses the use of clothes in the Jeeves saga by defining Bertie Wooster and Jeeves as two opposites in terms of wardrobe rules: the first does not pay attention to the social role of clothes and is constantly attempting to break the rules of fashion and proper dress in order to wear clothes that suit his fancy. Jeeves, however, is "hidebound" (Wodehouse, 2008b: 225) in matters of personal attire and prescribes the use of certain clothes according to their immediate function[92]:

> [Bertie's] antics show us his enjoyment of clothes, but he veers exasperatingly off the path of correct dressing, and has to be brought back into line perpetually by Jeeves. Bertie has some standards about what can and cannot be worn, as we see from his appalled reaction to the 'crimson satin tie decorated with horseshoes' worn by a besotted Bingo Little ('Cerebellum' 405), but his own dress sense is alarmingly erratic. Jeeves functions as a dress enforcer in their relationship, unexpectedly often to his own advantage. (Macdonald, 2016: 229)

[92] "No, Jeeves,' I said, raising my hand, 'argument is useless. Nobody has a greater respect than I have for your judgment in socks, in ties, and – I will go farther – in spats; but when it comes to evening shirts your nerve seems to fail you. You have no vision. You are prejudiced and reactionary. Hidebound is the word that suggests itself. It may interest you to learn that when I was at Le Touquet the Prince of Wales buzzed into the Casino one night with soft silk shirt complete" (Wodehouse, 2008b: 225).

By contrasting Jeeves and Bertie's different views on clothes, Wodehouse is also contrasting different attitudes to convention: frustration or flouting on the one hand, and strict adherence on the other. When Jeeves reminds Bertie of the importance of trousers, he is reminding him indeed of the purpose of convention, of social life, and that it is ultimately an inevitability. But again, there is no clear advocacy of following every rule in Wodehouse: Jeeves' obsession with clothes is a comic, harmless exaggeration of his conventionality. While Bertie always ends up adhering to Jeeves' rules of attire, his principal whim, Bertie is constantly allowed to forego other conventional rules of social life: being employed, being married, being sedate; in short, growing up.

The trouser side of the equation is a subtle reminder of the inevitability of convention, but the Carnivalesque proper constantly creeps through the narratives: in the constant indulgence in food and drink, in the pranks and capers of the members of the Drones Club, Bertie included; in the excesses committed by all and sundry on Boat Race Night, including pinching policemen's helmets. As expressed by the 1444 circular letter of the Paris School of Theology quoted by Bakhtin, the Carnivalesque fulfills one of the effects of humour beautifully – that of relief. The relief theory of humour was perhaps most famously put forward by Alexander Bain, who although preponderantly critical of laughter, observed:

> We are sometimes obliged to put on a dignity which we perhaps do not feel, as in administering reproof or correction to inferiors; and still oftener have we to assume an attitude or respect and reverence that does not possess our inward feelings. Both the one and the other situation is a fatiguing tension of the system, and we have the pleasure of a "blessed relief" when anything happens to give a relaxation. (Bain, 1865: 251)

Humour thus provides relief from the pressures of convention, which is why it can never be entirely subdued by convention. Instead, the constant freedom of the second world, of play, is allowed to intrude upon convention and bend its rules in order to ensure happiness. The

vague though clear and consistent moral Code of the Woosters allows Bertie, with his inherent goodness, to break certain rules to his satisfaction while guided by Jeeves, and thus ultimately remain safe from the pressures of convention, of the social life that chafes, one seen in almost Schopenhauerian terms. Schopenhauer famously described the misgivings of social life in terms of the hedgehog's dilemma:

> One cold winter's day, a number of porcupines huddled together quite closely in order through their mutual warmth to prevent themselves from being frozen. But they soon felt the effect of their quills on one another, which made them again move apart. Now when the need for warmth once more brought them together, the drawback of the quills was repeated so that they were tossed between two evils, until they had discovered the proper distance from which they could best tolerate one another. Thus the need for society which springs from the emptiness and monotony of men's lives, drives them together; but their many unpleasant and repulsive qualities and insufferable drawbacks once more drive them apart. (Schopenhauer, 2000: 652)

This can be said to be the state of things that Bertie gets to escape temporarily by the end of the narratives, often by allowing himself to be made into a scapegoat, a *pharmakos*: one who is considered a fool and cast out of society. We see this in the many occasions in which Jeeves has Bertie thought of as a kleptomaniac or as otherwise mentally disturbed in order to allow him to retreat to solitude and away from the demands of his friends and relatives when they are finally satisfied – within reason – through Jeeves' actions. Yet there is a twist to this *pharmakos*: he is not cast out of society for the audience's pleasure, although Jeeves' slight toying with Bertie is enjoyable[93]. Instead, he has the sympathy of the audience, he *escapes* unpleasant society once he has done "the right thing", which Frye associates with comedies of manners:

[93] Bertie sacrifices his (not altogether strong) reputation as mentally sane in order to save the day for his friends and relatives in *The Inimitable Jeeves*, *Jeeves in the Offing*, *The Code of the Woosters*, and *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*, in all of which he is mistakenly considered to be generally insane or, specifically, a kleptomaniac. Perhaps the first instance where Bertie is considered to be mentally ill is in the chapters "Introducing Claude and Eustace" and "Sir Roderick Comes To Lunch", from *The Inimitable Jeeves* (1923).

> Finally comes the comedy of manners, the portrayal of a chattering-monkey society devoted to snobbery and slander. In this kind of irony the characters who are opposed to or excluded from the fictional society have the sympathy of the audience. Here we are close to a parody of tragic irony, as we can see in the appalling fate of the relatively harmless hero of Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*. Or we may have a character who, with the sympathy of the author or audience, repudiates such a society to the point of deliberately walking out of it, becoming thereby a kind of pharmakos in reverse. (…) *It is more usual, however, for the artist to present an ironic deadlock in which the hero is regarded as a fool or worse by the fictional society, and yet impresses the real audience as having something more valuable than his society has*. (Frye, 1973: 48, my italics)

This would be Bertie's innocence and his sense of duty to his fellow human. As comically put by Bertie himself in *The Code of the Woosters*: "Scratch Bertram Wooster, I often say, and you find a Boy Scout" (Wodehouse, 2008c: 18). Having said that, there is a subtly misanthropic strain to Bertie in how he chafes at most company beyond Jeeves and some of the Drones – and even including Jeeves, in his rebellious moods. This is something that comes across in his fear or open disdain for most children, for instance. And inasmuch as Bertie Wooster's voice is similar to Wodehouse's own self-effacing comic voice, obvious both in the tone of his Berlin Broadcasts and in his autobiographical books, Wodehouse's own personal brand of displeasure in the company of others may have left a mark on his creation. He is known to have favoured writing in his study over attending the gatherings his wife Ethel often threw in their homes throughout the years. Guy Bolton tells the story of when, as they were looking for a new flat, Wodehouse asked his wife Ethel to find one on the ground floor, saying: "I never know what to say to the lift boy" (Donaldson, 1982: 5). Similarly, in a 1924 letter to William Townend, Wodehouse writes: "Merry Christmas and all that. Though I'm always glad when it's over, aren't you?" (Ratcliffe, 2013: 174). Or similarly – and of course humorously – as Malcolm Muggeridge recalls:

> The last time I saw him he complained that a television serial he always watches at noon had failed to appear that day. Instead, an oafish figure named Khrushchev had occupied the screen. On another occasion, a young, earnest American was present, who brought

> up the subject of nuclear warfare, which, he said, might well destroy the whole human race. 'I can't wait,' Wodehouse murmured. (Muggeridge, 1966: 82)

None of this is meant to construe Wodehouse as a true misanthrope, nor – again – does assessing his character, now even more inaccessible than when he lived, truly matter. But this kind of remark, this kind of humour, is also a part of the Jeeves series. Even Bertie's inherent goodness does not keep him from – and again, as a joke – wishing suicide on Edwin the Boy Scout (Wodehouse, 2008b: 25). Nor does it stop him from this particularly evocative gag:

> [T]he Pyke's idea of a refreshing snort was, as I knew from what she had told me on the journey out, a cupful of tepid pip-and-peel water or, failing that, what she called the fruit-liquor. You make this, apparently, by soaking raisins in cold water and adding the juice of a lemon. After which, I suppose, you invite a couple of old friends in and have an orgy, burying the bodies in the morning. (Wodehouse, 2008b: 232)

But it does, while occasionally chafing and despairing, allow him to stick to this code, and to remain committed to engendering the best of all possible worlds for those around him.

Arguably, the difference between the descending incongruity of Wodehouse and Rabelais is the difference between the feudal and religious oppression that characterised the real counterpart of Rabelais' fictional world, on one hand, and the moral repression of the real counterpart of Wodehouse's fictional world, on the other – the former being typically more intense than the latter, and thus requiring more explicit humour for greater relief. But both of these authors create second worlds in and of themselves. They are both second worlds of play, second worlds of joy which are ambivalent towards the political details of their author's lives as well as our own. The nostalgia that they deliver on is a return to the playfulness of childhood – a return to humour without consequence, and to an extent, a glimpse at the "oceanic feeling". But they nevertheless have at least one relevant realist

claim: the necessity of, in whatever shape, convention – one that can hopefully be improved upon, one whose artificiality will hopefully become less palpable or oppressive, but which will nevertheless remain an artificial limit.

To conclude this section, then, we have seen that, as underlined by Camus and many others, there is a fundamental incongruity between our expectations regarding reality and what it is truly like. This is connected to a timeless nostalgia for a mythical golden past where unity prevailed, and which is partly expressed in the Jeeves saga through its nods to a pastoral, chivalric, Merry England. Yet we have also seen that this nostalgia is perhaps merely a desire to return to an oceanic feeling, to a freedom and unity perhaps experienced in early childhood – perhaps never. Literature may to some extent mend the gap by providing a sense of aesthetic unity between humanity and the world. The carnivalesque is an attempt to temporarily reexperience this age of freedom through engaging in play and humour, the latter being a practice which allows us to rise above the incongruities of our reality so that we can derive pleasure from them. Additionally, we have seen that play is an essential aspect of the human condition, and which is arguably at the very root of conventionality – it is both freedom from solemnity and guided by the "simulated" artificiality that we often rue. It is perhaps the fact that we endow the playfulness of our conventions with solemnity that often provokes the sense of artificiality, of the unnatural masquerade that humour sees through and from which the carnivalesque provides a release. Comedy brings these factors into play and resolves them by invoking its origins in fertility ritual – by acting as a force for life for the living as it signals the transience of human life, while pointing – through ambivalent laughter – towards an eternity that comes across as continuity amid perpetual change and renewal. We will now see how all of this comes together in a close reading of several different narratives of the Jeeves saga.

III. The Jeeves Stories

We have come to the conclusion that the popularity of the Jeeves saga resides in the familiarity of its background and allusions, facilitated by the prominence of English and anglophone culture in the 20th and early 21st centuries, as well as its concern with eschewing superficial topicality and the quality of its humorous style. We have also concluded that many of the salient particularities of the Jeeves saga can be explained by its status as comedy written in the spirit of ambivalent laughter, one that simultaneously upbraids and accepts. If further analysis bears this out, the saga is also a work of fiction where both humour and happy endings coalesce into a joyful effect of relief through a philosophy of comic resignation.

In order to illustrate just how this spirit is embedded in the narratives, I will offer a close-reading of a selection of short stories, namely: "Jeeves and the Impending Doom", "Jeeves Takes Charge , "The Aunt and the Sluggard", "Jeeves and the Unbidden Guest", "Jeeves and the Yule Tide Spirit", "The Episode of the Dog Mcintosh" and "Indian Summer of an Uncle". I will follow these with a close reading of the novels *The Inimitable Jeeves* (1923)[94] and *Joy in the Morning* (1946). Each of these stories has elements that differentiate them, such as the presence or absence of a romantic plot, but were chosen for a particular reason – each in some way directly illustrates my point. To avoid accusations of cherry-picking, however, I would simply say this: we have seen before how, as observed by Sophie Ratcliffe, a certain amount of emotional cladding is an important element of Wodehouse's style. In the Jeeves saga, waters that run deep throughout the narratives only occasionally rise to the surface. In the narratives chosen, their presence is not only patent, but – within

[94] *The Inimitable Jeeves* is not, as we will see, strictly a novel.

Wodehousian reason – explicit. Not only that, but they are in structure, tone, narrative and tropes entirely in the vein of the other volumes of the saga.

For one, Bertie Wooster functions as the narrator in all of them. The only exception is one of the short-stories in the entire saga, "Bertie Changes His Mind" (1922), which is narrated by Jeeves[95]. Bertie's narration is a central element of the saga. While as discussed, dialogue has an essential role, particularly in the deconstruction of clichés, Bertie's description is the most readily recognisable and unique stylistic element of the saga, and it is there that we find language-play at its most creative, plenty of intertextuality, and Bertie's "philosophical" reflections. An added element, of course, is that Bertie is a participating narrator and that, thusly, the stories are told through his perspective, with all the limitations that this point of view implies.

As a narrator, Bertie is, as argued before, comically unreliable, in the sense that we know that he tends to misrepresent his abilities both ways, to overestimate and often underestimate the abilities of Jeeves, and to overestimate the dangers before him. The choice of Bertie as a narrator, someone who constantly despairs despite being generally sunny in outlook, who is repeatedly faced with problems that he cannot easily surmount and a reality he does not exactly understand – though he understands it better than one might think[96] – is a particularly interesting one. The fact that we see this character engage with the reality around him allows us to draw a parallel with our own individual experiences of life, as observed by Goodman regarding Quixote's tilting at windmills and his own academic practice. Who better than a childlike "fool" to remind us of the comically incongruous nature

[95] *Ring for Jeeves* (1953), too – which I did not particularly consider for this thesis as it is substantially different from the other works – has an omniscient narrator and does not feature Bertie Wooster at all.
[96] Here I am referring to the many moments quoted throughout this thesis in which Bertie reflects on the nature of existence and on the misgivings of others.

of humanity, or the disjunction between ourselves and the world, ourselves and society, our desires and our bodily limitations? And who better than Jeeves to evoke the grasp of pragmatic conventionality necessary to navigate such a tortuously intricate reality? He and Bertie – professorial and slangy, hidebound and modern, conventional and hedonistic – are an inherently comic pair.

The narratives of the entire saga, as indicated above, and as we will see in the following close-reading, move from cosmos to chaos and back to cosmos again. Bertie is either in the comfort of his own home or of his carnivalesque, Drones-club existence, when he is roped into helping either a relative or a friend. He quickly finds himself in trouble, senses an impending doom that he cannot avoid, and ultimately, by committing himself to his code and attempting to do what's best by resorting only to his innocent inexperience in practical matters – one afforded him by his private income –, makes a mess of the situation. Subsequently, he is rescued by Jeeves, who arranges for the best of all possible worlds to become a reality. Aunt Agatha and Aunt Dahlia are two frequent fixtures that precipitate this impending doom, but so are, often within the same narrative, characters such as Bingo Little, Tuppy Glossop, Stinker Pinker and Gussie Fink-Nottle, whether they intend to cause mayhem or are just following their own hearts or natural goofiness. The "heavy" characters are typically authority figures, Aunt Agatha being one, but also the brain specialist Roderick Glossop, the proto-fascist Roderick Spode, the magistrate Sir Watkyn Bassett, the bully Stilton Cheesewright. Nemeses too (of a kind) are Bertie's undesirable love prospects, such as the too sentimental Madeline Bassett, the too imperious Florence Craye, and the too dynamic Honoria Glossop – all of them solely interested in an image of Bertie that does not correspond to the truth and that, in addition, they insist on improving upon. All of these

characters provide motive and incident, edging the narratives along to a greater and greater impending doom, until it is ultimately averted.

I have previously referred to how the Jeeves narratives owe much to farce. In her study of the genre, Jessica Milner Davis describes "Snowball Farces"

> in which all the characters are equally caught up as victims in a whirlwind of escalating sound and fury. Often these plots are driven by an elaborate series of misunderstandings and errors, giving rise to many "crossed lines" between the different parties. The power of nature, of inanimate objects, tools and machines, in dominating mere humans is frequently the source of the joke. (Davis, 2001: 7)

This echoes what Bergson previously wrote in his discussion of several comedic methods about the "*boule de neige*", or snowball effect: "*un effet qui se propage en s'ajoutant à lui-même, de sorte que la cause, insignifiante à l'origine, aboutit par un progrès nécessaire à un résultat aussi important qu'inattendu*"[97] (Bergson, 1938: 81). A constantly-building collection of mishaps that resolves at the end, leaving most of the characters better off but returning Bertie exactly to where he started, in circular fashion, is the backbone of the narratives of the Jeeves saga. The importance of particular objects, often stolen, is also clear: Uncle Willoughby's memoirs from "Jeeves Takes Charge", Sir Roderick Glossop's hat from "Sir Roderick Comes to Lunch", the necklace and policeman's costume in *Joy in the Morning*, the silver cow creamer from *The Code of the Woosters*, the black statuette from *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*, the banjolele from *Thank You Jeeves*, the club book of *Much Obliged, Jeeves*, and in general clothes of all kinds.

There were, however, slight changes along the years, as alluded to above, and observable in the close-reading offered below. These include changes in the occasional

[97] "These instances are all different, but they suggest the same abstract vision, that of an effect which grows by arithmetical progression, so that the cause, insignificant at the outset, culminates by a necessary evolution in a result as important as it is unexpected" (Bergson, 1911: 81).

topical references and changes in vocabulary, but the characters undergo a few changes themselves, often in redemptive terms. Roderick Spode, the leader of the comically fascistic Black Shorts, abandons his dictatorial tendencies when he receives a Lordship, though he remains generally unbearable in *miles gloriosus* fashion[98]; Roderick Glossop ceases to be an unlikable brain specialist and antagonist to Bertie and the two are ultimately reconciled; Aunt Agatha becomes ever more an evil spectre looming in the distance, and love (or lust)-crazed Bingo Little marries. As for Bertie and Jeeves, the former becomes gradually more spontaneous and accurate with his references, which he justifies by having picked up a few from Jeeves. In *Much Obliged, Jeeves* there is an inversion, and Jeeves finds himself deferring to one of Bertie's slangy expressions to describe someone accurately[99]. Bertie also becomes slightly more combative as time goes on, and attempts to take matters into his own hands, bristling at the fact that his acquaintances increasingly want to rely on Jeeves and not on him to solve their problems directly. Also in *Much Obliged, Jeeves*, the plot hinges on an oversight of Jeeves's, who does not believe that the club book at the Junior Ganymede can ever be stolen and used for blackmail, a contingency which Bertie had foreseen. To a degree, the character of Bertie also begins to reflect Wodehouse's age: references to wanting to spend time alone and away from crowds and clubs become more frequent, and *Aunts Aren't*

[98] The *miles gloriosus* is yet another stock character, a type of *alazon*. It is the model of the swaggering soldier that boasts excessively of his physical prowess.

[99] "'The expression I am trying to find eludes me, sir. It is one I have sometimes heard you use to indicate a deficiency of sweetness and light in some gentleman of your acquaintance. You have employed it of Mr. Spode or, as I should say, Lord Sidcup and, in the days before your association with him took on its present cordiality, of Mr. Glossop's uncle, Sir Roderick. It is on the tip of my tongue.''
'A stinker?'
No, he said, it wasn't a stinker.
'A tough baby? '
'No.''
'A twenty minute egg?'
'That was it, sir. Mr. Runkle is a twenty minute egg'" (Wodehouse, 2008e: 130).

Gentlemen, the final novel in the saga, begins with a slight jar as Bertie finds some concerning red spots on his chest (Wodehouse, 2008a: 9). Jeeves, in turn, begins as more of a relatable young man in his own right, as we will see in the earlier stories below, and becomes increasingly disembodied, shimmering in and out of rooms.

The core elements, however, remain the same throughout the stories and along the years. As stated by Laura White, Wodehouse's is "a recombinatory genius" (White, 1994: 127), and we can expect his work to consist of skilled variations on the same constituent parts.

"Jeeves and the Impending Doom"[100]

Perhaps the story whose narrative theme is the clearest, beginning with its title, is "Jeeves and the Impending Doom", included in the *Very Good, Jeeves* (1930) short-story collection. This particular story is almost completely devoid of the romantic element. Its two main narrative arcs are, firstly: at Woollam Chersey, Bingo Little, Bertie Wooster's friend who is more dunderheaded than even he, is struggling against all odds to maintain his position as the tutor of young Thomas, the son of Bertie's Aunt Agatha. Secondly: having recently arrived at Woollam Chersey, Bertie is forced to be on his best behaviour and abstain from drinking and smoking in order to impress Mr. Filmer, a Cabinet Minister and guest of Aunt Agatha's, for reasons unknown. The mere prospect of the ordeal of visiting his aunt in the countryside sends Bertie into despair:

> It was the morning of the day on which I was slated to pop down to my Aunt Agatha's place at Woollam Chersey in the county of Herts for a visit of three solid weeks; and, as I seated myself at the breakfast table, I don't mind confessing that the heart was

[100] Originally published in 1926.

> singularly heavy. We Woosters are men of iron, but beneath my intrepid exterior at that moment there lurked a nameless dread. (Wodehouse, 2008k: 15)

The excerpt contains at least four clichés, from the more pseudo-literary "nameless dread", to the use of "heavy heart", "intrepid exterior" and "men of iron" – all used in order to convey comic exaggeration both of Bertie's qualities and the terror before him. Aunt Agatha, whom Bertie often describes as the kind of person that "chews broken bottles and kills rats with her teeth" (Wodehouse, 2008g: 2), is typically critical of Bertie's lifestyle, dubbing him a "vapid and frivolous wastrel" (Wodehouse, 2008k: 18). The reader may have an inkling of Aunt Agatha's motives in having Bertie "giving up smoking (…) and all that is suggestive of the bar, the billiard room, and the stage door" (*ibid.*) in order to present himself favourably to a stern Cabinet Minister, but the matter is, as usual, not clear to Bertie.

The second narrative arc emerges when, upon finding out that Bertie is coming to Woollam Chersey, Bingo Little asks him, mystifyingly, to pretend that they do not know each other. On thin ice with Aunt Agatha since failing to supervise Cousin Thomas, who has recently been caught smoking in the shrubbery, Bingo believes that if Aunt Agatha discovers that he is friends with a wastrel such as Bertie he will surely be fired. Ordinarily without financial needs, owing to his wealthy author wife Rosie M. Banks, Bingo had recently been left on his own to fend for himself and feed his Pekingese, his wife having gone on a tour of America. Bolstered by a substantial allowance provided by his wife, Bingo immediately fritters it away at the races. In order to keep himself and the Pekingese alive and preserve matrimonial bliss, Bingo must keep his newfound job until his wife returns.

Ultimately, for the sake of a friend and a relative – neither of them very appreciative – and standing apparently nothing to gain, Bertie must avoid being himself. He must sacrifice his true nature and preferred habits in order to fit in society. This he attempts to do

> what with the agony of missing the life-giving cocktail before dinner; the painful necessity of being obliged, every time I wanted a quiet cigarette, to lie on the floor in my bedroom and puff the smoke up the chimney; the constant discomfort of meeting Aunt Agatha round unexpected corners. (Wodehouse, 2008k: 22)

At one point, learning that Mr. Filmer was the man who had caught Cousin Thomas smoking, and that the latter is now planning a revenge on the former, Bertie is distressed to see Bingo absorbed in a game of tennis in carefree fashion rather than look out for his and Bertie's now common interest: not to get on Aunt Agatha's bad side by displeasing Mr. Filmer. The two narrative arcs begin to converge. At this point, fearing that Bingo Little will soon lose his job and he himself will be harangued by his intimidating aunt, Bertie finds himself reflecting on Life, in a quote already much reproduced in this thesis, but which is central to this story and the saga on the whole:

> [A]s I dressed for dinner that night, I was conscious of an impending doom.
> 'Jeeves,' I said, 'have you ever pondered on Life?"
> 'From time to time, sir, in my leisure moments.'
> 'Grim, isn't it, what?'
> 'Grim, sir?'
> 'I mean to say, the difference between things as they look and things as they are.'
> 'The trousers perhaps a half-inch higher, sire. A very slight adjustment of the braces will effect the necessary alteration. You were saying, sir? (Wodehouse, 2008k: 26)

Jeeves is notoriously unconcerned. As we have seen above, he shifts the focus from Bertie's existentialist despair to literality and to the practicalities of social demands, as insignificant a thing as trousers. Bertie expects a life full of sweetness and light but, presented with a setback, is immediately taken aback by the sense of an impending doom, of the incongruity

between what he expects and the grim hand that he is dealt[101]. Jeeves' answer is to an extent a deferral: it resorts to Jeeves' comically excessive concern over clothes and social norms in general, as pointed out by Macdonald, in order to provide a humorous descending incongruity that restates the pragmatic, rather than idealistic side of life. But this is simultaneously an answer to Bertie's question: there are incongruities that can be actively corrected – pragmatic ones, namely sartorial, and others, namely existential, that cannot. The rest of the story provides a further answer to this conundrum born out of an impending doom that one is apparently helpless to evade. At this point in the narrative the most likely pathway to doom consists of the lingering spectre of the actions of Cousin Thomas, who seeks revenge. Jeeves subsequently learns that Thomas is, in an intertextual vein, planning on modelling his conduct on Captain Flint, from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883). This alarms Bertie, but Jeeves appears to be waiting for the right opportunity to strike, returning again to pragmatic matters:

> 'We can but wait and see, sir. The tie, if I might suggest it, sir, a shade more tightly knotted. One aims at the perfect butterfly effect. If you will permit me—
> 'What do ties matter, Jeeves, at a time like this? Do you realize that Mr Little's domestic happiness is hanging in the scale?
> 'There is no time, sir, at which ties do not matter.' (Wodehouse, 2008k: 27)

Jeeves' reply is both a comic take on his own conventional rigidity in the face of bigger issues and illustrative of the importance of nevertheless carrying on with what we can actually change. When Mr. Filmer disappears, Jeeves quickly discovers that he is still at Woollam Chersey, but stranded on a small island in a nearby lake, having rowed there but subsequently been marooned by Cousin Thomas in his attempt to emulate Captain Flint.

[101] The idiom "sweetness and light" was apparently first coined by Jonathan Swift in his satirical poem "Battle of the Books" (1704), but was later popularized by cultural critic Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*: *An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (1869).

Bertie subsequently goes on a mock-epic adventure, ironically modelling his own conduct – as he climbs up a wall and onto a roof to escape an aggressive swan – on "the lad who bore 'mid snow and ice the banner with the strange device 'Excelsior!'" (Wodehouse, 2008k: 32)[102]. Excelsior meaning both "upwards and onwards" and "higher" in Latin, Wodehouse is playing with the heroic tone of Longfellow's poem by, once again, bringing it down to its literality – literally ascending as he, frightened by a swan, climbs up a wall. On top of the roof of a building called The Octagon, where Mr. Filmer is also taking refuge from the swan, the two men share a brief moment of bonding about their recent experience before Filmer returns to his stiff, sober disposition. Jeeves shows up in the nick of time and manages to dispose of the swan, and Filmer is left with the distinct feeling that his boat was set adrift by Cousin Thomas. Bertie worries over Bingo's future marital bliss, but Jeeves once more turns the matter on its head: he convinces Filmer that Bertie is a frivolous young man prone to pranks, and that he most likely was the one who set the boat adrift. Hearing of this, Bertie is happy for Bingo but concerned about himself. Jeeves' plan, however, ultimately had more positive consequences than Bertie anticipated: by laying the blame on Bertie, he has ruined his reputation with Mr. Filmer. It is then revealed that Aunt Agatha intended Bertie to secure gainful employment as Mr. Filmer's secretary all along. By the end of the narrative, Bingo Little has retained his job, Aunt Agatha – who is intolerant of her nephew and wishes Bertie to become someone who he is not – has failed in her mission, Mr. Filmer has gotten what is probably a much deserved, temporary tonic for his single-mindedness, and Bertie has avoided being forced to accept, out of a sense of duty, inappropriate employment: "No, sir.

[102] Curiously, this is another of Wodehouse's slight misquotations that, if not intentional, indicates that he often relied merely on his memory for his references. The original reads: A *youth*, who bore, 'mid snow and ice/A banner with the strange device,/Excelsior!" (Longfellow, 1906: 42, my italics).

I fancy you would not have found it agreeable. Mr. Filmer is scarcely a congenial companion for you" (Wodehouse, 2008k: 40). Inappropriate, that is, because Bertie is simply not suited to take on important, bureaucratic responsibilities, nor to be within the grasp of a rigid character such as a teetotalling cabinet minister appears to be. Perhaps, not even to be employed to begin with. Jeeves then advises Bertie to climb down a nearby water pipe and escape Aunt Agatha's estate in order to avoid her wrath and remain free. The ending is one where we are allowed to imagine Bertie going on towards a happy future – after trials and tribulations, a new beginning.

But the narrative itself seems to edge slowly, of its own, towards this purpose. Jeeves is of course the reason why Bertie is delivered to safety, but even then the coincidences are too many. The authorial hand distinctly provides the patient Jeeves with the happy coincidences that Bertie would only see as more trouble, and leaves them for him to manipulate in everyone's favour. Bingo Little's presence at Woollam Chersey imposes an additional demand on Bertie and his incompetence makes for added trouble, but it is the very fact that he failed to supervise Cousin Thomas that allowed Jeeves to exploit the situation in order to get Bertie out of Mr. Filmer's grasp. The downside, of course, is that Bertie must take responsibility for a misdeed he is not responsible for, and must continue to be seen by Aunt Agatha as a wastrel. The end of the narrative, with its promise of escape, is a regular motif in the Jeeves saga. While Bertie has a code which he must uphold and which makes his actions predictable – he cannot let a pal down nor say "no" to a lady – he appears to chafe in society. In anything but light-hearted company, such as that which he can find in the Drones Club, he is ill at ease due to the obligations imposed upon him. The fact that he follows his own peculiar, public-school-influenced moral code appears to lead him to both find company difficult to the point of hoping for escape, and – through the machinations of

Jeeves – to earn that escape after what is ultimately a job well done. As alluded to before, Bertie is in a sense the comic *pharmakos* who sacrifices himself to win nothing but a return to his former peaceful frame of mind, although never to the point where his freedom is excessively suppressed. He is only permanently and slightly curbed by Jeeves and Jeeves's occasional whims – most of which have to do with convention.

The fact that all of the elements of this story seem to coalesce into eventual harmony allows for a glimpse into the particular comic perspective of the Jeeves saga: it is, to an extent, Providential. That is, in it the author is the architect of a Providence which, as MacDermott claims, he is aware does not function as neatly in real life, but which is revealed through how, in these narratives, staying true to oneself and mindful of others, skilfully or not, and navigating the tortuous aspects of life by dint of adaptation and light-heartedness will eventually deliver one to a state of harmony. Providence places the Bingos, Aunt Agathas and the Jeeveses in Bertie's way in order to guide him to a new beginning which is, curiously, a return to a previous state of bliss. This is an underlying theme constantly returned to, in a repetitive cycle that mirrors that of a happier Sisyphus.

"Jeeves Takes Charge"

In "Jeeves Takes Charge", from the *Carry On, Jeeves* collection, we are taken back to the past and shown how Bertie first made Jeeves' acquaintance. But more than that, we are introduced to one of the series' reoccurring dilemmas – that of the effect that Jeeves has on Bertie's life and whether he ultimately curbs Bertie's freedom. The story's opening paragraph states that very theme clearly:

> Now, touching this business of old Jeeves – my man, you know – how do we stand? Lots of people think I'm much too dependent on him. My Aunt Agatha, in fact, has even gone so far as to call him my keeper. Well, what I say is: Why not? The man's a genius. From the collar upwards he stands alone. I gave up trying to run my own affairs within a week of his coming to me. That was about half a dozen years ago. (Wodehouse, 2008c: 11)

Here Bertie accepts what he will later recurringly bristle at: not exactly Jeeves's dominance over him, but Jeeves's handling of all his problems – that is – all his responsibilities, and the indirect control that that implies. Notice too how in this story, originally published in 1916, Bertie dates his acquaintance with Jeeves to 1904. We will later see how this contributes to the saga's peculiar sense of time.

Bertie then launches into the story of why he hired Jeeves: he had been at Easeby, his Uncle Willoughby's place in Shropshire, and his previous valet Meadowes had been found stealing his silk socks and been consequently, though reluctantly, dismissed (*ibid*.). Jeeves arrives precisely on the morning after Bertie had been on the razzle: "It so happened that the night before I had been present at a rather cheery little supper, and I was feeling pretty rocky. On top of this I was trying to read a book Florence Craye had given me. (…) She was a girl with a wonderful profile, but steeped to the gills in serious purpose" (ibid.: 12). Bertie was supposed to finish that book, a volume titled "Types of Ethical Theory", by the end of that week, and it included convoluted passages which he found particularly trying:

> '*The postulate or common understanding involved in speech is certainly co-extensive, in the obligation it carries, with the social organism of which language is the instrument, and the ends of which it is an effort to subserve*.'
> All perfectly true, no doubt; but not the sort of thing to spring on a lad with a morning head. (ibid.: 12, italics in the original)

This sentence is not a Wodehousian fabrication, intended to exaggerate the excessively intricate style of certain philosophers, but an actual quotation from *Types of Ethical Theory*

(1885) by philosopher/theologian James Martineau. At this point in the narrative Bertie has two problems: a hangover and the need to please his fiancée Florence Craye by reading a particularly challenging piece of philosophy. Jeeves, "a kind of darkish sort of respectful Johnnie" with "a grave, sympathetic face, as if he, too, knew what it was to sup with the lads," then makes his entrance, "noiselessly (…) like a healing zephyr" (ibid.: 12). He proceeds to live up to that simile by immediately solving Bertie's first problem through concocting an intricate cocktail that immediately cures the latter's hangover: "[E]verything seemed suddenly to get all right. The sun shone in through the window; birds twittered in the tree-tops; and, generally speaking, *hope dawned once more*. (…) I perceived clearly that this cove was one of the world's workers, the sort no home should be without" (ibid.: 13). After working this wonder, however, Jeeves immediately states a caveat – a point where he himself is comically rigid: he had been previously employed by Florence Craye's father, but did not agree with his choice of garments at the dinner table. Lord Worplesdon, Bertie tells us, was an eccentric man who "had the worst temper in the county", and who "came down to breakfast one morning, lifted the first cover he saw, said 'Eggs! Eggs! Eggs! Damn all eggs' in an overwrought sort of voice, and instantly legged it for France, never to return"[103] (ibid.: 14). Florence, Bertie tells us, alarmingly takes after her father. Upon telling Jeeves that he is engaged to her, Jeeves appears to react reticently, and Bertie reasons that it is because "if she had a fault it was a tendency to be a bit imperious with the domestic staff" (ibid.: 14).

[103] Lord Worplesdon's absence is just one of the world-building elements of this story – like Bertie's Uncle Willoughy on whom he is supposedly financially dependent – that did not truly make the cut as the core elements of the saga began to crystalise. Worplesdon is to resurface, without any reference to his supposed lunacy, in the novel *Joy in the Morning* (1946).

Bertie subsequently receives a communication from Florence, urging him to return to Easeby immediately, where she had been visiting Bertie's Uncle in order to impress him. As he departs along with Jeeves, he notices the first inkling of a dispute with Jeeves over the suit he has decided to wear on the trip: "He didn't like the suit. I pulled myself together to assert myself. Something seemed to tell me that, unless I was jolly careful and nipped this lad in the bud, he would be starting to boss me. He had the aspect of a distinctly resolute blighter" (ibid.: 16). Bertie suitably attempts to rebel:

> Well, I wasn't going to have any of that sort of thing, by Jove! I'd seen so many cases of fellows who had become perfect slaves to their valets. (…) You have to keep these fellows in their place, don't you know. You have to work the good old iron-hand-in-the-velvet-glove wheezes. If you give them a what's-its-name, they take a thingummy (ibid.: 16).

He confronts Jeeves, who guardedly expresses his dislike of the suit, and asserts himself, but in the aftermath is confused by Jeeves' diplomacy: "I felt as if I had stepped on the place where the last stair ought to have been, but wasn't. I felt defiant, if you know what I mean, and there didn't seem anything to defy" (ibid.: 16). Here Bertie overstates the importance of his independence to such a degree, and simultaneously in such vague terms as "thingummy", that it is implied that Jeeves will have his way – and that his skills are such that he was likely right to begin with.

At Easeby, Florence unsurprisingly shows herself to be just as imperious towards Bertie as she supposedly is with the domestic staff, and orders him to do something about the finished manuscript of his Uncle's scandalous memoirs, which show an entire generation in carnivalesque light:

> ‘If half of what he has written is true (…) your uncle’s youth must have been perfectly appalling. The moment we began to read he plunged straight into a most scandalous story of how he and my father were thrown out of a music-hall in 1887!’
> (…)
> It must have been something pretty bad. It took a lot to make them chuck people out of music-halls in 1887. (ibid.: 19)[104]

Florence claims that the book is “full of stories about people one knows who are the essence of propriety to-day, but who seem to have behaved, when they were in London in the ‘eighties, in a manner that would not have been tolerated in the fo’c’sle of a whaler” (ibid. 19). Once again, and against MacDermott’s point about the black-and-white nature of the characters’ personalities, Wodehouse shows us that even his stern *senex* figures have had a raucous, rowdy youth – they too have indulged in the carnivalesque, have lived in Arcady. Bertie (and, in all likelihood, the reader), seems immediately interested in the contents of his uncle’s book, having enjoyed “Lady Carnaby’s *Memories of Eighty Interesting Years*” (ibid.: 19). Worried about her father’s reputation, however, Florence urges Bertie to steal the manuscript before it reaches the publisher, immediately showing herself to be in all things aligned with Aunt Agatha: “If you fail, I shall know that your Aunt Agatha was right when she called you a spineless invertebrate and advised me strongly not to marry you” (ibid.: 21). Bertie being put in a position where he is essentially blackmailed into stealing something, usually an object which is somehow ridiculous is, as we have seen, a constantly recurring plot trope in the saga, particularly conspicuous in the case of the silver cow creamer which is the central narrative device of *The Code of the Woosters*.

Bertie attempts to fob the job off on Edwin, Florence’s younger cousin and a paradigmatic humour: he is a Boy-Scout, and much is made by Wodehouse of his obsession

[104] This story is one of the examples of the fact that there is to an extent a Wodehouse World inhabited by his characters, and consequently of an intertextuality in that sense, too. In this case, there is a slight Blandings/Jeeves crossover when Florence Craye mentions that in the Uncle Willoughby memoirs there is “a dreadful [story] about Lord Emsworth” (ibid.: 19).

with striking off a number of acts of daily kindness from a list – it is obvious that it only matters to him that he has nominally performed them, as a boy-scout should, rather than whether or not he has truly done anyone any good. Reflecting on this personality trait, Bertie thinks: "It seemed to me that if he wanted to do a real act of kindness he would commit suicide" (ibid.: 25). Bertie balks at the task before him, and having finally done the deed one morning, having felt "from breakfast on (…) like a bag-snatcher at a railway station" (ibid.: 23), resorts yet again to literature in order to convey his apprehension: to detective novels and to Thomas Hood's *A Dream of Eugene Aram*, a poem about the real story of a murder committed by real-life Eugene Aram in 1744. Bertie compares himself to Aram himself, in particular:

> All I can recall of the actual poetry is the bit that goes:
>
> 'Tum-tum, tum-tum, tum-tumty-tum,
> I slew him, tum-tum-tum'
>
> But I recollect that the poor blighter spent much of his valuable time dumping the corpse into ponds and burying it, and what not, only to have it pop out at him again. It was about an hour after I had shoved the parcel into the drawer when I realized that I had let myself in for just the same thing. (ibid.: 25)

The comparison jars – stealing memoirs as alike to concealing a murder. Bertie's conscience is getting to him, and the looming presence of do-gooder Edwin does nothing to allay his fears. Meanwhile Uncle Willoughby begins to suspect, due to the fact that he believes the manuscript to be of no possible value to an outside person, that there is a kleptomaniac at Easeby. A moment later, Edwin tells Uncle Willoughby that Bertie stole the manuscript. He reasons that Bertie is perhaps a kleptomaniac, and compares him with A. J. Raffles, a popular gentleman thief character from the stories of E.W. Hornung: "a chap in a book who went about pinching things" (ibid.: 30). Uncle Willoughby then decides to search Bertie's room.

Jeeves opens the locked drawer where Bertie kept the manuscript, but it is empty, and Jeeves later tells Bertie he had overheard his and Florence's scheming, and decided to remove the manuscript from the drawer.

Uncle Willoughby then announces that his publisher received his manuscript that morning. Florence believes Bertie to have lacked the courage to steal and destroy the manuscript and ends their engagement, reflecting: "There was a time when I thought that, with patience, *you might be moulded into something worth while*. I see now that you are impossible!" (ibid.: 34, my italics). It is increasingly obvious to the reader, though not to Bertie, that despite her attractive profile Florence Craye is not exactly a desirable match for Bertie: she does not find Bertie worthwhile as he is, and does not respect him as a human being. Bertie asks Jeeves if he sent the manuscript to the publisher, which he confirms, arguing that Florence had exaggerated the potential effect of Sir Willoughby's recollections: "if you have ever studied psychology, sir, you will know that respectable old gentlemen are by no means averse to having it advertised that they were extremely wild in their youth", but Bertie is shocked and fires him (ibid.: 35). Jeeves takes the opportunity to speak to Bertie freely:

> In my opinion you and Lady Florence were quite unsuitably matched. Her ladyship is of a highly determined and arbitrary temperament, quite opposed to your own. (…) The opinion of the servants' hall was far from favourable to her, Her ladyship's temper caused a good deal of adverse comment among us. It was at times quite impossible. You would not have been happy, sir! (ibid.: 36)

He further adds, tellingly, that Florence's wish to mould Bertie intellectually would have been trying for Bertie:

> I have glanced at the book her ladyship gave you (…) and it is, in my opinion, quite unsuitable. You would not have enjoyed it. And I have it from her ladyship's own maid (…) that it was her intention to start you almost immediately upon Nietzsche. You would not enjoy Nietzsche, sir. He is fundamentally unsound. (ibid.: 36)

It is no surprise that Jeeves, who we will later learn favours Spinoza, is not a fan of Nietzsche. "Fundamentally unsound" is oddly appropriate, considering Nietzsche's struggles with physical and mental health. Jeeves appears to be referring to the philosopher's instability and avowal of the Dionysian side of humanity, rather than making a comprehensive statement as to the latter's worldview – in which case it would be a gross oversimplification, Nietzsche himself having been a devotee of Spinoza's work. It is not absurd to claim that not only would Nietzsche, like Martineau, be beyond Bertie's grasp, but especially considering Nietzsche's famous pronouncement that "God is Dead" and its potential effects on established convention, he would also be an unsettling influence on Bertie, one that Jeeves could not approve of. Spinoza's logical, hermetic system, however – no matter how potentially flawed, namely through its dismissal of empiricism – fits with Jeeves' worldview and the clockwork, Providential, structure of the saga's narratives. In "Philosophy with a Smile", Richard Hall argues that Jeeves' character and actions, whether intentionally on Wodehouse's part or not, are to a great extent congruent with Spinoza's philosophy. For Richard Hall, Jeeves is Spinoza's "wise man":

> These then are Jeeves' salient attributes: his fondness for Spinoza; his knowledge of psychology, which he applies advantageously to understanding others and presumably himself; his preternatural self-control; his disinterested benevolence, though not inconsistent with his welcoming events redounding to his own personal advantage, thus making it a form of enlightened moral egoism; his magnanimity as expressed in his nonjudgemental tolerance of human folly. (…) Jeeves' personality and behaviour are certainly not inconsistent with a Spinozistic regimen. Interestingly, Jeeves consistently exhibits the cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, prudence and temperance, commended alike by Aristotle, the Stoics and Spinoza. (Hall, 2016: 180-181)

Hall further convincingly clarifies Jeeves' distrust of Nietzsche:

> [T]he reason perhaps is that Spinoza is the arch-rationalist whose esteem of reason suited Jeeves' temperament, whereas Nietzsche is the arch-voluntarist who celebrated humanity's non-rational or 'passional nature' (to use William James's phrase), which undoubtedly would have appalled the hyper rational Jeeves. (…) Further, Spinoza was not a political revolutionary; he desired only that the socio-political order afford the philosopher the privilege of 'voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone', in peace and quietness. (182-183)

It stands to reason that Jeeves should mistrust a bolstering of Bertie's Dionysian man-about-town side potentially provided by Nietzsche – Jeeves' role is in fact to counterbalance yet allow for Bertie's good-natured drone side, not to exacerbate his carnivalesque indulgence or his awareness of the impending doom. A master at allaying hangovers, Jeeves is of course not generally opposed to revelling, but a balance must be achieved.

The following day, Bertie finds that he has miraculously recovered from the emotional blow of being rejected by Florence, and half-wonders if Jeeves had not been right. He once more peruses Martineau's *Types of Ethical Theory* and concludes: "Well – I mean to say – what? And Nietzsche, from all accounts, a lot worse than that!" (ibid.: 37). *Types of Ethical Theory* is not only unsuitable for Bertie due to the author's intricate style – it is also unsuitable because, as Richard Hall observes, in conjunction with Nietzsche they are contradictory recommendations that illustrate Florence Craye's character: professedly modern and intellectual, but ultimately status-obsessed, conservative, domineering, and superficial. Moulding Bertie by making him read both Martineau and Nietzsche is already somewhat contradictory: the former is a religious conservative and the latter far from it. That Craye is a mixture of the moralistic attitude of Martineau and the intensity of Nietzsche may not be absurd, but she is also quite clearly an intellectual dilettante, more interested in her image as an intellectual than in actually being one (Hall, 2016: 182). This will become even clearer in the analysis of *Joy in the Morning* (1946) below.

Ultimately relieved at the turn of events, Bertie re-hires Jeeves, and again asks him about the suit he appeared to dislike earlier in the story. The latter confirms his dislike, and when Bertie says the tailor is supposed to be one of the best men in London, replies: "I am saying nothing against his moral character, sir" (ibid.: 38). Bertie is wary, and weighs his options one more time, in the first example of a reflection that will constantly reemerge throughout the saga:

> I hesitated a bit. I had a feeling I was passing into this chappie's clutches, and that if I gave in now I should become just like poor old Aubrey Fothergill, unable to call my soul my own. On the other hand, this was obviously a cove of rare intelligence, and it would be a comfort in a lot of ways to have him doing the thinking for me. I made up my mind. (ibid.: 38).

Bertie decides to part with his suit, and Jeeves looks at him "like a father gazing tenderly at the wayward child," (ibid.: 38) announcing that he had already given it to the under-gardener the previous night, a liberty which he has clearly taken because he was so sure it would later be consented to. Bertie and Jeeves' relationship is thus established, Jeeves ultimately solving the two dooms that Bertie faces in this narrative – one immediate, the hangover, and one looming. This appears at first to be the situation involving the manuscript, but is ultimately revealed to be Bertie's engagement to Florence Craye, which Jeeves rightly dashes. Without benefitting from Jeeves' intellect, Bertie would be liable to be constantly at another's service – fiancée, wife, aunt or friend – and then truly unable to call his soul his own. With Jeeves as a providential guardian angel of sorts, though not without his own comic rigidity, Bertie is left somewhat free to roam with only the occasional sartorial concession, or at times the occasional travel destination favoured by Jeeves[105]. His free will, inevitably limited as it

[105] In *Much Obliged, Jeeves* (1971), the following exchange takes place:

always is, by life in society, is thus preserved to the utmost degree possible. That is, Bertie is allowed to relish in his child-like nature, his enjoyment of both peace and quiet and the carnivalesque, and his willingness to help others – all of this without being ceaselessly bound by them, as his acquiescing nature would dictate.

Were Bertie a flesh and blood individual we might find this an undesirable outcome – first at the mere idea of the financial impossibility for a valet in our times, and secondly the thought that someone would relinquish so vital an aspect of his freedom as "running his affairs" for extra comfort and what that might entail. Above all, we might find the idea of having someone "do the thinking" for us abhorrent. Yet Bertie can be argued to have an innate goodness that cannot survive the social masquerade unaided. Jeeves is there for the Providential support that such a guileless, almost infantile goodness requires. In that sense, preserving Bertie is again preserving childhood to a degree – to the degree of a sense of wonder, enthusiasm and goodness.

"The Aunt and the Sluggard"[106]

The theme of Providence becomes more salient in "The Aunt and the Sluggard". But yet again, its expression is nuanced. Temporarily in New York, Bertie has an American friend who lives in the countryside in Long Island – Rockmeteller Todd. As with Bingo in "Jeeves and the Impending Doom", Bertie is roped into disentangling Todd from his

"'How right you were,' she said, 'when you told me once that you had faith in your star. I've lost count of the number of times you've been definitely headed for the altar with apparently no hope of evading the firing squad, and every time something has happened which enabled you to wriggle out of it. It's uncanny'
She would, I think, have gone deeper into the matter, for already she had begun to pay a marked tribute to my guardian angel, who, she said, plainly knew his job from soup to nuts, but at this moment Seppings appeared and asked her if she would have a word with Jeeves, and she went out to have it" (Wodehouse, 2008h: 191-192). The guardian angel, one can easily conclude, is Jeeves.

[106] Originally published in 1916.

troubles, and begins by letting the reader know that he truly thought that this time Jeeves would let him down – but not quite. Todd is an idle poet who appears to write Whitmanesque poetry for literary journals merely so that he can afford to spend time "sit[ting] on a fence, watching a worm and wondering what on earth it [is] up to, for hours at a stretch" (Wodehouse, 2008b: 107). Lofty poetry is thus seen with a jaundiced eye, although the idleness of the poet himself is not truly criticised. In addition to his poetry, Todd's future is ensured by one of his aunts, who lives somewhere in Illinois. Reflecting on this felicitous circumstance, Bertie tells the reader:

> It's a curious thing how many of my pals seem to have aunts and uncles who are their main source of supply. There is Bicky, for one with his uncle the Duke of Chiswick; Corky, who, until things went wrong, looked to Alexander Worple, the bird specialist, for sustenance. (…) These things cannot be mere coincidence. They must be meant. *What I'm driving at is that Providence seems to look after the chumps of this world; and, personally, I'm all for it*. I suppose the fact is that, having been snootered from infancy upwards by my own aunts, I like to see that it is possible for these relatives to have a better and a softer side. (Wodehouse, 2008b: 109, my italics)

The statement is heartfelt, but also a peculiar mix of the candid, the ironic and the dunderheaded. The fact that Bertie's friends of the landed gentry have wealthy relatives that provide for them is not exactly one of Nature's unexplainable coincidences, to be explained only through an act of divinity – there is a slight resemblance to the Lichtenberg joke quoted by Freud in which he wonders how it is that cats happen to so conveniently have two holes exactly where their eyes are (Freud, 2002: 51). Wodehouse is, of course, aware of this "irony", and is playing with the social and financial position of his subjects. In addition, Bertie finds his own aunts to be more of a source of tribulations rather than of income, but he is certainly well provided for, and is through his large private income and through the presence of Jeeves also one of the chumps that Providence has provided for. But once again,

Bertie loses faith in this vague, kind-hearted Providence and the narrative is fraught with comic misunderstanding.

Rockmetteller Todd is told by his aunt that she, having never been to New York and considering herself too old to enjoy the city life, will now give him an allowance on the condition that he write her regularly with details of "the gay, prismatic life of New York" (Wodehouse, 2008b 111-112). Todd, who in Bertie's view should be pleased, is not fond of city life and is immediately concerned, but Bertie suggests that Jeeves, who enjoys the New York nightlife and who demonstrates that he knows what is in vogue, should have such experiences for him and take notes. This he does, and Todd writes fantastical accounts of New York life to his aunt. The details prove so vivid, however, that the aunt comes to New York for a visit, mistakenly thinking that Todd lives at Bertie's apartment and is its owner, Jeeves being his manservant. To keep up the façade for his friend's benefit, Bertie is forced to leave the house and take up at a hotel. There, in a nod to the Stoics, he reflects on suffering:

> You know, I rather think I agree with those poet-and-philosopher Johnnies who insist that a fellow ought to be devilish pleased if he has a bit of trouble. All that stuff about being refined by suffering, you know. Suffering does give a chap a sort of broader and more sympathetic outlook. It helps you to understand other people's misfortunes if you've been through the same thing yourself. (ibid.:125)[107]

[107] "Has something befallen you? Good; then it was your portion of the universal lot, assigned to you when time began; a strand woven into your particular web, like all else that happens" (Aurelius: 34). In *The Mating Season*, Jeeves himself provides a version of this quote:

> I was endeavouring to convey my appreciation of the fact that your position is in many respects somewhat difficult, sir. But I wonder if I might call your attention to an observation of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. He said: "Does aught befall you? It is good. It is part of the destiny of the Universe ordained for you from the beginning. All that befalls you is part of the great web". Bertie's reply is that Marcus Aurelius is an ass (Wodehouse, 2008g: 41-42).

Faced with having lost his valet, his perfect omniscient nanny (Auden, 1962:144), Bertie is forced to revisit his views on Providence:

> As I stood in my lonely bedroom at the hotel, trying to tie my white tie myself, it struck me for the first time that there must be whole squads of chappies in the world who had to get along without a man to look after them. I'd always thought of Jeeves as a kind of natural phenomenon; but by Jove! Of course, when you come to think of it, there must be quite a lot of fellows who have to press their own clothes themselves, and haven't got anybody to bring them tea in the morning, and so on. It was rather a solemn thought, don't you know. I mean to say, ever since then I've been able to appreciate the frightful privations the poor have to stick. (ibid.: 125)

The tone is wholly unironic on Bertie's part, and the point made is a good one, yet the effect is twofold and a certain irony comes through: Bertie is genuinely empathetic but foolish in his belief that he can now appreciate how the poor must feel by being temporarily relieved of his manservant and forced to dress himself at a hotel. The takeaway is that he can never fully understand, but he nevertheless has a point, which is comically jarring.

Yet the narrative bears his original belief out. A motif which is subtly introduced early in the story, when Bertie compares Todd's dislike of New York to that of "Jimmy Mundy, the reformer bloke" (*ibid.:* 112), most likely a parody of Anti-Saloon leader Wayne Wheeler, ends up providing a solution in the end. When Bertie is finally adjusting to his new life out of his apartment and without Jeeves, foraying once again into New York's cabaret life, Todd's aunt begins to behave differently, making Todd suspicious. It is then revealed that she has changed her mind about New York city and now considers it an unholy Sodom, precisely after stumbling upon one of Jimmy Mundy's speeches due to Jeeves, who deliberately sends her off in a cab to one of his meetings rather than to a cabaret. Jeeves's justification is that he modelled his actions on those of his own aunt, who had an obsession with spending her families' money riding hansom cabs back and forth. His family found that

enlisting a preacher to talk to this aunt about "higher" things diverted her from her obsession. "Higher things" thus become nothing more than a pragmatic solution to curb obsessive rigidity. Ultimately, neither Jimmy Mundy's obsession with temperance nor Todd's aunt's obsession with New York are allowed full vent, nor are they allowed to oppress Bertie or Jeeves' taste for nightlife or Todd's taste for the country. Todd's aunt, desirous to save her nephew from perdition, begs him, not knowing how much he will appreciate it, to go back to the country and stay away from the city. The future of Rockmeteller Todd is ensured.

"Jeeves and the Unbidden Guest"[108]

"Jeeves and the Unbidden Guest", still set in New York City, continues to explicitly state the theme of the impending doom, this time by attempting to resort to intertextual authority:

> I'm not absolutely certain of my facts, but I rather fancy it's Shakespeare – or, if not, it's some equally brainy bird – who says that it's always just when a fellow is feeling particularly braced with things in general that Fate sneaks up behind him with the bit of lead piping. And what I'm driving at is that the man is perfectly right. Take, for instance, the business of Lady Malvern and her son Wilmot. That was one of the scaliest affairs I was ever mixed up with, and a moment before they came into my life I was just thinking how thoroughly all right everything was. (Jeeves, 2008b: 60)

In this particular case we are reintroduced to the reoccurring feud between Bertie and Jeeves in the matter of wardrobe. Bertie, who had been frustrated by giving in to Jeeves' wardrobe suggestions as of late, becoming almost a "dashed serf" (*ibid*.: 60), is feeling in fine fettle because he has finally asserted himself before Jeeves on the matter of a hat – The Broadway Special, that he was keen on and of which Jeeves disapproved. He is consequently feeling

[108] Originally published in 1916.

"pretty manly and independent" (*ibid*.: 61). The feud is ongoing, and Bertie asserts himself further on the matter of a pink tie, when Lady Malvern appears, a friend of Aunt Agatha's and a like-minded woman: "She made me feel as if I were ten years old and had been brought into the drawing-room in my Sunday clothes to say how-d'you-do" (*ibid*.: 64). Lady Malvern is revealed to be of a not only imperious but also dismissive nature – a purported intellectual who believes she can write a book about the entirety of the United States after a month-long-tour:

> No doubt you read my book, 'India and the Indians'? My publishers are anxious for me to write a companion volume on the United States. I shall not be able to spend more than a month in the country, as I have to get back for the season, but a month should be able. I was less than a month in India, and my dear friend Sir Roger Cremone wrote his 'America from Within' after a stay of only two weeks. (ibid.: 65)

Lady Malvern (and Sir Roger Cremone) is thus comes across as vain rather than competent, and, while Wodehouse is often accused of being anti-intellectual, it appears obvious that what is being lampooned here is false-intellectuality and poor ethnography – the idea that one can truly portray an entire nation alien to oneself after a cursory tour.

Having been told by Aunt Agatha that he would do anything to be of service, Lady Malvern demands that Bertie put up her son, Motty, who at twenty-three appears to have been unable to develop a personality while under his mother's wing. Lady Malvern describes him as a vegetarian, a teetotaller and "a home bird" (ibid: 66). Bertie feels cornered into this arrangement, not wanting to be harangued by Aunt Agatha – who is as usual displeased about one of Bertie's previous actions – upon his return to England. Jeeves, who is upset about the tie – among other squabbles –, appears unwilling to help Bertie. Quickly, we discover that in his mother's absence, Motty proves himself to be a rakehell who intends on relishing in his freedom and soaking up New York life, getting immediately drunk on his

first night out, paraphrasing Ecclesiastes 11:9 as his motto: "Young man, rejoice in thy youth! Tra-la! What ho!" (ibid.: 71). Motty's repression at the hands of his mother makes him taxing company for Bertie, who understands his predicament but is afraid that his Aunt Agatha will assume that he has led Motty astray:

> In a way, I couldn't help sympathising with the chap. He had about four weeks to have the good time that ought to have been spread over ten years, and I didn't wonder at his wanting to be pretty busy. I should have been just the same in his place. Still, there was no denying that it was a bit thick. (…) I couldn't get rid of the feeling that, sooner or later, I was the lad who was scheduled to get it behind the ear. (ibid: 72).

Bertie is then torn between sympathising with Motty and his obligations towards Aunt Agatha. Over the course of a month, Motty continues to carry on in carnivalesque fashion, attempting to make up for lost time, imperilling Bertie's position. Jeeves, still upset at Bertie's sartorial choices, does not appear to offer sympathy nor resolution. Bertie leaves New York for a breath of fresh air only to find out that in his absence, Motty has been imprisoned and Jeeves has done nothing to prevent it. Lady Malvern returns sooner than anticipated, having unexpectedly seen Motty carrying out hard-labour in a prison which she was visiting for sociological purposes. Jeeves, however, saves the day by claiming that Motty had been imprisoned not due to Bertie's neglect, but due to his own wish to observe America from within in order to help his mother. Lady Malvern is convinced, Motty is allowed to rejoice in his youth, and Bertie is liberated from his Aunt Agatha's wrath. To reward Jeeves' actions and show him that he appreciates his help, he decides to give in on the matter of the pink tie and the Broadway Special Hat.

In this story the second world of the carnivalesque as relief from the pressures of social life is an evident *leitmotif*: Motty is behaving in an unhinged way to correct the lack of amusement and exploration in the twenty-three years of his life. But it is not only Motty's

free will that is at stake, but Bertie's. In this as in other narratives, he feels bound by Jeeves' hold on matters of attire, musical instruments and choice of holiday locations. But Jeeves is no ordinary valet, and the slight extra demands that he makes are compensated by the role he performs in rescuing Bertie from trouble. In this case, however, Jeeves intercedes for Bertie out of sheer interest in his well-being. No concessions are made before Jeeves finds a way to get Motty arrested and conveniently frames his arrest as charity on Motty's part, thus putting an end to his spree and keeping Bertie out of trouble. The focus is on Jeeves' concern for Bertie's wellbeing as well as Bertie's gratitude for his role in staving off the impending doom. In other narratives, this give-and-take can be more tortuous, and as in the previous tale, Jeeves will perhaps anticipate his reward before Bertie acknowledges a job well done, or conveniently manipulate Bertie in order to ultimately get his way. The aforementioned story "Bertie Changes His Mind" is an example in which this is clear. Through Jeeves' narration, we see his motivations through a microscope, and they acquire a realism that takes away from the light-heartedness. Although authors like Kristin Thompson advise us not to ignore this story as it is an important one-off and sheds light on the motivations of Jeeves, I would argue that the shift in narrative style unbalances the power dynamic to a degree that makes Jeeves unnecessarily sinister and contrasts with his usual appearances.

"Jeeves and the Yule-tide Spirit"[109]

In "Jeeves and the Yule-tide Spirit", Bertie begins the narrative by letting Jeeves down. He intends to spend the Christmas season at Skeldings Hall at the invitation of Lady Wickham, in whose daughter, Bobbie Wickham, Bertie is romantically interested, instead of

[109] Originally published in 1927.

visiting Monte Carlo, in accordance with Jeeves' wishes. As in "Jeeves Takes Charge", a romantic element is thus present in this story – but only to an extent. Bertie is also interested in the presence of Tuppy Glossop at Skeldings, wishing to secure revenge from a prank Tuppy had pulled on him at the Drones Club – making him drop into a pool in his suit to win a bet. The practical joke, of course, is a common plot motif dating back, as such, at the very least to *commedia dell'arte*[110]. After this change of plans Jeeves appears to immediately grow colder, and Bertie cannot seem to place this newfound coldness: "You know, every now and then I can't help feeling that Jeeves is losing his grip. In his prime it would have been with him the work of a moment to have told Aunt Agatha that I was not at home. I gave him one of those reproachful glances, and took the machine" (*ibid.*: 64). Via telephone, Aunt Agatha immediately demands that Bertie should behave himself at Skeldings, Lady Wickham being her friend, and that he should impress Sir Roderick Glossop, a brain specialist who due to previous happenings ("Sir Roderick Comes to Lunch") believes Bertie to be insane. Bertie has to navigate all of this in order to obtain his revenge against Tuppy and the love of Bobbie Wickham. Jeeves, however, disapproves of Bobbie, finding her frivolous, and consequently an unsuitable match for Bertie, commenting that Bobbie would require a husband with "a commanding personality and a considerable strength of character" (*ibid.*: 71). Bertie, he appears to think, (rightly) lacks these qualities. As described in *Thank You, Jeeves*, Jeeves finds Bertie mentally negligible, but he concludes this observation by stating that he also has a heart of gold (Wodehouse, 2003: 82). It is perhaps also interesting

[110] "As Kathleen M. Lea remarks in her classic study of the sixteenth-century Italian *commedia dell'arte*, the most fundamental of plots is the single *burla* or practical joke: and one step beyond that is a plot made up of a string of them, connected by the common thread of the same type-characters and their motivations. Thus, one clown may merely say to another, 'Let's do the old man', or 'Let's do him again,' and the farce will move forward with either a repetition, or perhaps an inversion" (Davis, 2001:6). In Wodehouse's work, the equivalent would be, according to Usborne, the urge of characters like Psmith or Bobbie Wickham to "start something" (Usborne, 1988: 129).

to observe that, compared to Jeeves and other members of the domestic staff in the saga, particularly butlers, Bertie does come across as mentally negligible, but not exactly when compared to his peers, who are almost uniformly clueless.

In order to obtain revenge against Tuppy, Bertie asks Jeeves where Tuppy's room is and decides to go and puncture his hot water bottle. But he is ultimately caught, tellingly reflecting: "You know, sometimes it seems to me as if Fate were going out of its way to such an extent to snooter you that *you wonder if it's worth while continuing to struggle*" (*ibid.*: 77, my italics). The exaggeration of such a reaction to a disappointingly moist bed is inherently comic, but still comes across as having a kernel of truth. As it turns out, Bertie succeeded in puncturing the hot water bottle not of Tuppy Glossop, but of his father, Roderick Glossop. Bertie consequently feels, echoing Kipling, like the "toad under the harrow" (ibid.: 79) – who knows "exactly where each tooth-point goes" (Kipling, 1899: 149).

Roderick Glossop decides to take Bertie's room as retribution, leaving Bertie to sleep in the former's wet bed. Learning later that Jeeves deliberately deceived him about Roderick Glossop changing rooms with his nephew Tuppy, Bertie is dismayed by "the blackness of his treachery" (*ibid.*: 81). Yet it is quickly revealed that Jeeves' plan was meant to prevent Roderick Glossop and Aunt Agatha's plans for Bertie to wed his daughter Honoria, in everything his opposite: "a ghastly dynamic exhibit who read[s] Nietzsche and ha[s] a laugh like waves breaking on a stern and rock-bound coast" (*ibid.*: 65) – yet another unsuitable match for the idle, malleable Bertie. In addition, Tuppy had also been told by Bobbie Wickham to puncture Bertie's hot water bottle, and heads towards Bertie's room. As we know, it was Roderick Glossop, however, not Bertie who was in Bertie's room, and after being awakened by Tuppy he is beyond a doubt convinced that Bertie is insane and not a

match for his daughter. The episode also reveals what, in Jeeves' words, is Bobbie's "keen sense of humour", but which Bertie seems only as double-crossing, leading him to pronounce his love for Bobbie dead.

To close the narrative, Jeeves suggests that Bertie escape Skeldings in order to avoid the wrath of his Aunt Agatha. But Bertie is concerned that in England he will always be in his aunt's reach. Jeeves then reveals that he had never cancelled the cruise to Monte Carlo, and suggests that they return to their original plan:

> I think the best plan, sir, would be for you to leave England, which is not pleasant at this time of the year, for some little while. I would not take the liberty of dictating your movements sir, but as you already have accommodation engaged on the Blue Train for Monte Carlo for the day after to-morrow—. (*ibid.*: 86)

Seeing no other alternative, Bertie gratefully accepts.

Unlike in "Jeeves and the Unbidden Guest", in this narrative Jeeves manoeuvres events in order to apparently frustrate Bertie, but ultimately to bring about a state of things where the best choice for all involved is also to do what Jeeves wants. Bertie is unaware of this dimension, but he is also generally not always aware that Jeeves is working for his benefit: "All the while I supposed he had been landing me in the soup, he had really been steering me away from it" (*ibid.*: 83). It is no surprise to the reader that Bertie would find Christmas in England difficult, and perhaps not even that Bobbie Wickham would be an unsuitable match. After all, Christmas would imply that Bertie be in the environs of relatives in the vein of Aunt Agatha, and his Code would certainly provide for a number of difficult situations that a trip to Monte Carlo would certainly avoid. The takeaway is that Jeeves, like an omniscient deity of sorts, is working in the background to bring about harmony although Bertie often lacks the ability to understand his mysterious ways.

"The Episode of the Dog Mcintosh"[111]

"I was jerked from the dreamless by a sound like the rolling of distant thunder; and, the mists of sleep clearing away, was enabled to diagnose this and trace it to its source. It was my Aunt Agatha's dog, McIntosh, scratching at the door" (Wodehouse, 2008k: 112). The story begins as Aunt Agatha's Aberdeen Terrier, McIntosh, intrudes on Bertie's sleep – his moment of peace. The dog is then revealed to have done the same thing every day for the five preceding weeks. We learn that Bertie has been dogsitting and that, that evening, it will be time for Aunt Agatha to retrieve her pet. Should anything happen in the meantime, it would be a disaster. Aunt Agatha communicates her return via letter. A second letter, however, announces a second narrative arc that will intrude on the first: Bobbie Wickham – Bertie's impish former love interest of whom Jeeves disapproves – asks Bertie to have her and two of her friends over for lunch. Bertie asks Jeeves to prepare lunch, meanwhile alluding mistakenly to the lyrics of the popular 19th century Christmas Carol "Good King Wenceslas": "bring me fish and bring me fowl", rather than bring me flesh and bring me wine – which Jeeves corrects (Wodehouse, 2008k: 114). Good King Wenceslas was translated into English from the original Czech by Thomas Neale, and the lyrics dwell on the conduct of 10th century Saint Wenceslaus, who went a long distance to give alms to a poor man during the Feast of Stephen – a story then, of generosity and self-sacrifice that provides a tongue-in-cheek motif for Bertie's conduct towards Wickham – one of parodical saintliness.

[111] Originally published as "The Borrowed Dog" (1929).

Bertie then provides the actual details of the contents of the repast as per Wickham's instructions. Due to her personality and due to the specific inclusion of certain foods such as roly-poly pudding and "plenty of chocolates with that gooey stuff in the middle" (*ibid*.: 114), we quickly realise that there is something peculiar about this lunch. Bertie then gives us details about Wickham, reminding us of her red hair and of Jeeves' reticence towards her, providing a contemporary physical comparison to Clara Bow (1905-1965) and alerting the reader to the fact that her mother, who resembles Aunt Agatha in appearance, is a writer of "novels which, I believe, command a ready sale among those who like their literature pretty sloppy" (*ibid.*: 115).

Wickham arrives for lunch and reveals that her guests are a theatrical producer from America and his young son, whom she intends to impress because she wants to please her mother, who has written a new play, and with whom she is not in good standing recently owing to her rakehell lifestyle. This is a lifestyle, we are told, that includes having recently totalled a car. The producer Wickham invited to lunch is revealed to be Mr. Blumenfeld, who first appears in the story "The Startling Dressiness of a Lift Attendant", a part of *The Inimitable Jeeves*, analysed below. Blumenfeld believes that his son has a sixth sense for the theatre and is about as smart as the average audience member. He relies on him to make business decisions in every production. Wickham intends to read the play to both of them and impress the child. Bertie, recalling that the child often tells people that they have a face like a fish, comments that he will clump him on the head if he does so. Jeeves suggests that Bertie should perhaps abscond during lunch to avoid unpleasantness and Bertie escapes, brushing past Blumenfeld and the child on his way out. Due to this behaviour, Blumenfeld thereafter suspects that Bertie is insane.

After the lunch, Wickham reveals to Bertie that she has given the child the dog McIntosh to secure his approval – with success. Bertie is immediately worried about Aunt Agatha, but does not want to get Wickham in trouble by demanding the dog be returned, as Jeeves suggests, owing to *noblesse oblige*: "No, Jeeves,' I said. 'But if you can think of some way by which I can oil privily into the suite and sneak the animal out of it without causing any hard feelings, spill it" (ibid.: 124). This illustrates, once again, that Bertie's code may be rigid, but can only be allowed to truly operate if Jeeves' well-intentioned rule-bending is put in place – a rule-bending that Bertie is at times only too ready to accept, or even suggest. Jeeves suitably concocts a scheme whereby Bertie is to sprinkle his trousers with aniseed, a dog-snatcher trick of the trade, and sneak into Blumenfeld's hotel room while they are out in order to abscond with the dog. Upon hearing this plan Bertie comments:

> You know, whatever you may say against old Jeeves – and I, for one, have never wavered in my opinion that his views on shirts for evening wear are hidebound and reactionary to a degree – you've got to admit that the man can plan a campaign. Napoleon could have taken his correspondence course. (*ibid.*: 126)

Bertie once more sums up the reason why Jeeves remains at his employ – while comically rigid on the subject of clothes, he is undeniably and profitably efficient.

Bertie successfully recovers McIntosh, but immediately realises he has still put Bobbie Wickham in danger, in what perhaps is a rare questionable plot point. Blumenfeld then calls at Bertie's flat. Jeeves advises Bertie to hide behind the settee. As Blumenfeld arrives, furious and armed with accusations of dog-theft against Bertie, he detects a smell of aniseed. Jeeves reveals that Bertie sprinkles it on his trousers:

> "What on earth does he do that for?'

> ‘I could not say, sir. Mr Wooster’s motives are always somewhat hard to follow. He is eccentric.’
> ‘Eccentric? He must be a loony.’
> ‘Yes, sir.’
> ‘You mean he is?’
> ‘Yes, sir!’
> There was a pause. A long one.
> ‘Oh?’ said old Blumenfeld, and it seemed to me that a good deal of what you might call the vim had gone out of his voice.
> He paused again.
> ‘Not dangerous?’
> ‘Yes, sir, when roused” (ibid.: 131)

Jeeves then convinces Blumenfeld that Bertie, insane as he is, is inexplicably enraged by fat people, like Blumenfeld, and had not been present at lunch for fear of not controlling himself. Jeeves mentions that Bertie is at that very moment napping behind the settee, which drives Blumenfeld from the premises, fearful of this violent eccentric. He tells Bertie that he had told Miss Wickham to tip Blumenfeld off, thus leaving her in good standing with him, and has just given Blumenfeld a substitute dog. Bertie is elated:

> Owing solely to the fact that your head bulges in unexpected spots, thus enabling you to do about twice as much bright thinking in any given time as any other two men in existence, happiness, you might say, reigns supreme. Aunt Agatha is on velvet, I am on velvet, the Wickhams, mother and daughter, are on velvet, the Blumenfelds, father and son, are on velvet. *As far as the eye can reach, a solid mass of humanity, owing to you, all on velvet*. (ibid.: 133, my italics)

This particular narrative sheds light on what will later become a predominant tendency in Wodehouse’s narratives – even the villain who is foiled is never foiled critically. Aunt Agatha occasionally gets her comeuppance and is never satisfied in changing Bertie’s lifestyle, but is more and more excluded from the narrative, so as to generally stand for authority, oppressiveness and intimidation. She is dehumanised, in that sense – a remote threat of an impending doom. In this story, even she is to be satisfied, and Bertie is allowed to face her at his ease:

> "I straightened the tie. I pulled down the waistcoat. I shot the cuffs. I felt absolutely all-righto.
> 'Lead me to her,' I said." (ibid.: 134)

"Indian Summer of an Uncle"[112]

In this short story, the main narrative revolves chiefly around romantic love, although as usual, keeping Bertie as an outsider. Bertie's Uncle George, Aunt Agatha's brother and a bachelor getting on in years, finds himself suddenly in love with a waitress at his club. Jeeves describes the situation as that of an Indian Summer: "a kind of temporarily renewed youth" (ibid.: 247), in a faint evocation of the manic old men of Aristophanes. When Bertie has to apprise his Aunt Agatha of the facts, she lets out "a screech rather like the Cornish Express going through a junction" (ibid.: 250). Aunt Agatha, representing aristocratic snobbishness and class rigidity, is shocked by the suggestion that her brother, Lord Yaxley, will marry someone from the lower classes – or as put by Bertie "the proletariat", and by Jeeves, correcting him, "the lower middle classes" (ibid.: 247). Bertie had anticipated such a reaction and feared it, but his own view is more aligned with Robert Burns' poem *For a' That And a' That*, conveying the idea that he is not opposed to inter-class mingling, and also creating the opportunity for misquotation and further teasing out of the ridiculous with Jeeves:

> 'You know [Aunt Agatha], Jeeves. She is not like me. I'm broad-minded. If Uncle George wants to marry waitresses, let him, say I. I hold that the rank is but the penny stamp—'
> 'Guinea stamp, sir.'
> 'All right, guinea stamp. Though I don't believe there is such a thing. […] I maintain that the rank is but the guinea stamp and a girl's a girl for all that.'
> 'For *a*' that", sir. The poet Burns wrote in the North British dialect.'
> […]
> 'Never mind about the poet Burns.'

[112] Originally published in 1930.

> ‘No, sir.’
> ‘Forget the poet Burns.’
> ‘Very good, sire.’
> ‘Expunge the poet Burns from your mind.’
> “I will do so immediately, sir’ (ibid.: 248)

Aunt Agatha desires Bertie to put an end to Uncle George’s romance, and the ghost of an earlier fling with a waitress that ended the same way is hanging in the air. Bertie alludes once more to literary precedent and love as a force of Nature in order to dissuade her:

> You’re taking an awful chance. I mean, whenever people do it in novels and plays, they always get the dickens of a welt. The girl gets the sympathy of the audience every time. She just draws herself up and looks at them with clear, steady eyes, causing them to feel not a little cheesey. If I were you, I would sit tight and *let Nature take its course*. (ibid.: 251, my italics)

But Bertie’s aunt refuses, and forces Bertie to “undertake negotiations” (ibid.), offering the girl money to break off her union. Bertie protests, but Aunt Agatha is adamant and he heads off to East Dulwich to attempt to deliver: “And when she draws herself up and looks at me with clear, steady eyes, what do I do for an encore?” (ibid.: 252). Arriving at the destination, Bertie finds himself dismayed by the gaudiness of the suburbs and, ultimately, of his host, the aunt of Uncle George’s fiancée, whom he nevertheless finds “a friendly soul” (ibid.: 253). The aunt, without Bertie’s being aware of it, has mistaken him for a doctor, leading, as per Bertie’s code, to this interaction:

> ‘What do you think of that knee?’ she asked, lifting the seven veils.
> Well, of course, one has to be polite.
> ‘Terrific!’ I said. (ibid.: 254)

The mistake is ultimately cleared up, and Bertie seems to get along splendidly with his host, whom he believes to be a genial soul with a genuine, hearty laugh. The result is that he

cannot bring himself to make his offer. Aunt Agatha is upset to the point that she almost utters 'Gorblimey', an interjection associated with the lower classes, but "[remembers] her ancient lineage just in time", suggesting the fickleness of such posturing (ibid.: 258). Jeeves, whom Aunt Agatha had barred from partaking in the events out of a sense of upper-class propriety, is asked by Bertie to intervene, and suggests that Uncle George be introduced to his fiancée's aunt, whose gaudiness might repel him. Aunt Agatha rejects the plan but Bertie decides to go on and "do Aunt Agatha good despite herself", paraphrasing Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798": "these little acts of unremembered kindness[sic]" (ibid.: 260)[113].

His mission ahead of him, Bertie grows wary: "The moment I woke, I felt conscious of some *impending doom*, and the cloud, if you know what I mean, grew darker all the morning. By the time Jeeves came in with the cocktails, I was feeling pretty low" (ibid.: 261, my italics). On the way back to East Dulwich Jeeves reveals that Uncle George's fiancée, swayed by the latter's title, had broken off an "understanding" with a friend of Jeeves', Smethurst. At the aunt's house, after a brief conversation during which she talks about stomach linings and having been a waitress, they all reach the conclusion that she is Uncle George's former fiancée, the only woman whom he ever loved. The name "Lord Yaxley" had meant nothing to her as he had inherited the title soon after they parted. Uncle George soon arrives, they instantly connect and begin discussing the lining of each other's stomach, like "deep calling to deep"[114]. Both are ultimately reunited with Aunt Agatha's approval, who is relieved that Uncle George's new fiancée is of appropriate age and is under the

[113] The original poem reads: "His little, nameless, unremembered, acts/Of kindness and of love" (Wordsworth, 1904: 91).
[114] Psalm 42:7.

misapprehension that she may be of noble stock. In the end, it is revealed that Jeeves knew the aunt's true identity all along, and hoping that her niece would follow "the dictates of her heart and [refrain] from permitting herself to be lured by gold and the glamour of his lordship's position" (ibid.: 268), devised a reunion with Uncle George. Bertie and Jeeves further reflect on the soundness of their union, anticipating that the future Lady Yaxley will have a restraining effect on Lord Yaxley's excessive drinking. "Nature" is thus allowed to take its course.

While the future Lady Yaxley is not of noble stock, which makes Bertie worry about Aunt Agatha's eventual reaction, Jeeves reminds Bertie that, quoting Tennyson, "Kind hearts are more than coronets" (ibid.), and that Bertie should, once again, escape in order to avoid Aunt Agatha's wrath. Bertie, who was unhappy about his own position in this outcome, concludes that Jeeves has scattered "light and sweetness on every side", and makes his exit by paraphrasing a stage direction from Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*: "exit hurriedly, pursued by a bear" (ibid.: 269).

The Inimitable Jeeves (1923)

Published in 1923, this volume collects short stories originally published in magazines from 1918 to 1922, but slightly reworked and divided into halves so that they might blend into the chapters of one overarching narrative more seamlessly. Said narrative mostly concerns Bertie Wooster's friend Bingo Little's constant quest for (or obsession with) love.[115]

[115] I will not be analysing The Purity of the Turf, originally published in 1920, due to its overall similarity to The Great Sermon Handicap.

"Jeeves Exerts the Old Cerebellum/No Wedding Bells for Bingo"[116]

This story, originally published in *The Strand Magazine* and *Cosmopolitan* in 1921 under the telling title "Jeeves in the Springtime", was subsequently divided into two in order to fit *The Inimitable Jeeves'* structure of interconnected short-stories. It is conspicuous for its three subtle references to World War I. The narrative begins in the morning, and the topic of peace and tranquillity as well as Jeeves' contribution to it is quickly established:

> A most amazing cove, Jeeves. So dashed competent in every respect. […] Every other valet I've ever had used to barge into my room in the morning while I was still asleep, causing much misery: but Jeeves seems to know when I'm awake by a sort of telepathy. He always floats in with the cup exactly two minutes after I come to life (Wodehouse, 2019: 1).

On that particular morning, Jeeves floats into Bertie's bedroom and the following interaction ensues:

> 'How's the weather, Jeeves?'
> 'Exceptionally clement, sir.'
> 'Anything in the papers?'
> 'Some slight friction threatening in the Balkans, sir. Otherwise, nothing' (ibid.: 1)

The latter is of course a veiled reference to the situation in the Balkans post-WWI, reduced to nothing but a slight friction, when it was certainly anything but. Jeeves goes on to dispense sound horse-racing advice and announce that he has sent back Bertie's new mauve shirts, arguing that they do not suit him. Bertie, not yet in one of his rebellious moods[117], accepts this lightheartedly:

[116] Originally published as "Jeeves in the Springtime" in 1921.
[117] In "The Pride of the Woosters Is Wounded", analysed below, we see Bertie rebel at being called mentally negligible by Jeeves, and thus feeling particularly inclined to defy him, whereas here he is content to bow to "superior knowledge".

> Well, I must say I'd thought fairly highly of those shirtings, *but I bowed to superior knowledge*. Weak? I don't know. Most fellows, no doubt, are all for having their valets confine their activities to creasing trousers and what not without trying to run the home, but it's different with Jeeves. Right from the first day he came to me, *I have looked on him as a sort of guide, philosopher, and friend* (ibid.: 2, my italics)

Bertie also looks on Jeeves as an aunt (Wodehouse, 1963: 12), a nanny (Wodehouse, 1963: 8), a father (Wodehouse, 2008b: 38), a mother (Wodehouse, 2008e: 149) and an uncle (Wodehouse, 2003: 83), the conclusion being that he is a figure who generally knows best and shares a loving bond with Bertie, though his superiority at times chafes. In this occasion, Bertie goes on to extoll the virtues of that Spring morning, quoting from Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" and telling Jeeves, in a nod congruent with Merry England and the *mytho*s of spring, that he is off to the park to do pastoral dances. Unfortunately, the impending doom seems to be just around the corner, in the shape of a still unmarried Bingo Little.

> I don't know if you know that sort of feeling you get on these days round about the end of April and the beginning of May, when the sky's a light blue, with cotton-wool clouds, and there's a bit of a breeze blowing from the west? Kind of uplifted feeling. Romantic, if you know what I mean. I'm not much of a ladies' man, but on this particular morning it seemed to me that what I really wanted was some charming girl to buzz up and ask me to save her from assassins or something. So that it was a bit of an anti-climax when I merely ran into young Bingo Little, looking perfectly foul in a crimson satin tie decorated with horseshoes. (ibid.: 3)

Bertie's romantic, literary fantasies are buoyed by the general atmosphere of springtime, but they're immediately dashed to the ground by Bingo's comic aesthetic flaws, which signal worse things to come – that is, more disturbances to Bertie's expectations of a day lifted directly out of literature, with romantic pathos aplenty. As it turns out, Bingo is under the same springtime spell that is affecting Bertie, and has recently fallen in love with a woman named Mabel, a waitress. We quickly realise that Bingo is a kind of embodiment of

springtime madness, a Jonsonian humour: "I realized now that poor old Bing was going through it once again. Ever since I have known him […] he has been perpetually falling in love with someone, generally in the spring, which seems to act on him like magic" (ibid.: 4). Bertie seems to disapprove of Bingo's choice in future fiancée as much as he disapproves of his choice in horseshoe ties and hearty food – both of which were recent acquisitions, under Mabel's influence. Bingo asks Bertie to appeal to Jeeves to find a way to make his uncle, the *senex* figure on whom he depends, more receptive to his marriage to a waitress. Jeeves suggests that Bertie tell Bingo to go and read to his Uncle, who is a gourmand that is currently on a diet owing to an attack of gout and has little to do. Furthermore, he recommends that Bingo, in the vein of the propaganda tactics developed during World War I (ibid.: 9), read aloud to his uncle narratives that dwell on relationships between members of different social classes, thus preparing him for Bingo's announcement. In particular he recommends Rosie M. Banks's books[118], romantic novels which Jeeves claims "are neglected by the reviewers but widely read", and which "make very light, attractive reading," (ibid.: 10). Jeeves' recommendation is curious: both a subtle slighting of Rosie M. Banks' books as mere propaganda – that is, as something that merely has infectious mass-appeal –, and one of the early occasions in which Jeeves is shown to have a vague appreciation for popular culture – or for its usefulness. On the one hand, this falls in line with Jeeves' typical strategic line of thinking. On the other hand, some distance away from the guardian angel of *Much Obliged, Jeeves*, this Jeeves is still instead a well-rounded individual, including dalliances with women, bathing belle competitions and an appreciation for nightclubs alongside his more erudite and professional nature. Comically rigid on the subject of attire,

[118] By using "Rosie M. Banks" Wodehouse potentially intended to allude to and lampoon the works of Ruby M. Ayres, a very prolific romance writer.

he is too knowledgeable to ignore even the mass appeal of Rosie M. Banks' "bilge literature".

Not long after, the works of Rosie M. Banks, which bear clichéd titles, lightly mocked as such, like "All for Love", "A Red, Red Summer Rose" and "Only A Factory Girl" seem to be making an effect on Bingo's uncle, the latter novel making him "[gulp] like a stricken bull-pup" (ibid.: 12). Still, Bingo does not have the heart to break the news of his imminent engagement to his uncle, and asks Bertie to do so instead. Bertie consents, though reluctantly, and finds himself at lunch with "Old Little", being fawned upon because, it is revealed, Bingo had told his uncle that "Rosie M. Banks" was merely Bertie's pen-name. Old Little then extolls on Bertie's literary virtues:

> 'Mr. Wooster, I am not ashamed to say that the tears came into my eyes as I listened to [your books]. It amazes me that a man as young as you can have been able to plumb human nature so surely to its depths; to play with so unerring a hand on the quivering heart-strings of your reader; to write novels so true, so human, so moving, so vital!'
> 'Oh, it's just a knack.' (ibid.: 15)

He then launches into another speech about the merits of his cook – apparently Jeeves's fiancée[119] – during which a brief mention to air-raids in 1917 is made, and praises the philosophy of life in "Bertie's" books: "I am ashamed to say that there was a time when I was like other men, a slave to the idiotic convention which we call Class Distinction. But since I read your books—" (ibid.: 17). Old Little is now willing to accept his nephew's engagement, but we immediately learn that he will not be providing Bingo with extra income as he has married his cook, rendering Bingo's future marriage impossible. In the end, it is revealed that Jeeves had orchestrated the plan to read Rosie M. Banks to Old Little exactly

[119] The plot device of Jeeves having fiancées is used two times in this book only to be abandoned and never again used, likely due to, as observed above, the ethereal qualities that Jeeves develops more and more over time.

in order for him to marry his cook, thus ending her engagement to Jeeves, so that Jeeves could pursue a relationship with Mabel, Bingo Little's love interest, instead. All is well, even for Bingo, who has avoided marrying someone with whom his tastes, though he appears to be unaware of it, seem to clash. Yet Bingo's temporary setback is just that – temporary.

Apropos the air-raid mentioned above: references to World War I appear to be a slight acknowledgement on behalf of the author of one of the major historical events of the time; these will be fewer as time goes on, and are virtually undetectable in a novel such as *Joy in the Morning* published in 1946. Bingo Little's uncle's reference to class distinctions also appears to be a nod to class struggle, very much the order of the day in 1921 – yet here it is reduced to the mere ability of a "romance" novel to sway an old man. As we have seen, however, this principle of "love knows no bounds" is also a dominant force in these narratives themselves, very much so in stories like "Indian Summer of an Uncle", and a truly comic narrative could never – nor does it – take class distinctions absolutely seriously. The references to contemporary issues highlight the disjunction between the fictional, comic reality and the actual reality, acknowledging ongoing change and integrating it positively into what is ultimately a changeless human condition.

Rosie M. Banks's novels ultimately function much like the other clichés which Wodehouse usually lampoons: they are ridiculous in their clumsy, formulaic nature, but possess an infectiousness that relates comically to the life of Wodehouse's characters, influencing it, if anything, through its echoing of the power of unbridled, springtime love.

"Aunt Agatha Speaks Her Mind/Pearls Mean Tears"[120]

In this story Bertie begins by reflecting that, if his had been a noble nature, he would have been "all broken up" (*ibid.*: 20) about Bingo's failed engagement. Bingo, however, like the Spring-maddened man he is, seems to be taking it in stride himself: "A resilient bird, Bingo. He may be down, but he is never out" (*ibid.*) Bertie is consequently feeling in fine fettle:

> It suddenly struck me so forcibly, one morning while I was having my bath, that I hadn't a worry on earth that I began to sing like a bally nightingale as I sploshed the sponge about. It seemed to me that everything was absolutely for the best *in the best of all possible worlds*. (ibid.: 21)

Bertie is quite literally echoing a Leibnizian sentiment, not at all incompatible with Jeeves' own preference for Spinoza, that our reality is "the best of all possible worlds" (Leibniz, 1951: 228). Once more, however, just as Bertie is feeling at his best and Leibnizian optimism at its most likely, much like in Voltaire's *Candide*, the doom turns a shaded corner:

> *But have you ever noticed a rummy thing about life? I mean the way something always comes along to give it you in the neck at the moment when you're feeling most braced about things in general*. No sooner had I dried the old limbs and shoved on the suiting and toddled into the sitting-room than the blow fell. There was a letter from Aunt Agatha on the mantelpiece. (*ibid*., my italics)

Aunt Agatha, living embodiment of the impending doom, demands that Bertie join her in France at *Roville-sur-mer*, and Bertie as usual acquiesces out of a sense of familiar duty. His only comfort is that there, a place "presumably dripping with the gaiety and *joie de vivre* of France", he can perhaps wear his new cummerbund (ibid.: 22). At *Roville*, at the hotel

[120] Originally published as "Aunt Agatha Takes the Count" in 1922.

Splendide, where his Aunt is residing and terrorising the staff, Bertie learns that he is to be introduced to a Miss Hemmingway, "a nice, quiet girl, so different from so many of the bold girls one meets in London," and has "a grim foreboding of an awful doom" (ibid.: 23). Aunt Agatha then reveals that she wants Bertie to marry Miss Hemmingway, delivering a stern indictment of his lifestyle, and that of Drones or second-sons like him:

> It is young men like you, Bertie, who make the person with the future of the race at heart despair. Cursed with too much money, you fritter away in idle selfishness a life which might have been made useful, helpful and profitable. You do nothing but waste your time on frivolous pleasures. You are simply an anti-social animal, a drone. Bertie, it is imperative that you marry. […] You should be breeding children to… (ibid.: 23)

The takeaway, of course, is that Bertie must be a productive member of society and ensure the future of his country, in what is a conservative, rather than progressive, takedown of the uselessness of his existence. Whereas in "Comrade Bingo" we will see that the members of the Heralds of the Red Dawn consider Bertie to be a wastrel in line with a communist perspective, here it is the voice of the establishment that condemns his lifestyle. Neither of these perspectives allow for someone to simply "exist beautifully" (Wodehouse, 2011: 520).

Bertie eventually meets Miss Hemmingway, as well as her sedate curate brother, and finds her immediately plain and dull: "I said to myself, 'the girl plays the organ in a village church!'" (ibid.: 24). He feels suitably low and, to cheer himself up, dons his new cummerbund. Jeeves is absolutely against it, but Bertie perseveres, concluding:

> Dashed upsetting, this sort of thing. If there's one thing that gives me the pip, it's unpleasantness in the home; and I could see that relations were going to be pretty fairly strained for a while. And, coming on top of Aunt Agatha's bombshell about the Hemmingway girl, I don't mind confessing it made me feel more or less as though nobody loved me. (ibid.: 26)

Without Jeeves's comfort and assistance, Bertie feels entirely alone, and finds himself dwelling on his impending doom through a verse from Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality": "Shades of the prison-house begin to close upon the growing boy" (Wordsworth, 1904: 354). The impending doom – the prison house – is not school but rather, in this case, marriage. But a hitch in Aunt Agatha's plans soon appears. Miss Hemmingway's brother, the curate, appears to be rather less sedate than he seemed and has something of a gambling streak. Since arriving at *Roville*, he has gambled away all of his money as well as a loan from his parishioners, leading Bertie to reflect, optimistically, on his lack of rigidity: "This evidence that he had sporting blood in his veins made him seem more human". According to Bertie, this makes him more interesting, as opposed to his placid sister (ibid.: 30):

> I gazed at him with no little interest and admiration. Never before had I encountered a curate so genuinely all to the mustard. Little as he might look like one of the lads of the village, he certainly appeared to be the real tabasco, and I wished he had shown me this side of his character before. (ibid.: 31)

The siblings then ask Bertie to take a valuable pearl necklace as a security for a loan, so that the curate can cover his costs, and to write him a receipt for the pearls. He acquiesces, but Jeeves reveals that the siblings are in fact the confidence tricksters Soapy Sid and his accomplice, and that they had attempted to take the pearls back, making off with the money, the pearls and the receipt with which they could claim Bertie had lost the necklace. Bertie's candid generosity has gotten the best of him, but Jeeves ultimately recovers the pearls before the couple leaves, and reveals that they had been stolen from Aunt Agatha in the first place. Bertie decides to return the pearls in order to secure some form of goodwill from his Aunt, but she is blaming the theft on the staff, whom she arrogantly lambastes. Bertie

uncharacteristically upbraids her, telling her that she has merely misplaced her own pearls and is now blaming the servants, and encourages her to recompense the ones she unjustly blamed. He then casts aspersions on Aunt Agatha's abilities to find him a suitable mate.

The story ends with Bertie, grateful to Jeeves for his actions, discarding his new-fangled cummerbund for the latter's benefit – but perhaps partly also because, being no longer downcast, he needs no further cheering up. This is yet another occasion in which Jeeves acts in such a way as to above all preserve Bertie's good nature: Bertie is ultimately rewarded for his charity towards the two thieves, whereas Aunt Agatha is punished for her suspicion and undue upbraiding of the hotel staff. Aunt Agatha is correct that a theft has taken place, but her prejudices led her to blame the staff immediately and to be taken in by Soapy Sid and his accomplice's airs of upper middle-class virtue. Bertie, on the other hand, would suspect neither, and if anything is suspicious of the supposedly perfect, rigid picture of perfection they provide. That is, he is suspicious of the lack of zest or of relatable, flawed humanity in the way both characters behave.

"The Pride of the Woosters Is Wounded/A Hero's Reward"[121]

In this story, the main action takes place in England after the *Roville* debacle, and consists in Bertie's attempt to take his and Bingo's troubles into his own hands while Jeeves is away on holiday. Bertie is particularly motivated to do so because he is greatly offended by overhearing Jeeves talking to his temporary replacement, at which point he says: "You will find Mr. Wooster (…) an exceedingly pleasant and amiable young gentleman, but not intelligent. By no means intelligent. Mentally he is negligible—quite negligible" (ibid.: 40-

[121] Originally published as "Scoring off Jeeves" in 1922.

41). Bertie is suitably upset, and rather than face Jeeves, immediately leaves the apartment on his way to a lunch with Aunt Agatha, nevertheless holding a grudge: "We Woosters do not lightly forget. At least, we do—some things—appointments, and people's birthdays, and letters to post, and all that—but not an absolute bally insult like the above. I brooded like the dickens" (ibid.: 41). In terms of publication date, this is to an extent the origin story of Bertie's constantly resurfacing desire to prove himself to Jeeves and state his independence – although as we have seen, the action in "Jeeves Takes Charge" supposedly takes place much before this and already establishes this friction.

On the way to his lunch, Bertie bumps into Bingo, who has been staying at the Glossop residence in Ditteredge, Hampshire, where he is tutoring the Glossop child, Oswald, and appears to have been immediately fallen in love with his sister Honoria Glossop: "one of those dashed large, brainy, strenuous, dynamic girls you see so many of these days" (ibid.: 42), the implication being that she has an domineering personality. Where Bertie sees a woman with a look "like a sergeant-major", Bingo sees a "tender goddess", and loftily quotes Byron's "She Walks in Beauty" to describe Honoria. Yet he immediately forgets himself and belies the spring-addled superficiality of his love: "'She walks in beauty like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies; and all that's best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes. Another bit of bread and cheese,' he said to the lad behind the bar." (ibid.: 43)

Bertie resumes his way to his lunch with Aunt Agatha, where she yet again insists he must marry and go at once to Ditteredge Hall to get better acquainted with, yes – Honoria Glossop. Yet Bertie, eager to show Jeeves that he is not mentally negligible, is jubilant:

> It wasn't two minutes after I had parted from Aunt Agatha before the old fighting spirit of the Woosters reasserted itself. Ghastly as the peril was which loomed before me, I was conscious of a rummy sort of exhilaration. It was a tight corner, but the tighter the

> corner, I felt, *the more juicily should I score off Jeeves when I got myself out of it without a bit of help from him*. (ibid.: 45, my italics).

At Ditteredge, Bingo is surprised to find Bertie around. Oswald Glossop, "one of those supercilious striplings who give you the impression that you went to the wrong school and that your clothes don't fit" (ibid.: 46), proves to be unpleasant company for Bingo, but gives him little trouble, spending most of his time sitting on a bridge, fishing for tiddlers. Bertie jokingly suggests that Bingo shove him in the water, because it would shake him out of his rigid stupor, but Bingo balks at the comment, fearing Honoria's reaction. Thinking again of Jeeves and of his own intelligence, Bertie devises a plan, concluding that it is "what Jeeves would have done" (ibid.: 47), whereby he is to push Oswald into the water and Bingo is to rescue him in front of Honoria, causing her to lose all interest in Bertie and shift her attention to Bingo, who concludes: "I was only thinking (…) how fearfully wet Oswald will get. Oh, happy day!" (ibid.: 48).

Reflecting on his plan, Bertie muses existentially:

> I don't know if you've noticed it, but it's rummy *how nothing in this world seems to be absolutely perfect.* The drawback to this otherwise singularly fruity binge was, of course the fact that Jeeves wouldn't be on the spot to watch me in action. Still, apart from that there wasn't a flaw. The beauty of the thing was, you see, that there wasn't a flaw. (ibid. 49, my italics).

Very quickly, however, we learn that Bertie's first pronouncement is correct, and his latter one false – nothing in the world is indeed perfect, and his plans fall drastically short of perfection by most standards, but though the way is tortuous, his earlier Leibnizian outlook is nuanced, rather than entirely out of place. As he approaches Oswald in order to push him into the water with Honoria in sight, in a typical nod to the theatre, Bertie recollects having played the butler in a country-house party years prior. Having done the deed, he compares

the wait for Bingo to come and rescue Oswald to how he himself had to wait in for what seemed like an eternity for someone to deliver the line that allowed him to exit stage, and which made him finally understand a tired cliché: "I understood what these writer-chappies mean when they talk about time standing still" (ibid.: 52). Bertie jumps in to try to save Oswald, but the latter is already safe and Honoria interprets the whole affair as a roundabout way to impress her and propose. It is subsequently revealed that Bingo had been distracted from his role in the proceedings by a Miss Braythwayt, with whom he is now in love and whom he considers to be a tender goddess, dismissing Honoria as a mere passing whim. Bertie is thus, having neglected to ask for Jeeves' help, temporarily in Honoria's clutches.

On a final note, even though the "mentally negligible" question (rightfully) persists, it is somewhat allayed in *Thank You, Jeeves* (1934), where Jeeves repeats his comment, but later adds in conversation with Pauline Stoker: "Mr. Wooster is capable of acting very shrewdly on occasion" (Wodehouse, 2003: 217).

"Introducing Claude and Eustace/Sir Roderick Comes to Lunch"[122]

In this story Bertie's temporary setback is ongoing – Honoria intends, like Aunt Agatha, to "mould" him. During that quest, and just when Bertie is despairing and hoping for his own death, saying to himself "Death, where is thy jolly old sting?" in a nod to I Corinthians 15:55, the two women announce that they dislike Jeeves, who has just returned from his vacation, and that Bertie must dispose of him (ibid. 56). Yet a temporary hitch presents itself when Honoria's father, the brain specialist Sir Roderick Glossop, decides to meet Bertie in order to make sure that he is normal, and not in some way disturbed. This is

[122] Originally published simply as "Sir Roderick Comes to Lunch" in 1922.

because Bertie's Uncle Henry was reputedly somewhat mentally unstable and prone, it is said, to hoarding rabbits, cohabiting at some point with twelve of the specimens. This is also the first time in which we are introduced to the ne'er do wells Claude and Eustace, Bertie's cousins, who in Bertie's absence had lunched at his apartment and, along with a certain Lord Rainsby, or "Dog-Face", had been entertained by Jeeves.

The following day, Sir Roderick insists on having lunch with Bertie, and Jeeves makes the necessary arrangements. At lunch, Sir Roderick, much like the majority of authority figures in the saga, seems gloomy and humourless, though also unaware of his humourlessness. He complains about how his hat had been stolen earlier that day as a practical joke. He also reveals that he detests cats, just as the sound of mewing appears to be heard from an adjoining room. Jeeves is called in to assure Sir Roderick that there are no cats in the premises, but instead confirms that there are three cats in Bertie's bedroom, to the latter's surprise, and furthermore that they appear to be overexcited, having discovered the fish under Bertie's bed. Suspecting that Bertie is a lunatic that keeps three cats and dead fish under his bed, Sir Roderick begins to leave. Bertie decides to talk him down, but as Jeeves hands him what is supposed to be his hat so he can follow Sir Roderick out, the latter realises that Bertie is carrying the self-same hat which had been stolen earlier. He demands an explanation from Jeeves in private and meanwhile Bertie bumps into Lord Rainsby, who reveals that he was the one who had left the cats at the apartment, while Claude and Eustace were responsible for both the fish and the hat – the implication being that they stole the latter. Jeeves is then revealed to have coaxed events along towards this conclusion, and suggests that Bertie once again escape the wrath of Aunt Agatha to New York. This is the origin of Bertie's reputation as a lunatic as far as Roderick Glossop is concerned, and once more, it allows Bertie to escape an oppressive, unsuitable social arrangement that would have ill-

suited him by becoming the *pharmakos* that escapes for society's sake, yes, but also for his own sake – society being typically unpleasant company in a Schopenhauerian vein, as alluded to previously. While within the grasp of his family or friends, with the exception of the occasionally satisfying bash at the Drones club or Anatole's sumptuous meals, Bertie is constantly chafing at the unceasing demands made by everyone around him. Away from them, he is allowed temporary respite from society and from Schopenhauer's famous hedgehog dilemma: that we require each other's company but ultimately bristle at it.

"A Letter of Introduction/Startling Dressiness of a Lift Attendant"[123]

In New York, Bertie receives a letter of introduction to Cyril Bassington from Aunt Agatha, and hopes to ease her wrath by taking him out and watching over him. Bertie also takes a fancy to a pair of purple socks, which Jeeves dislikes. When Bertie finally encounters Cyril, it is to pick him up from prison: Cyril had been arrested for assaulting a policeman whom he had mistaken for a postman. Bertie then introduces Cyril to his playwright friend George Caffryn, only realising too late that Aunt Agatha does not wish Cyril to be introduced to theatrical circles. Cyril becomes friends with Caffryn and immediately joins the cast of one of his musical comedies. Bertie attempts to reason with George, but he will not dismiss Cyril, leading Bertie to feel friendless once again: "I felt as if I hadn't a friend in the world" (ibid.: 82) and attempting to persuade Jeeves to help him. Jeeves, annoyed at the purple socks, does not, and later, when canvased over the contents of an angry letter by Aunt Agatha, comments: "time may provide a solution, sir" (ibid.: 84). Jeeves is at that point entertaining a child whose valet is taking a much-needed break. The child tells Cyril he has

[123] Originally published as "Jeeves and the Chump Cyril" in 1918.

a face like a fish, prompting him to give him "a couple of tolerably juicy buffets before he legged it" (ibid.: 85). It is later revealed that the child is the son of Mr. Blumenfeld whom we have met before in the story "The Episode of the Dog Mcintosh" but which Bertie and Jeeves meet here for the first time. Mr. Blumenfeld is the theatrical manager of George Caffryn's production of "Ask Dad" and believes his audiences have the average intelligence of a child his son's age. He thus consults his son's opinion about every play he produces. The child, seeing Cyril on stage, wants him kicked out for being ugly, and his father agrees. Cyril then decides to abandon his theatrical career, passing it off as his own decision in order to be fair to his family. Jeeves guardedly admits to having influenced the child's decision to insult Cyril, and Bertie rewards him by jettisoning his purple socks. Jeeves gives them to the man operating the lift, and on the latter they look flattering, with Bertie commenting: "I don't know when I've seen anything so dressy" (ibid. 92). This is a good example of Jeeves' conservative views on clothes applying mostly to Bertie: Bertie's otherwise carefree life requires a balance achieved through the duties his code impose upon him and the dicta of convention signified by his clothes: others in different positions, such as the lift attendant, the Prince of Wales (Wodehouse, 2008b: 225) and Monty Byng may enjoy more sartorial freedom:

> [W]hen I caught sight of myself in the glass I nearly swooned. Jeeves was perfectly right. I looked a cross between a music-hall comedian and a cheap bookie. Yet Monty had looked fine in absolutely the same stuff. These things are just Life's mysteries, and that's all there is to it. (Wodehouse, 2004: 2)

Likewise, Lord Emsworth of the Blandings Castle saga is allowed to potter and amble freely in old, stained and baggy clothes as it simply suits him the best, to the chagrin of his sister and of The Efficient Baxter.

"Comrade Bingo/Bingo Has a Bad Goodwood"[124]

The story begins back in London, with Bertie making the comment that "the Empire isn't the place it was" (ibid.: 93). Coming from Bertie, whose knowledge of the Empire is negligible, it comes across as a mere nostalgic cliché. The reason for Bertie's comment quickly becomes clear, however. At the Park, Bertie runs into Bingo Little's uncle, the Old Little of before, while a rally of the "Heralds of the Red Dawn" is taking place nearby. As they chat about his newfound title of Lord Bittlesham and his ownership of a small stable for horse racing purposes, they are denounced by a member of the mob:

> There you see two typical members of the class which has down-trodden the poor for centuries. Idlers! Non-producers! Look at the tall thin one with the face like a motor-mascot. Has he ever done an honest day's work in his life? No! A prowler, a trifler and a blood sucker! (ibid.: 95)

Later bumping into Bingo, Bertie learns that his uncle has cut him off since getting married and that he is once again in love in with a girl named Charlotte Corday Rowbotham, whose father is a communist[125]. Bertie comments, reflecting on the speed with which Bingo's shifts affections, and consequently on their lack of depth: "Well, to my certain knowledge you've been in love with at least half a dozen girls since the spring, and it's only July now" (Wodehouse, 2019: 96).

In order to impress Charlotte, Bingo has joined the communist group Heralds of the Red Dawn. Simultaneously, Bingo is going to bet on a horse from his uncle's stable in order to win enough money to marry Charlotte. Bingo immediately cadges an invitation for a

[124] Originally published simply as "Comrade Bingo" in 1922.
[125] Rowbotham's two first names appear to be a reference to Charlotte Corday, the *Girondist* sympathizer who murdered Jean-Paul Marat in his bath.

lavish meal at Bertie's flat, bringing along Clarissa, her father and "Comrade Butt", who is engaged to Clarissa. Bertie reflects on his own moral principles:

> I don't know why, ever since I first knew him at school, I should have felt a rummy feeling of responsibility for young Bingo. I mean to say, he's not my son (thank goodness) or my brother or anything like that. He's got absolutely no claim on me at all, and yet a large-sized chunk of my existence seems to be spent in fussing over him like a bally old hen and hauling him out of the soup. I suppose it must be some rare beauty in my nature or something. (ibid.: 99)

The motive is of course the following of Bertie's code, and his general compassion for the "chumps of the world", Bingo being even chumpier than he. He worries about Bingo's nonsensical plan to marry this girl and live on horse-racing winnings. There, Clarissa's father, who calls Jeeves "an obsolete relic of an exploded feudal system" (ibid.: 102), lunches heartily and attempts to convert Bertie to the cause. Comrade Butt criticises Bertie's lifestyle: "I wonder the food didn't turn to ashes in our mouths! Eggs! Muffins! Sardines! All wrung from the bleeding lips of the starving poor!", causing Bertie to comment to the reader that "It was all very well for Comrade Butt to knock the food, but he had pretty well finished the ham; and if you had shoved the remainder of the jam into the bleeding lips of the starving poor it would hardly have made them sticky" (ibid. 103). That is, whatever the possible merits of Comrade Butt's speech, he is ultimately a hypocrite, falling morally short of the principles he so staunchly preaches.

The next day, Bertie bumps into Bingo and his uncle, who tells him he has received a threatening letter, probably from the man who harangued him and Bertie at the Park. Bingo, who actually wrote the letter himself, tells him he will get to the bottom of things. Then the horse race at Goodwood comes along, and Lord Bittlesham's horse loses out. Bingo is at the races in disguise, making an inflammatory speech about his uncle, at one point saying: "The

world won't be a fit place for honest men to live in till the blood of Lord Bittlesham and his kind flows in rivers down the gutters of Park Lane!" (ibid.: 108). But Bingo is subsequently unmasked by Comrade Butt as an imposter and Lord Bittlesham's nephew. A fistfight ensues and both are arrested. Bingo decides to go spend some time in the country and it is subsequently revealed that Jeeves had intervened to tell Butt of Little's identity in order to sever his ties with Clarissa, an overbearing, unsuitable match.

The lampooning of "communists" here is little different from the treatment typically afforded to Aunt Agatha – both sides are simplified as curmudgeons, intent on having their own way chiefly for personal gain. Whatever Wodehouse's views on communism, although unlikely to be truly sympathetic, we are dealing once again with comically single-minded rigidity here, hypocritically shielding human appetites. This is a vanity that comedy cannot ignore – a clear instance of not knowing, or misrepresenting, oneself.

"The Great Sermon Handicap"[126]

This story is a particularly good example of Wodehouse's ambivalent comic perspective: ultimately a kind-hearted send-up of obsessions with both games and the conventions of Anglicanism. It is also, along with "The Purity of the Turf", one of the most similar to his public-school stories in theme and structure. Restless after his loss at Goodwood, and wishing to escape London in August, Bertie accepts an invitation to Twing Hall, where Bingo Little has taken yet another tutoring job and where Claude and Eustace are sojourning. The latter tell Bertie that the biggest sporting event of the season is taking place, and that Bertie should join them. Having got there, Bertie discovers that Bingo has

[126] Originally published in 1922.

been attempting to heal a broken heart, and Bertie fails to understand his use of the objective-correlative metaphor:

> 'I wanted to creep away and hide myself. I've been through a bad time, Bertie, these last weeks. The sun ceased to shine—"
> 'That's curious. We've had gorgeous weather in London.'
> 'The birds ceased to sing—'
> 'What birds?
> 'What the devil does it matter what birds? (…) Any birds. The birds round about here. You don't expect me to specify them by their pet names, do you? I tell you Bertie, it hit me hard at first, very hard.'
> 'What hit you?' (ibid.: 118)

As it turns out the gloomy spell has ended, as, at Twing Hall, Bingo has immediately fallen in love with Cynthia, with whom Bertie himself had once been in love, the "jolly old frenzy" having petered out due to, as we later discover, her rejection, but also perhaps due to her high ideals and a desire for Bertie to secure employment: "I may be wronging her, but I have an idea that she's the sort of girl who would want a fellow to carve out a career and what not. I know I've heard her speak favourably of Napoleon" (ibid.: 116). They are now simply friends.

Bingo decides to pursue Cynthia. Simultaneously, the twins Claude and Eustace reveal what the biggest sporting event of the year is – betting on the length of the local parsons' sermons:

> Well, you know how many parsons there are round about here. There are about a dozen hamlets within a radius of six miles, and each hamlet has a church and each church has a parson and each parson preaches a sermon every Sunday. To-morrow week—Sunday the twenty-third—we're running off the great Sermon Handicap. Streggles is making the book. Each parson is to be clocked by a reliable steward of the course, and the one that preaches the longest sermon wins. (ibid. 121).

The twins want Bertie to finance the entire operation, and it appears that "old Heppenstall" is a safe bet for the longest sermon. Bertie goes in. Bingo also participates, but Jeeves is offered a go and refuses.

The twins subsequently realise that they have left "G. Hayward" out of the picture, who had recently delivered an address of twenty-six minutes at a village wedding. Bertie decides to ensure his bet by offering to ask old Heppenstall to preach his sermon on Brotherly Love, which often lasts over forty minutes, next Sunday. Old Heppenstall replies that "in these restless times" (ibid.: 126) brevity is the soul of the sermon, and says that his sermon on Brotherly Love now takes fifteen minutes to deliver. He asks Bertie if he should "for example, delete the rather exhaustive excursus into the family life of the early Assyrians" (ibid.) which Bertie encourages him not to do. Unfortunately, old Heppenstall takes ill with hay fever on Saturday, "coughing in his stable all last night" (ibid.: 127), making everyone switch their bets to G. Hayward, whose "habit of stopping dead and looking round the church at intervals was worth minutes to us, and in the home stretch we gained no little advantage owing to his dropping the pince-nez and having to grope for them" (ibid.: 128). It is revealed, meanwhile, that Jeeves had bet ten pounds on Reverend James Bates. Jeeves then delivers Bertie a letter from Old Heppenstall who, unable to attend and deliver his sermon, has entrusted it upon his nephew, the Reverend Bates. Bingo, who had of course been mixing gambling with the church, calls preaching another man's sermon dishonest, but Bertie replies, in unconsciously stinging manner, that "clergymen do it all the time. They aren't expected always to make up the sermons they preach" (ibid.: 131). Jeeves then comes out as the winner to everyone else's loss – perhaps for their own good – having learned of the contents of the letter through Old Heppenstall's butler. We subsequently learn that Cynthia is engaged to the Reverend Bates, and that Bingo's hopes are consequently thoroughly

dashed, thus adding two more frustrated romances to Bingo's six, to add to Jeeves' own dalliance with two women as well as Bertie's temporary engagement to Honoria and a potential brush with the criminal Miss Hemmingway. Where love is concerned, chaos has so far reigned supreme in these narratives. It is perhaps important to add, too, that Bingo's chances with someone who expects him to be a productive member of society were perhaps scarce to begin with, and indicate that his passion was misguided.

"The Metropolitan Touch"[127]

The story opens with a communication from Bingo to Bertie, in characteristically impulsive, clumsy manner:

> I say Bertie old man I am in love at last. She is the most wonderful girl Bertie old man. This is the real thing at last Bertie. Come here at once and bring Jeeves. Oh I say you know that tobacco shop in Bond Street on the left side as you go up. Will you get me a hundred of their special cigarettes and send them to me here. I have run out. I know when you see her you will think she is the most wonderful girl. Mind you bring Jeeves. Don't forget the cigarettes.—Bingo. (ibid.: 151)

One for exaggerated, intense appetites, the driving force that is Bingo (driving force, too, of this narrative) cannot seem to tell the difference between his desire for a girl and for a pack of a hundred cigarettes – everything is simply appetite, with no consideration due. We have since learned to mistrust Bingo's claims of true love, but this time Jeeves announces that Bingo is referring to Old Heppenstall's niece, Mary Burgess, and that they should be a good match. More than that, she has private means and would be able to provide for Bingo, who is clueless on his own: "In short, sir, I think that if there is anything that we can do we should

[127] Originally published in 1922.

do it" (ibid.: 153). Face to face with Bingo, Bertie questions the method behind Bingo's infatuations: "What beats me (…) is what principle you pick them on. The girls you fall in love with, I mean. I mean to say, what's your system? As far as I can see, no two of them are alike" (ibid.: 153). But as always, Bingo declares his holy love for Mary Burgess, and Bertie is convinced.

A rival to Bingo arrives on the scene, however: the Reverend Mr. Wingham. Jeeves suggests that Bingo, who seems dumbstruck by the sight of Mary, should strike a friendship with her little brother. Bingo does so, and as Bertie leaves for London, he appears to find things promising. Yet Jeeves had already hinted that Mary Burgess favoured the Reverend, and we learn through Bertie that she hopes her little brother will one day become a curate. This is a clear instance of Bertie misrepresenting the reality around him – it is somewhat obvious to everyone but him and Bingo that things are not on the latter's side. But a fortnight later Bertie receives another telegram, where Bingo declares: "Dash it Bertie you simply must come. I am in a state of absolute despair and heart-broken. Would you mind sending another hundred of those cigarettes." (ibid.: 156) Bertie is annoyed and tells Jeeves to send Bingo a wire "telling him to end it all in the village pond" (ibid.: 157), but Jeeves decides to investigate. He returns the next day with ominous news: Mr. Steggles, the man whose idea the Great Sermon Handicap was, is taking bets against Mr. Little marrying Mary Burgess. Steggles is up to dirty work, too: he has caused Bingo to fall completely out of favour with Mary Burgess by making her brother engage in competitive eating. Apropos Steggles, Bertie comments that "Machiavelli could have taken his correspondence course" (ibid.: 158); that is to say, like Jeeves he is skilled at scheming, but unlike Jeeves, he has sadistic purposes. Jeeves advises Bingo to busy himself with good works in order to impress Mary, and it seems to be working, which bolsters his confidence. Temporarily in London, Bingo seems indeed

to be in better spirits. When Bertie tells Bingo that there is a bet running on his chances at a union with Mary, Bingo reacts in classic mixed manner, unable to follow one single train of thought to the end or distinguish between his desires:

> 'Betting! You don't mean that they're betting on this holy, sacred—Oh I say, dash it all! Haven't people any sense of decency and reverence? Is nothing safe from their beastly, sordid graspingness? I wonder (…) if there's a chance of my getting any of that seven-to-one money? Seven to one! What a price!' (ibid.: 161)

Returning to reason, Bingo reveals that he is in town to steal material from theatrical revues in order to put up his own revue at Twing, titled "What Ho, Twing!" for the Village School Christmas Entertainment. The revue carries on with several hitches, but at the end, during a number which should have involved tossing fake, woollen oranges at the audience but instead involved real oranges, "the evening's entertainment had begun to resemble one of Belfast's livelier nights" (ibid.: 169), in a guarded reference to the turmoil in the Northern Irish capital at the time. Bertie colourfully describes the atmosphere: "[t]he air was thick with shrieks and fruit" (ibid.), and in the end Bingo is unanimously despised and sought after for a beating, in typical *pharmakos* manner. It is then revealed that Steggles had substituted the woollen oranges with real ones. Bingo manages to escape the ordeal unharmed. A week later, Mary Burgess is engaged to Reverend Wingham. Jeeves, it is revealed, had at one point joined in Steggles' scheme and bet against Bingo, ultimately collaring a decent sum. While Mary Burgess seems to have been a decent match, Jeeves appears to realise at one point that not only are Bingo's affections volatile, but in this particular case his cause is quite clearly lost. Instead of facilitating a future relationship that does not seem to be at all viable, he capitalises on the likeliest outcome. While this is entirely harmless, it is still some distance away from the guardian-angel-Jeeves who in *Much Obliged, Jeeves* (1971) removes Bertie's

entry from the incriminating book kept at The Junior Ganymede Club for butlers and valets, where they inscribe every aspect of their employers' private lives for the benefit of their colleagues. At that point in time, Jeeves does so simply to safeguard Bertie's reputation.

"The Delayed Exit of Claude and Eustace"[128]

Claude and Eustace carry on in carnivalesque fashion, even though they had supposedly been shipped off to South Africa by Aunt Agatha. Bertie and Jeeves feud over a pair of old Etonian spats. Bertie reflects on his gloom and on the contemporary tendency to dwell on the morbid:

> I suppose every cove has black periods in his life to which he can't look back without the smouldering eye and the silent shudder. Some coves, if you can judge by the novels you read nowadays, have them practically all the time; but what with enjoying a sizable private income and a topping digestion, I'm bound to say it isn't very often I find my own existence getting a flat tyre. (ibid.: 181)

This is a recurring theme in Wodehouse, who has been known to express his scepticism regarding pessimism or morbidity in literature. Particularly, he was sceptical of the thought that they endow works of fiction with seriousness and thus inherent literary value – one obtained, perhaps, at the cost of comedy. In his actual work, however, this reticence is seldom expressed without nuance. For instance, when in the short story "Monkey Business" Montrose Mulliner expresses the following, valid sentiment: "I consider that each one of us should do all that lies in his power to fight the ever-growing trend of the public mind towards the morbid and the hectic" (Wodehouse, 1975: 167), he is simultaneously trying to avoid having to share close quarters with a gorilla. His statement conveys not so much enlightened

[128] Originally published in 1922.

criticism of modernity, but concern about his personal safety. Similarly, Bertie seems to think that there is, overall, undue focus on the negative in the modern world, but he acknowledges that his particular personal situation is an especially favourable one. In the short story "Jeeves and the Greasy Bird" (1965), the following exchange takes place:

> 'Yes, sir. Mr. Eggleston is one of your angry young novelists. The critics describe his work as frank, forthright and fearless.'
> 'Oh, do they? Well, whatever his literary merits he struck me as a fairly noxious-specimen. What's he angry about?'
> 'Life, sir.'
> 'He disapproves of it?'
> 'So would one gather from his output, sir.'
> 'Well, I disapproved of him, which makes us all square.' (Wodehouse, 1966: 11)

Yet not much later, we are treated to this conversation:

> 'And nothing to be done about it. We are helpless to assist.'
> 'One fears so, sir.'
> 'Life can be very sad, Jeeves.'
> 'Extremely, sir.'
> 'I'm not surprised that Blair-Eggleston has taken a dislike to it.'
> 'No, sir.' (Wodehouse, 1966: 14)

The story, of course, turns out for the best – even where Mr. Eggleston is concerned. Though Bertie dislikes Blair-Eggleston's attitude, the narrative both forces Bertie to recognise that Eggleston has a point, that is, that life has its share of sadness; and that that Eggleston is not necessarily right – things can turn out for the better.

In the story in hand, the twins Claude and Eustace are ultimately dispatched to the island of Madeira, Jeeves having manipulated them to think that a mutual love interest is headed there, and Jeeves and Bertie are reconciled, the latter telling Jeeves to destroy his spats as a reward – not knowing Jeeves has already done so. The excesses of the twins' carnivalesque nature are then not suppressed or judged, but heuristically dealt with – that is,

Jeeves merely employs a certain amount of deception in order to spare everyone the antics of the twins, who simply take their chaotic revelling elsewhere. Again, unpleasant companions are understood and properly dealt with.

"Bingo and the Little Woman/All's Well"[129]

The story begins with Bertie and Bingo at a new club, The Senior Liberal, while the Drones is due for its annual cleaning: Bertie chafes at the lack of carnivalesque ease at his new temporary club:

> [W]e were roosting at the Senior Liberal, and personally I had found the strain pretty fearful. I mean, when you've got used to a club where everything's nice and cheery, and where, if you want to attract a chappie's attention, you heave a bit of bread at him, it kind of damps you to come to a place where the youngest member is about eighty-seven and it isn't considered good form to talk to anyone unless you and he were through the Peninsular War together. (ibid.: 193)

The general atmosphere of oppressive solemnity notwithstanding, Bingo immediately falls in love with a waitress, whom Bertie thinks "raised the standard of the place quite a bit" (ibid.: 194). A few days after, Bingo announces that he is engaged, and that his fiancée accepted him because, in a foreshadowing of her romantic, exaggerated nature, "she has a sort of idea that we must have met in some previous existence. She thinks I must have been a king in Babylon when she was a Christian slave. I can't say I remember it myself, but there may be something in it" (ibid.: 196). Bingo wants Bertie to once again pretend he is Rosie M. Banks to impress his uncle. Bertie refuses, but with the typical appeals to friendship and having been at school together, is as usual quickly talked into it:

[129] Originally published as "Bingo and the Little Woman" in 1922.

> And of course, dash it, at the end of ten minutes I'd allowed the blighter to talk me round. It's always the way. Anyone can talk me round. If I were in Trappist monastery, the first thing that would happen would be that some smooth performer would lure me into some frightful idiocy against my better judgment by means of the deaf-and-dumb language. (ibid.: 197)

Eager to please, Bertie sticks to his code. Bingo then talks him into sending an autographed copy of his book to Old Little, and to read "his" latest novel, *The Woman Who Braved All*, in order to be able to discuss it with him. Bertie is aghast, and we are again treated to a slight lampooning of romance literature of the early 20th century:

> Bar a weekly wrestle with the Pink'Un[130] and an occasional dip into the form book I'm not much of a lad reading, and my sufferings as I tackled 'The Woman' (curse her!) 'Who Braved All' were pretty fearful. But I managed to get through it, and only just in time, as it happened, for I'd hardly reached the bit where their lips met in one long, slow kiss and everything was still but for the gentle sighing of the breeze in the laburnum. (ibid.: 199)

Old Little is once again suitably melted by the saccharine book and "full of human charity and kindliness towards [his] species" (ibid.: 198). The cliché, despite itself, is effective. Old Little promises to reinstate the allowance and to ponder his blessings.

A few days later, Bertie runs into Bingo, who casually reveals that he is now married. Bertie is tasked with breaking the news to Old Little. Arriving at the latter's house, he quotes Rosie M. Banks' most recent novel to Old Little, a particularly soppy passage about an all-consuming love, decreed by fate, prevailing over any and all prohibitions. Old Little is softened, and gives his blessing to the marriage. Bingo's fiancée, however, reveals that she is Rosie M. Banks, and was merely posturing as a waitress to gather material for her

[130] *A Pink'Un and a Pelican* (1898) is a book of reminiscences concerning the members of the Pelican Club by Arthur M. Binstead, and is a source of some of the slang used by Wodehouse.

upcoming book. The uncle at first does not believe her, but is then convinced and angry at Bingo and Bertie's scheming. Both Old Little and Rosie M. Banks are particularly upset with Bertie, and on their way to demand personal explanations. Bertie escapes to Norfolk on Jeeves' advice. When he returns, he bumps into Old Little at Bingo's apartment, and finds that he avoids him in a strange, frightened manner. Bingo ultimately reveals that everything is fine between him, Rosie and his uncle, owing to the fact that Jeeves has told Old Little that Bertie is insane. Jeeves then resorts to elements of "Sir Roderick Comes to Lunch" in order to justify his claim: he declares that Bertie is himself convinced that he is Rosie M. Banks and reaches out to Sir Roderick Glossop, who confirms that Bertie fills his bedroom up with cats and fish and pinched Sir Roderick's hat. Bertie is incensed and decides to fire Jeeves, but upon arriving to his apartment, weakens:

> I pushed on to the old flat, seething like the dickens. One thing I was jolly certain of, and that was that this was where Jeeves and I parted company. A topping valet, of course, none better in London, but I wasn't going to allow that to weaken me. I buzzed into the flat like an east wind…and there was a box of cigarettes on the small table and the illustrated weekly papers on the big table and my slippers on the floor, and every dashed thing so bally *right*, if you know what I mean, that I started to calm down in the first two seconds. It was like one of those moments in a play where the chappie, about to steep himself in crime, suddenly hears the soft, appealing strains of the old melody he learned at his mother's knee. (ibid.: 212, italics in the original)

As the comic *pharmakos*, with "half London going about under the impression that [he's off his] chump", Bertie is nevertheless satisfied that things have turned all right for his friend and that Jeeves continues to provide, despite the strategic character assassination, perfect service beyond the call of duty, and consequently satisfaction – to a solid mass of humanity.

In conclusion, this novel is like *The Mating Season* (1949) very clearly permeated by the theme of Spring and the plot points of romantic comedy. It is Bingo's manic appetite for

love that causes upheaval in Bertie's life and leads him away from both his peace and quiet and his carefree, drone revelling. Through several schemes that Bertie is neither morally nor intellectually capable of devising or enforcing, Jeeves successfully manipulates the events in order to deliver Bingo to Rosie M. Banks, thus ending his chaotic spree, ensuring his happiness and disentangling Bertie from the collateral damage that he has routinely been put through. We see Bertie despair and eventually find relief, at his expense yet far from the madding crowd, in the safety of his childishness. The game was played, and to everyone's satisfaction – including the reader, whom Wodehouse has artfully seduced into several variations on the same theme.

Joy In the Morning (1946)

This 1946 Jeeves novel written over twenty years after *The Inimitable Jeeves* and just before, partly during, and after Wodehouse's WWII controversy is shot through with the theme of eventual harmony: of, as its title clearly states, a joy that comes in the morning. It begins, uncharacteristically, with the end of the narrative:

> After the thing was all over, when peril had ceased to loom and happy endings had been distributed in heaping handfuls and we were driving home with our hats on the side of our heads, having shaken the dust of Steeple Bumpleigh from our tyres, I confessed to Jeeves that there had been moments during the recent proceedings when Bertram Wooster, though no weakling, had come very near to despair.
>
> 'Within a toucher, Jeeves.'
>
> 'Unquestionably affairs had developed a certain menacing trend, sir.'
>
> 'I saw no ray of hope. It looked to me as if the blue bird had thrown in the towel and formally ceased to function. And yet here we are, all boomps-a-daisy. Makes one think a bit, that.'
>
> 'Yes, sir.'
>
> 'There's an expression on the tip of my tongue which seems to me to sum the whole thing up. Or, rather, when I say an expression, I mean a saying. A wheeze. A gag. What, I believe, is called a saw. Something about Joy doing something.
>
> 'Joy cometh in the morning, sir?"
>
> 'That's the baby.' (Wodehouse, 2008f: 9)

This latter reference is a biblical one, specifically to Psalm 30:5 which reads: "weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" – an allusion to the temporary nature of God's wrath, or taken metaphorically, to the temporary nature of all earthly troubles.

Bertie goes on to explain that he is referring to the "Steeple Bumpleigh horror." Steeple Bumpleigh, a fictional village in the county of Hampshire and the place where Bumpleigh Hall, the setting of most of the narrative in *Joy in the Morning*, is located, is immediately described in mock-Merry England terms:

> A picturesque settlement, yes. None more so in all Hampshire. It lay embowered, as I believe the expression is, in the midst of smiling fields and leafy woods, hard by a willow-fringed river, and you couldn't have thrown a brick in it without hitting a honeysuckle-covered cottage or beaning an apple-cheeked villager. But you remember what the fellow said – it's no bally bit of use every prospect pleasing if man is vile, and the catch about Steeple Bumpleigh was that it contained Bumpleigh Hall, which in its turn contained my Aunt Agatha and her second husband. (Wodehouse, 2008f: 10)

The reference to man being vile is from the 19th-century bishop and hymn-writer Reginald Heber's hymn *From Greenland's Icy Mountains* (Heber, 1898: 138-139). The hymn is an exhortation to evangelism in the quest to deliver humanity from sin, and Wodehouse is mock-evoking its lofty tones by leading Bertie to conclude that although, like the Greenland, "Afric" and Ceylon of the poem, Steeple Bumpleigh is beautiful, its inhabitants – like all men and women – are wretches. Bertie also comically twists the hymn's meaning from an exhortation to evangelise to the simple fact that his Aunt Agatha and her second husband are beyond the point of repair.

In addition, Steeple Bumpleigh provides the narrative's green world – the place, like the Forest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where everything is both plunged into chaos and returned to harmony before the return to the city can be accomplished, or in this case, Bertie

and Jeeves' escape from Bumpleigh back to London. The Steeple Bumpleigh Horror, Bertie claims, had been looming in the horizon: his friend Boko Fittleworth had often invited him to his bijou residence in the village, and Jeeves had been encouraging of a visit to Bumpleigh as he had heard the local fishing was admirable. Due to the presence of Aunt Agatha and her husband, Bertie has stayed clear of the place: "but all the while (…) the shadow of Steeple Bumpleigh was creeping nearer and nearer, and came a day when it tore off its whiskers and pounced" (ibid.: 11). This, as usual, takes place on a morning in which Bertie is feeling in fine fettle: "oddly enough, the morning on which this major disaster occurred was one that found me completely, even exuberantly, in the pink" (ibid.: 11). The peril of Bumpleigh once again rears its head when Bertie is told by Jeeves that Miss Zenobia 'Nobby' Hopwood, a good friend of Bertie's and his uncle Worplesdon's ward, wants Bertie to visit her at Bumpleigh Hall. She had swung by for a visit as Bertie slept, accompanied by G. D'Arcy Cheesewright, a former schoolmate of Bertie's "with a head like a pumpkin" (ibid.: 13) and also a resident of Bumpleigh. To boot, Lord Worplesdon calls Jeeves in order to invite him over to the Hall to ask him for advice, and Bertie decides to go for a stroll to enjoy the clement day. To compensate Jeeves for denying him his fishing at Bumpleigh, Bertie asks him if there is anything he can get him while out, and the latter replies:

> "[T]he new and authoritatively annotated edition of the works of the philosopher Spinoza. Since you are so generous, I would appreciate that very much.
> '(…) You're sure you've got the name right? Spinoza?
> 'Yes, sir.'
> 'It doesn't sound probable, but no doubt you know best.' (ibid.: 15-16)

As discussed above, Jeeves' taste for Spinoza is a matter of occasional record, and it fits the character particularly well. Earlier, in "Jeeves Takes Charge", we are told that Jeeves finds Nietzsche to be "fundamentally unsound" (Wodehouse, 2008c: 36); here, we are introduced

to his taste for Spinoza. Partly, the gag is that someone should be so intellectually advanced that they find Spinoza, a notoriously difficult, elliptical philosopher, to be a casual source of pleasure, but as we have seen, the philosopher's worldview is somewhat congruent with that of Jeeves. The gag is of course also partly that Bertie can only conceive of reading detective novels and other pulp fiction, or generally any author included in the "Book of the Month Club", which makes Jeeves' predilection all the more alien to him – unfathomable.

At the bookshop, the salesman is puzzled by Bertie's request and can only suggest a number of detective novels, as well as a work of fiction titled *Spindrift*. As Bertie holds the latter in his hand, his attention drifting off towards one of the book salesman's suggestions of popular books – a thriller titled *The Poisoned Pin* – he is taken aback by Florence Craye's surprised hollering, and immediately relates it to the detective novels that are currently on his mind, blurring the lines between fiction and 'reality': "I mean, if there's one thing I bar, it's the sort of story where people stagger to and fro, clutching their foreheads and registering strong emotion, and not a word of explanation as to what it's all about till the detective sums it up in the last chapter" (ibid.: 18). As a metafictional gag at the reader's expense, this revelation itself comes at the end of a chapter and Florence's reaction is only explained at the beginning of the following one.

We are left, meanwhile, with Bertie's sense of impending doom at seeing Florence, to whom he "had once been engaged to be married, and not so dashed long ago, either" (ibid.). The gap between the last time that Bertie was engaged to Florence Craye in the short story "Jeeves Takes Charge" (1916) and this statement from *Joy in the Morning* (1946) is one of thirty years. While the distance between the publication of two related narratives need not be reflected within the narratives themselves, there are internal inconsistencies in the saga's sense of time, and this is a particularly obvious case. According to Bertie, the actions of

"Jeeves Takes Charge" took place in 1904, which sets it firmly in the Edwardian period. Yet in *Joy in the Morning* (1946), the second time that he finds himself in danger of marrying Florence (ibid.: 22), there is a fleeting comic reference to the New Deal, which we will address below, and which situates the narrative solidly in the 1930s, specifically post-1933. Bertie's "not so long ago" is quite literally referring to thirty years' time, yet it is absolutely clear that neither Florence nor Bertie have aged thirty years between these two stories. Quite simply, it does not matter. Once again, what Wodehouse is doing is providing familiar details to supply the contemporary readers of his books with relatable points of reference.

Bertie then restates his dislike for Florence, putting it in simple terms: "the root of the trouble was that she was one of those intellectual girls, steeped to the gills in serious purpose, who are unable to see a male soul without wanting to get behind it and shove". He adds: "I had always felt that she was like someone training on to be an aunt" (ibid.: 20, 21). On the one hand, Bertie is indeed, as put by Jeeves, "one of Nature's bachelors" (Wodehouse, 2003: 217), and his status as a spirit of playful childishness cannot allow for a mature relationship, attracting instead women who desire to "get behind him and shove."

Many of the women who are romantic prospects in Bertie's life thus become an undesirable civilising influence, and an instance of the use of an old comic trope, that of the *senex*, the authority figure that is unnaturally rigid and suppresses the carnivalesque (and thus also foments it). Nevertheless, it must be said that Wodehouse's work includes a diversity of women characters not solely used for this purpose. Women might indeed function as a kind of *senex* in the narratives, specifically the aunt characters (although Aunt Dahlia is not truly a *senex*), but characters such as the mischievous Bobbie Wickham have more of a hellraiser role, Honoria Glossop is simply too intellectually and physically dominant for Bertie, Cynthia Wickhammersley, Nobby Hopwood and Corky Pirbright for

instance are more in the line of lively and charming co-conspirators and friends, and Madeline Bassett is an altogether different type of antagonist. They introduce some diversity into Wodehouse's women characters[131].

It is subsequently revealed that Florence's surprise is due to the fact that the book which Bertie is holding, *Spindrift*, is her own creation – a novel that she had recently written. When the salesman arrives with a book by Spinoza, she is further impressed by Bertie's growing intellect and invites him to Bumpleigh Hall. As per his Code, Bertie is reluctant to let her down. Outside of the bookshop, Bertie then runs into his old friend/nemesis, Stilton Cheesewright, and learns that the latter is engaged to Florence Craye and that Nobby Hopwood has become engaged to Boko Fittleworth, the man who had invited him to Steeple Bumpleigh in the first place. Stilton, a single-minded bully, is immediately suspicious of Bertie's acquaintance with Florence, making Florence's recent interaction with Bertie all the more dangerous. Bertie reflects on the engagement with relief, but then becomes concerned with Stilton's own wellbeing instead:

> [I]t is seldom that the Woosters think only of self, and I now found the contemplation of the dreadful thing which had come upon this man filling me almost to the brim with pity and terror. It seemed to me that a Save Stilton Cheesewright movement ought to be got under way immediately. (ibid.: 35)

Bertie immediately puts Stilton's predicament into mock-philosophical terms, specifically in terms of hubris:

> One could see, of course, how the tragedy had occurred. *It was the poor blister's pathetic desire to do his soul a bit of good that had landed him in this awful predicament*. As is so often the case with these stolid, beefy birds, he had always had a yearning for higher things. This whole business of jacking up the soul is one that varies according to

[131] Having said that, a deeper analysis of this topic, which could prove valuable, would be extraneous to this thesis.

> what Jeeves calls the psychology of the individual, some being all for it, others not. You take me, for instance. I don't say I've got much of a soul, but, such as it is, I'm perfectly satisfied with the little chap. I don't want people fooling about with it. (…) But with Stilton it was different. Buttonhole him and offer to give his soul a shot in the arm, and you found in him a receptive audience and a disciple ready to try anything once. (ibid.: 36, my italics)

The undertone is as ever slightly ironic: Stilton's general instincts to try to do himself good appear to have little that is wrong with them at first glance, and Bertie comes across as someone carelessly uninterested in doing himself good of any sort. Bertie then concludes:

> [H]ow long would this last? I mean to say, he might be liking the set-up, but, as I saw it, the time would come when he would examine his soul, note how it had sprouted and say, 'Fine. That's enough to be going on with. Let's call it a day,' only to discover that he was inextricably entangled with a girl who had merely started. It was from this fate, which is sometimes called the bitter awakening, that I wanted to rescue him. (ibid.)

Bertie is thus actually concerned that Stilton – with whom he only seems to share a common past at school and Oxford as well as a mutual dislike – will not be able to call his soul his own, failing to properly get to know himself due to a desire for constant improvement and subjecting his free will to Florence's influence and control. In order to save Stilton from this fate, Bertie writes a strongly-worded letter about Florence's faults to Nobby, hoping she will persuade Stilton to call things off. Later putting the matter to Jeeves, Bertie evokes Thomas Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" to convey Stilton's ignorance of the danger that looms in a union with Florence: "Alas, regardless of their fate, the little victims play"[132] (ibid.: 38). Gray's poem is a meditation on the dubious value of wisdom, and although in this particular instance the quote is used merely for dramatic effect regarding Stilton's obliviousness of the impending doom that is an engagement with Florence, there is something about the poem that resonates with Bertie's innocent, sunnier side:

[132] The original poems reads "Alas, regardless of their doom" (Gray, 1966: 8).

Yet ah! why should they know their fate?
Since sorrow never comes too late,
And happiness too swiftly flies.
Thought would destroy their paradise.
No more; where ignorance is bliss,
'Tis folly to be wise (Gray, 1966: 9-10)

Jeeves then reluctantly discloses to Bertie that Worplesdon, Florence Craye's father, is under a lot of stress as he is amid a merger between his shipping firm and a prominent American one. Jeeves has conveniently suggested that an important, covert meeting take place at a cottage nearby Bumpleigh Hall, and that he and Bertie, who can be expected to keep matters secret, supervise the proceedings, which would conveniently allow Jeeves to do some fishing at the same time: "It needed no more than that word 'river' to tell me what had occurred. I saw the whole hideous plot" (ibid.: 43). Learning that Jeeves and he are to stay at a cottage dubbed "Wee Nooke", Bertie absolutely refuses to go to Steeple Bumpleigh, finding the cliché, Merrie England rurality of it all unpleasant, but is reminded by Jeeves that his Uncle would be displeased and acquiesces, musing: "It has been well said of Bertram Wooster by those who enjoy his close acquaintance that if there is one quality more than another that distinguishes him, it is the ability to keep the lip stiff and upper and make the best of things" (ibid.: 45). Once more, we find here a defence of stoicism in the variety fostered by the late Victorian English public school, but applied to enduring a holiday at a cottage with a clichéd name for the sake of one's uncle's business interests.

All the forces conspiring to take Bertie to Steeple Bumpleigh and its horrors thus finally come together: Boko, Nobby and Florence's desire for a visit; Uncle Worplesdon's desire for assistance and Jeeves's desire to fish. The one notable exclusion, of course, is Bertie's own volition, although his conscience impels him to get involved in Stilton's

situation. Nearing Bumpleigh, Bertie's optimistic streak is bolstered by the fact that Aunt Agatha is absent and that there will be a fancy dress ball. Meeting Nobby on the way, she reveals that she and Boko both fell in love at first sight that year at the end of May – in Springtime. Bertie finds that unlikely, as while Nobby "is a girl liberally endowed with oomph" (ibid.: 52), Boko "is a cross between a comedy juggler and a parrot that has been dragged through a hedge backwards" (ibid.: 61). Uncle Worplesdon, however, as the *senex* or *heavy* figure, is opposed to the match, thus providing the novel's traditional New Comedy romantic storyline. Worplesdon, it turns out, is suspicious of Boko's career as a writer: "[Worlplesdon's] been in business all his life, and he can't imagine anybody having any real money except a business man" (ibid.: 54). He is also, tellingly, suspicious of Boko's personal grooming, namely his trousers – as we have seen, a recurring motif. Bertie reveals himself to be, as ever, liberal in matters of social status and the formal side of the masquerade, replying: "[Uncle Worplesdon]'s an ass. Boko's a writer. He must know that writers are allowed a wide latitude. Besides, though I wouldn't care to have Jeeves hear me say so, trousers aren't everything" (ibid.: 54).

It later transpires that Boko had previously been engaged to Florence, which adds him to a list comprising Bertie and now Stilton. Uncle Worplesdon finds this to mean that Boko is an irresponsible *dilettante*, or according to Nobby: "a butterfly (…) flitting from flower to flower and sipping" (ibid.: 55). Meeting Boko at his bijou residence, Bertie and he share a brief moment's reflection on Life and Boko's current position – weak-willed and prone to distraction, he must marry Nobby within a month's time, before he leaves to Hollywood, where distraction abounds:

> There was a silence, broken only by the musical sound of us having another go at the elixir. Then he heaved a sigh and said that life was rummy, to which I assented that in many respects it was very rummy."
>
> 'Take my case. (…) Did Nobby tell you what the position was?
>
> 'About Uncle Percy gumming the works, you mean? Oh, rather.'
>
> 'A nice bit of box fruit, what?'
>
> 'So it struck me. Decidedly. The heart bled.'
>
> (…)
>
> 'If I were to submit a story to [your aunt Dahlia's women's rag, "Milady's Boudoir"] about a girl who couldn't marry a fellow without some blasted head of the family's consent, she would hoot at it, That is to say, I am not allowed to turn an honest penny by using this complication in my work, but it is jolly well allowed to come barging in and ruining my life. (ibid.: 63-64)

Again the subject of the incongruity of life – its "rumminess" – arises. In this case, what seems particularly jarring to Boko is that something that would be considered *clichéd* and bad form by the lowest of literary journals is actually taking place in his life – with no regard for tasteful aesthetics. As a plot device, it is an ironic, metafictional nod at the contrived, traditional nature of the novel's plot. But it is also the reiteration of its simultaneous relevance and irrelevance as a trope. That is, as a nod to the real origins of the cliché and the artificiality of the rules that brought it about. In a sense, the need for the consent of the head of the family, here explained by Nobby being Worplesdon's ward and not being legally capable of deciding her future, is just as ridiculous as any other potential societal constraint imposed on true love.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that Boko has, after being encouraged by Nobby, attempted to be genial during a lunch with Worplesdon, and decided to introduce a carnivalesque element to a meeting with a dour *senex*: springing "Joke Goods" such as "The Plate Lifter", "The Dribble Glass" and "The Surprise Salt Shaker" on him, and consequently failing to ingratiate himself (ibid.: 66). Bertie despairs, and Wodehouse introduces a playful jab at the absent mindedness of creative types which is both a jab at

Wodehouse himself, who as we have seen used a voice similar to Bertie's for self-deprecating purposes, and at Bertie's own simplicity:

> I groaned a hollow groan. The heart had sunk. One has, of course, to make allowances for writers, all of them being more or less loony. Look at Shakespeare, for instance. Very unbalanced. Used to go about stealing ducks. (…) [But] Boko had carried an author's natural goofiness too far. Even Shakespeare might have hesitated to go to such lengths. (ibid.: 67)

Boko then requests Bertie to plead his cause with his uncle. On his way to Wee Nooke, Bertie runs into Cheesewright, further foreshadowing upcoming events by dubbing the latter an "Othello". A conversation ensues, during which the association between heavies and authority figures both in the law and in Wodehouse becomes evident. Magistrates, brain specialists and policemen, due to the solemn roles they play, are lambasted for their rigidity. In this narrative, it is revealed that Stilton is currently working as a countryside policeman, thus donning a uniform that Bertie refers to as "the panoply of the awful majesty of the Law" (ibid.: 69). It is also revealed that many of the second sons of Bertie's acquaintance have gone into The Force, a hint at the rising need for them to provide for themselves that showcases a post-war reality. Contrary to Stilton, however, most of these acquaintances of Bertie's were policemen in London, and had hopes of "getting into Scotland Yard and rising to great heights in their profession" (ibid.: 71), rather than becoming countryside policemen. Bertie then adds that he has doubts about Stilton's prospects in the Yard, however, should he ever have any, while also taking a jab at the cult of sports in public schools and Oxbridge:

> [Stilton's] entire formative years […] had been spent in dipping an oar into the water, giving it a shove and hauling it out again. Only a pretty dumb brick would fritter away his golden youth doing that sort of thing – which, in addition to being silly, is also the deuce of a sweat – and Stilton Cheesewright was a pretty dumb brick. A fine figure of a young fellow as far northwards as the neck, but above that solid concrete" (ibid.: 72)

He further speculates that Stilton would sooner become "one of those Scotland Yard bunglers who used […] to be getting into Sherlock Holmes' hair (ibid.: 72). Knowing that Bertie and Florence had recently seen each other at the bookshop where he tried to buy the works of Spinoza, and having found a signed copy of *Spindrift* addressed to Bertie, Stilton believes that Bertie has come to steal Florence away from him. Bertie is unsuccessful at dispelling his suspicions, and later running into Florence, learns that a rift between her and Stilton is on the horizon: she disapproves of him becoming "a common constable" when "his uncle wants him to stand for Parliament and is prepared to pay all his expenses and to finance him generously for the rest of his life" (ibid.: 77-78). This is yet another element that proves that Florence, self-professed intellectual modernist, is in fact not so, but rather a conventional person who places great importance on status.

At Wee Nooke, Bertie runs into Florence's brother, Edwin the Boy Scout, whom we have already seen is obsessed with doing "good deeds", regardless of their actual outcome. Edwin had been cleaning Wee Nooke, and boasts that without him the place would have been a mess, with, according to Bertie: "a smugness which jarred upon my sensibilities" (ibid.: 82). As Bertie is about to leave the house, Edwin decides to clean its chimney with gunpowder and paraffin, causing it to burst into flames. Reluctantly entertaining thoughts of chivalry, Bertie decides to run into the building "it being (…) one of those situations where *noblesse* more or less *obliges*", when Edwin emerges unharmed (ibid.: 87). Bertie still swoops in to rescue his Sinbad the sailor costume for the upcoming fancy dress ball, but is met outside by his uncle, who disregards his explanations and blames him for the fire, calling him a lunatic (ibid.: 91) and mourning the loss of the place where he intended to hold his secret meeting. Uncle Worplesdon then asks Jeeves to take up residence at the Hall and

Bertie is left to room with Boko, the two parting comically over the poet Thomas Moore's words on the gazelle, from the romance *Lalla Rookh*:

> 'The poet Moore, sir. He complained that he had never nursed a dear gazelle, to glad him with its soft black eye, but when it came to know him well and love him, it was sure to die.
> 'It's the same with me, [Jeeves]. I am a gazelle short.' (ibid.: 97)

Bertie also expresses his fear of incurring in Cheesewright's anger, whereupon the latter might, as per Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib", "swoop on [him] (…) like the wolf on the fold" (ibid.: 99), and realises that he has lost the brooch that Aunt Agatha had told him to give Florence, and which Edwin had offered to take to her earlier. Jeeves offers to go to London and back with a new brooch to replace it. Not only does the image of Stilton as a wolf and Bertie as the fold come across as lightly comic in and of itself, but in this particular reference to Byron, Bertie is ultimately likening Stilton Cheesewright to Sennacherib, King of Assyria, and himself to the holy city of Jerusalem. The descending incongruity, not only from Byron's adaptation of this Biblical episode to *Joy in the Morning*, but also from Jerusalem to Bertie Wooster, is gleefully obvious.

Bertie then crosses paths with Nobby, with whom he discusses Stilton. Nobby claims to appreciate the latter's desire to earn his own living, and attributes that desire to the fact that Florence made him read Karl Marx – again, showing that Nobby's unpretentious nature is indifferent to status, while Florence's dalliances with theory ignore what said theory signifies. Stilton, Nobby claims, is impressionable and Bertie, who agrees, recalls him having once taken up Buddhism on a whim at Oxford in his frantic quest to "jack up the soul" in different directions. It is to Stilton's credit, Nobby observes, that he has decided to provide for himself after reading Marx. The fact that Florence is puzzled that Marx should

have influenced him thusly only illustrates that she is the farthest thing from an intellectual possible, and instead driven chiefly by self-interest. Bertie concludes that he no longer wishes to save his "frenemy" from his fate with Florence and hopes that Nobby will convince him to stand for Parliament, chiming in that "there are bigger fatheads than Stilton among our legislators" (ibid.: 111). At Boko's residence, Nobby later reveals that her guardian's thoughts of Boko being a sipping butterfly owe to the fact that in his youth he used to "go about with rather a rackety set in London and he knew a lot of writers who made quite a bit from time to time and spent it all in a couple of days and had to live on what they could borrow" (ibid.: 115), which grounds his concern in fact and reveals a more human side to this *senex* figure. With Bertie in no position to plead with his uncle for Boko and Nobby's engagement, Boko fantasises about playing the role of a hero in a farce: "Suppose (…) I were to save the heavy's home from being looted by a midnight marauder, that would make him feel I had the right stuff in me, I fancy. He would say 'Egad! A fine young fellow, this Fittleworth!' would he not?" (ibid.: 116). He then begins to model a plan on such a situation and insists, as usual, that Bertie play the part of the burglar. Bertie attempts to refuse at first:

> [T]hat play of Boko's, to which I alluded earlier, had been one of those mystery thrillers, and (…) it was only natural that some such set-up as this should have occurred to his diseased mind. (…) Nobody is more anxious than Bertram Wooster to lend a helping hand to Love's young dream, but there are limits to what he is prepared to sign on for, and sharply defined limits, at that. (ibid.: 117)

But Nobby and Boko's insistence, complete with allusions to Bertie as Sir Galahad, bring him around reluctantly, eager not to disappoint:

> Until now, I had, as I say, been all ready with the *nolle prosequi*, and had indeed opened my lips to shoot it across with all the emphasis at my disposal. But as I caught Nobby's eye, fixed on me in a devout sort of way, and at the same time was conscious of Boko shaking my hand and kneading my shoulder, something seemed to check me. I mean,

> there really didn't seem to be any way of *nolly-prosequi*-ing without spoiling the spirit of the party.
> 'Oh, rather,' I said. 'Absolutely.'
> But not blithely. Not with any real chirpiness. (ibid.: 119)

These meek expressions of dissatisfaction on Bertie's part are sprinkled throughout the series, proof of Bertie's reluctant but steadfast adherence to his code and his inability to actively cause others pain. In *Right Ho, Jeeves*, as he tries to reconcile Angela to Tuppy Glossop, the following exchange takes place:

> "Oh, for goodness sake, go away and boil your head, Bertie!"
> I drew myself up.
> "That," I replied, with dignity, "is just what I am going to go away and boil. At least, I mean, I shall now leave you. I have said my say."
> "Good."
> "But permit me to add----"
> "I won't."
> "Very good," I said coldly. "In that case, tinkerty tonk."
> And I meant it to sting. (Wodehouse, 2008i: 229)

As Boko and Bertie skulk about the dark, night-time gardens of Bumpleigh, Bertie feels as if he is being taken, once more not through the pastoral haven Bumpleigh appears to be, but a fantasy hellscape: "I might […] be safe from the dragon, but what about the hippogriffs? […] What price the hippogriffs?" (ibid. 122). This contrasts with Jeeves' later rhapsody on the beauty of that night, quoting for that purpose from *The Merchant of Venice*: "Look how the floor of heaven is thick inlaid with patines [sic] of bright gold" (ibid.: 129; Shakespeare, 2003: 168). As Bertie readies himself to break Worplesdon's scullery window, he finds himself reflecting empathetically on what he imagines is a burglar's plight:

> What a way to earn a living! […] I must have used up quite three minutes of my ten in meditating on these hardy fellows and wondering what made them go in for such an exacting life work. Large profits, no doubt, and virtually no overhead, but think what they must have to spend on nerve specialists and rest cures. (ibid.: 123)

Edwin is ominously wandering around the premises, and Bertie suddenly bumps into Jeeves, who tells him that he has taken care of the brooch situation and tells him that Worplesdon is carrying on his business meeting with Mr. Chichester Clam in the potting shed rather than Wee Nooke. Bertie pities Mr. Clam, who being American has no clue of the perils of Bumpleigh. Bertie and Jeeves run into Worplesdon on his way to the potting shed, and are interrupted by Stilton, who has been told that there is a burglar in the premises by young Edwin, when Boko Fittleworth announces he has trapped a burglar in the potting shed. Bertie concludes: "He knew now what happened to people who came to Steeple Bumpleigh" (ibid.: 137).

The presence of Chichester Clam and the merger of his and Lord Worpldeson's company is of course the most salient transatlantic element of this narrative. After contextualising the pastoral, green world elements of Steeple Bumpleigh and its actual sinister overtones for the potentially non-English reader, Wodehouse now gives a tongue-in-cheek contextualisation of a stereotypical American magnate for the non-American reader:

> Here […] was one of those solid business men who are America's pride, whose lives are as regular and placid as that of a bug in a rug. (…) Up in the morning bright and early at his Long Island home. The bath. The shave. The eggs. The cereal. The coffee. The drive to the station. The 8.15. The cigar. The *New York Times*. The arrival at the Pennsylvania terminus. […] That was the year in, year out routine of a man like Chichester Clam, Sundays and holidays excepted, and it was one ill calculated to fit him for the raw excitements and jungle conditions of Steeple Bumpleigh. [It] must have come upon him as a totally new experience, causing him to wonder what had hit him – like a man who, stooping to pluck a nosegay of wild flowers on a railway line, is unexpectedly struck in the small of the back by the Cornish Express. (ibid.: 138)

The comic takeaway being, of course, that the Merry England, green world idyll of Steeple Bumpleigh is far more dangerous than any gangster Chichester Clam plausibly might

encounter in the United States. Bertie's ominous statement is quickly borne out by the fact that Boko has unwittingly trapped Chichester Clam in the potting shed. Worplesdon is outraged and demands he be set loose, but refuses to divulge Clam's identity, secrecy being paramount. Boko is visibly upset. When Nobby hears of it, Bertie explains the plan's failure through a recurring verbal leitmotif of the novel ("a concatenation of circumstances" [ibid.: 146]), telling her that he thinks that "you can never trust an author not to make an ass of himself" (ibid.: 147). The use of "a concatenation of circumstances" is a particularly obvious way of resorting to a cliché, a particularly vague one, in order to explain reality away – and simultaneously to point out that function of the cliché. Bertie finds it easier to explain the complicated chain of events that led to Boko's current low standing with Worplesdon by simply calling it a "concatenation of circumstances", that is, resorting to the authority of a scientific-sounding cliché, than to actually proceed with an explanation, both highlighting the highfalutin peculiarity of the expression, especially of the word "concatenation", and stating its memorability, its aptness to linger in the ear. Similarly, Jeeves often explains certain behaviours, as we will see, by ascribing them to the "psychology of the individual" (ibid.: 163).

In a vein similar to the slighting of authors proffered just before, after Boko has been duly chastised as "a miserable fathead" by Nobby, Bertie advises him not to worry: "You can't go by what a girl says when she's giving you the devil for making a chump of yourself. It's like Shakespeare. Sounds well, but doesn't mean anything" (ibid.: 152). The takeaway being both a certain candid daring of Bertie's in claiming that Shakespeare's words mean nothing – and yet again a knock at the intellectual pedestal writers are often placed upon, and the limits of their craft – but perhaps also a reference to Macbeth's famous reflection on the futility of life:

> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing. (Shakespeare, 1997: 229)

Were we to consider life to be meaningless, or meaningful beyond our comprehension, it certainly should follow that tales of life are ultimately equally meaningless. The irony of the paradox that the author of such words puts himself in cannot easily escape him. And in the case of Bertie's tales, he himself comes across, perhaps more barefacedly, as yet another idiot whose tales are full of sound of fury. But, again, they sound well – their music is patent. As in Nobby's abuse of Boko, literature, and perhaps words in general, are held to be particularly meaningless in the face of Love, to which point Bertie paradoxically quotes romantic poet Robert Southey's lines: "Love is indestructible/its holy flame burneth for ever[sic]"[133] (ibid.: 152). But Bertie explains further:

> Love's silken bonds are not broken just because the female half of the sketch takes umbrage at the loony behaviour of the male partner (…). However devoutly a girl may worship the man of her choice, there always comes a time when she feels an irresistible urge to haul off and let him have it in the neck. I suppose if the young lovers I've known in my time were placed end to end – difficult to manage, of course, but what I mean is just suppose they were – they would reach half-way down Piccadilly. And I couldn't think of a single dashed one who hadn't been through what Boko had been through to-night. (ibid.: 153)

As predicted by Bertie, the impending doom of Nobby's anger has quickly passed, and both she and Boko have queried Jeeves about hatching a new scheme to please Worplesdon. Jeeves suggests that Bertie abuse him verbally and that Boko defend him. Bertie refuses to

[133] This is perhaps another instance of Wodehouse quoting from memory, as Southey's poem actually reads "its holy flame forever burneth" (Southey, 1842: 585).

join in the scheme, but gives in when told by Boko that he will make Nobby cry. Bertie is then assaulted by Edwin, whose obsessive boy scout nature impels him to keep up a thorough search for burglars on the grounds. Bertie is incensed, but hearing that Edwin has also accidentally assaulted his own father, Worplesdon, reflects: "I had that sort of awed feeling one gets sometimes, when one has a close-up of the workings of Providence and realizes that nothing is put into this world without a purpose, not even Edwin, and that the meanest creatures have their uses" (ibid.: 161). The angle is of course invective against Edwin's rigidity through praise of Providence, but an earnest point about the latter is still made – that there may be an underlying, if hard to pinpoint, sense to things. Yet Edwin immediately reveals that Florence and Stilton have broken their engagement over an argument about Worplesdon, a Justice of the Peace, whom Stilton claims is "shackling the police" by not allowing Stilton to arrest Chichester Clam. Bertie believes the news, as considering the "psychology of the individual" (ibid.: 163), the immutable nature of true love does not exactly apply to Stilton and Florence – rather, this is perhaps more of a case of matching two villains to everyone's satisfaction. To make matters more perilous for Bertie, Edwin reveals that he has found the original brooch Bertie had brought to Bumpleigh hall and given it to Florence, claiming it was a gift from Bertie.

Bertie praises Stilton to Florence in order to mend their engagement and avoid being roped into one, but is told "Bertie, you are extraordinary! (…) So quixotic. It is what I love in you. Nobody hearing you would dream that it is your dearest wish to marry me yourself" (ibid.: 173). Distraught, Bertie returns to Boko's residence to find him still cold, which further distresses him: "The circs being what they were, this absence of the sympathetic note distressed me, filling me with what I have heard Jeeves describe as thoughts that lie too deep for tears. A man in my position wants his friends to rally round him" (ibid.: 177). The

reference is again to Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality": "To me the meanest flower that blows can give/Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears" (Wordsworth, 1904: 256). Boko suggests that he got out of his own engagement with Florence by adopting a secret method, and Bertie agrees to follow the plan of insulting Worplesdon in exchange for this secret, reflecting, in self-defeating *alazon* fashion, though not without irony, on the nature of compromise: "I have a will of iron, but it can be switched off if the circumstances seem to demand it. The strong man always knows when to yield and make concessions. I have frequently found myself doing so in my relation with Jeeves" (ibid.: 180).

Reflecting on his predicament, Bertie dwells once again on the discrepancy between human emotions and the reality around them – the absence of the objective correlative: "though all Nature smiled, there was, as I have indicated, no disposition on the part of Bertram to follow its example"[134] (ibid.: 182). He puts his predicament to Jeeves, another exchange about the fretful porpentine's locks ensues, during which Bertie remarks, in line with his previous dig at Shakespeare's work: "I suppose half the time Shakespeare just shoved down anything that came into his head" (ibid.: 189). Once more, the fun resides in this mixture of a comment delivered by a wise fool: the iconoclastic slighting of such revered work, which dispels an unthinking aura of praise and grounds Shakespeare as a man and author like any other, and simultaneously a sweeping generalisation by someone not entirely familiar with his work. Jeeves decides to make inquiries about Boko's secret method. Hearing of this, Boko is disappointed, asking Bertie, in mock-reference to a patriotic music hall song, "Sons of the Sea", dating from 1914: "Where are the boys of the bulldog breed?"

[134] The use of "all Nature smiled" appears to be a nod to Richard Barham Harris' *Ingoldsby Legends*, written under the name of Thomas Ingoldsby: "The Sun when down – all Nature smiled – but Nelly shook her head!" (Ingoldsby, 1892: 302).

(ibid.: 189). Jeeves returns with the information that Boko had kicked Edwin in the behind, thus eliciting Florence's outrage and ending the engagement. Bertie prepares to do the same.

As examined above, his growing sense of foreboding is out of sync with the lack of gravitas in the landscape. The mission of kicking young Edwin is itself made mock-Shakespearean. Jeeves comments that Bertie's hesitation between understanding what he must do and actually carrying the plan out is "much the same thing [that] had bothered Hamlet" (ibid.: 194), and describes it resorting to *Julius Caesar*: "between the acting of a dreadful thing and the first motion, all the interim is like a phantasma or a hideous dream" (ibid.: 194). In two pages, references are made to *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. As Bertie resorts to a subterfuge to manoeuvre Edwin into kicking him, he reflects on his moral code: "anybody knowing *Bertram Wooster and his rigid principles* might have supposed that such wilful tampering with the truth would have caused the blush of shame to mantle his cheek. Not so, however" (ibid.: 198, my italics).

Unfortunately, Edwin had just done Florence one of his "good-deeds", and she is pleased that Bertie kicked him. Nobby urges Bertie to carry on the Worplesdon plan by promising that she will show Florence a scathing letter Bertie had written about her when attempting to save Stilton from a gloomy future. But as Bertie waits for his uncle in the latter's study, Worplesdon arrives, frantic, after accidentally stepping on Boko and driving him off the grounds, rendering the plan useless: "by George, that is what Bumpleigh Hall wants *to make it an earthly Paradise* – fewer and better Fittleworths" (ibid.: 210, my italics). While this is of course a general expression of annoyance on Worplesdon's part, it is also reflective of his conception of Paradise: a place devoid of people whose company chafes. Having heard that Bertie kicked Edwin, Worplesdon decides that Bertie is an able fellow and should therefore advise him about his next meeting with Clam, who is timid and has

been traumatised by his last experience in the potting shed. Worplesdon claims this is due to the

> neurotic tendency in the American business man. (…) Over in America, it appears, life for the business man is one long series of large cups of coffee, punctuated withs shocks from the New Deal[135]. He drinks a quart of coffee, and gets a nasty surprise from the New Deal. To pull himself together, he drinks another quart of coffee (…). Vicious circle. No nervous system could stand it (ibid.: 214)

America is thus again the counterpoint to the earthly "paradise" of Bumpleigh Hall, where people appear to get greater jolts of fear than in any American metropolis.

Bertie tells Nobby that, if he is successful in arranging for the Clam meeting, he will be in a position to plead Boko's cause: "already I am practically Uncle Percy's ewe lamb. That will make me still ewer" (ibid.: 221). Jeeves comes up with the solution of a meeting during the fancy dress ball at East Wibley, the one that Bertie has been hinting at since he departed to Steeple Bumpleigh. Going to this ball dressed as Sinbad the Sailor was, as we know, the only thing he had truly looked forward to. But Jeeves suggests that for the purpose of the meeting and in order to successfully conceal his uncle's identity – especially because Aunt Agatha would frown upon him attending such a frivolous entertainment – Bertie must relinquish his Sinbad costume and attend with Boko wearing different costumes to benefit from Worplesdon's good mood.

On the day of the ball, Worplesdon confesses he used to be a keen reveller and had only not married Bertie's aunt thirty years before because she had been shocked by his outrageous behaviour. Boko, who had driven with Jeeves to London so that he could persuade Clam to return to Bumpleigh, has chosen a "sex-appealy" Cavalier costume for

[135] While of course the book was partly started during the New Deal, this reference was rather out of date in 1946, and further places the timeline of the story post 1933, twenty-nine years after the 1904 of "Jeeves Takes Charge".

himself, and one of Pierrot in mauve for Bertie, to his chagrin (ibid.: 235). But he has got his suitcase mixed up at the Drones, and now only has a Borstal Rovers football outfit at his disposal. Bertie despairs at having no costume, reflecting that it is too late to drive down to London and that in Steeple Bumpleigh the goods available are scarce and stereotypically bucolic: "it had only one shop, that so ably conducted by Mrs Greenless opposite the Jubilee watering-trough: and this, after it had supplied you with string, pink sweets, sides of bacon, tinned goods and *Old Moore's Almanac*, was a spent force" (ibid.: 240). Jeeves soon returns with a policeman's costume which he found by the banks of the river, where Bertie had earlier been swimming and had a nasty encounter with Stilton. Jeeves appears to be at ease with having stolen a policeman's uniform: "I acted from the best motives, sir. It seemed to me that at all costs it was essential that you take part in to-night's festivities" (ibid.: 245). Bertie understands, but reflects on his position:

> [M]ine is a fearful predicament. One false step, and Stilton will be on the back of my neck, shouting for Justices of the Peace to come and sentence me to a long spell in the cooler. And, apart from that, has it occurred to you that this Cheesewright is about forty inches more round the chest and eight inches more round the head than me? (…) Why, dash it, I'd rather go to this binge as the meanest Pierrot. *Still, I suppose my bally preferences don't count*". (ibid.: 245, my italics)

Tellingly, Jeeves resorts to George Bernard Shaw's play *The Admirable Bashville* (1901) and replies in the name of the greater good: "I fear not, sir. For know, rash youth (…) that in this star crost world Fate drives us all to find our chiefest good in what we can and not in what we would" (ibid.: 246). The conclusion is thus that Bertie should act not only in his self-interest, but do what fosters the greater good. A sacrifice consisting of something as unimportant as risking some trouble with Stilton Cheesewright (and thus the police) is worth the outcome of an otherwise happy ending for Worplesdon and Clam as well as Nobby and

Boko. Bertie agrees: "'Quite', I responded. 'Yes, I suppose the bullet must be bitten. Right ho, Jeeves,' I said, summoning to my aid all the splendid Wooster fortitude, 'lead me to it' (ibid.: 246).

The dramatic summoning of the Wooster fortitude which ends Chapter 25 is mock-dramatic, in a mock-epic vein. Bertie is the self-sacrificing hero, and the context and tone of the book typically sap the pathos of his heroism, but the narrative does not mock the principle upon which he acts – Bertie does not, like Don Quixote, return to his sanity and recant his excessive idealism[136]. He is no zealot, like Quixote, but the fact that he manages to, and is aided in adhering to his own principles is never mocked. Nevertheless, will Bertie truly be jeopardised for the sake of the others? The end-as-beginning of the novel lets us know that, even if Bertie does sacrifice himself, and he certainly sacrifices his time and well-being for the duration of the narrative, all will come to a good end. The reader is merely propelled forward by a desire to enjoy the prose – revealing the happy ending before the narrative gets underway is a blatant, tongue-in-cheek eschewing of the purpose of plot other than to keep the reader immersed in intricate, intertextual comic prose. To create such an invisible backbone, so to speak, for almost 300 pages becomes the challenge.

Boko and Bertie head to the ball. Stilton's suspicions are temporarily allayed by Boko, who suggests that Edwin may have been responsible for the theft of his uniform: "There comes a moment, he had pointed out, in the life of every Boy Scout when he suddenly feels fed up with doing acts of kindness and allows his human side to get uppermost" (ibid.: 248). Bertie's car breaks down mid-journey and he arrives at the ball late. There, he discovers that Worplesdon is celebrating heartily at the bar, having completed his deal with Clam much to

[136] It must be said that it is far too simplistic to conclude, from *Don Quixote*, that Quixote is merely a lunatic who went through an episode and regained sanity before he perished. The charm of his idealism, foolish though it is, cannot be denied, and Quixote remains a utopian figure in literature.

his advantage, and may pass out at any moment. Worplesdon intends to revel heartily, in what he calls "a night for unstinted rejoicing" (ibid.: 251), and Bertie reflects that he is ripe for accepting Boko and Nobby's engagement: "It was like something out of Dickens, and I saw that he was going to be clay in my hands" (ibid.). Yet Worplesdon proves difficult to persuade until Bertie reveals that Boko too had once kicked Edwin the Boy Scout: "I confess (…) that what you tell me causes me to look on the fellow with a somewhat kindlier eye. Yes, to some extent, I admit, it has modified my views regarding him. It just shows that there is good in all of us" (ibid.: 257). The joke being – like with Soapy Sid – that Bertie recognises Boko's humanity in his relatable flaws, juxtaposed with the idea that kicking a Boy Scout should be considered a virtue. Still hesitant, Worplesdon is finally convinced by the fact that their engagement would mean that Boko and Nobby will immediately move to Hollywood, where Boko cannot pester him endlessly. Bertie advises Worplesdon to sit in Boko's car to sober up and tells him: "By Jove, Uncle Percy, you'll be thankful for this later on, when you realize what a bit of a goose you're handing *two young hearts in springtime*" (ibid.: 259, my italics), then telling Boko to address Worplesdon and driving home to remove his police uniform, dispose of it in the river and rest.

Just as he is about to rest, he finds the fretful porpentine to which Jeeves had alluded throughout the narrative, and which we have previously mentioned above (p. 59), literalised between his sheets:

> It was not immediately that the tired eyelids closed in sleep, for some hidden hand had placed a hedgehog between the sheets – practically, you might say, *a fretful porpentine*. Assuming this to be Boko's handiwork, I was strongly inclined to transfer it to his couch. Reflecting, however, that while this would teach him a much needed lesson it would be a bit tough on the porpentine, I took the latter into the garden and loosed it into the grass (Wodehouse, 2008f: 259, my italics).

He assumes it to be Boko's handiwork but refuses to engage in that kind of pranking as it would not be fair to the porpentine. He reflects: "the day's work done, I turned in and soon sank into a dreamless slumber" (ibid.: 261). The next morning Bertie hears good news from Nobby, and exclaims: "it was (…) with no uncertain feeling that *this was the maddest, merriest day of all the glad new year* that I returned to the house, where genial smells from the dining-room greeted the nostrils and caused me to dress like a streak" (ibid.: 262, my italics). The line is lifted from Tennyson's *The May Queen* poem, particularly popular in the Victorian era, during which its repetitive cadence was also put to music, and refers to the celebration of spring whereby a young girl was elected the Queen of May. But the poem has an addendum which culminates in tragedy – the death of the May Queen – and Bertie's happy ending proves to be an equally hasty conclusion. Breakfasting heartily with Nobby and Boko, they are interrupted by Stilton, who has been told by Edwin, who has a solid alibi, that he saw a policeman's outfit lying around as he deposited a hedgehog between Bertie's sheets – thus revealing that he is not that much of a pure Boy Scout. Stilton intends to arrest Bertie, but Boko claims he requires a warrant and allows Bertie enough time to escape. Yet before he manages to reach his car, he realises that Worplesdon has been left locked in Boko's car the entire night and is furious. Bertie grows grave, musing that "melancholy had marked me for its own", in a nod to Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", which, in its celebration of those whose lives have gone quietly unsung, comically echoes Bertie's constant sacrifices – namely those of his reputation and peace of mind – for the benefit of others. Knowing that Boko and Nobby's future is in danger, that he must face his uncle to get into his car and that he may be arrested by Stilton at any moment, he appeals to Jeeves, clutching his sleeve "like a lost child hooking on to its mother" (ibid.: 271). He assures Bertie that Bertie is "armed so strong in honesty that his lordship's

displeasure will pass you by as the idle wind, which [he] respect not", in another nod to *Julius Caesar* (ibid.: 272). Jeeves finally offers to reason with Worplesdon, and after the latter is released and begins to berate Boko, reveals that Aunt Agatha has unexpectedly returned to Bumpleigh Hall and was surprised and angered to hear that Uncle Percy's bed had not been slept in. Uncle Percy becomes the proverbial pillar of salt, as we have seen earlier (p. 51). Jeeves manages to contrive an excuse for Uncle Percy to give Aunt Agatha which is contingent on his approval of Boko and Nobby's union – Boko gets this consent in writing. The excuse also puts Worplesdon in a position where he can testify that he spent the night in Bertie's house and that the latter was there, thus proving him innocent of stealing Stilton's uniform. Worplesdon will also not sign the warrant allowing Stilton to arrest Bertie.

There is a temporary hitch when Nobby reveals Edwin has destroyed Bertie's damning letter about Florence, and Jeeves is at a loss, but it is quickly revealed that Stilton, who has resigned the Force in protest against Worplesdon, is now her fiancée once more as he is no longer a policeman. Bertie prepares to go, as promised, and face Aunt Agatha's wrath with his uncle, to corroborate his story, but Jeeves reveals that his aunt's presence was a fabrication and that they can leave immediately. Conveniently still in the morning, joy arrives in the form of a happy ending for every character involved, including the *senex*/villain figures of Florence, Worplesdon and Stilton. Boko and Stilton are engaged, Bertie fulfills Boko and Nobby's wish of visiting them, Florence and Stilton are engaged, Worplesdon concludes his business meeting successfully, Jeeves is allowed to indulge in some fishing, and Bertie – though troubled for a time and standing nothing to gain – earns the satisfaction of doing what ought to be done and returning safely to his merry, untroubled *status quo*, for a while. While in previous narratives Aunt Agatha was often the villain who could not get her way, in this narrative she merely looms in the background as a disembodied threat. After

the carnivalesque episode of the fancy dress ball, everything is put in place so that, as in "The Episode of the Dog McIntosh", the cast of characters becomes "a solid mass of humanity (…), all on velvet" (Wodehouse, 2008k: 133).

The joy referred to both in the title and the opening of the book is guaranteed, and is only a clearer translation of what is taking place in every one of the Jeeves and Wooster narratives. Elsewhere in the Jeeves saga, this *denouement* is often summarised through an allusion to a particular passage from Robert Browning's verse drama *Pippa Passe*s:

> The year's at the spring,
> And day's at the morn;
> Morning's at seven;
> The hill-side's dew-pearl'd;
> The lark's on the wing;
> The snail's on the thorn;
> God's in His heaven—
> All's right with the world! (Browning, 1947: 17)

The slightly comical reference to snails and larks is of course unfailingly lampooned, as with the ending of *The Code of the Woosters*:

> 'This is the end of a perfect day, Jeeves. What's that thing of yours about larks?'
> 'Sir?'
> 'And, I rather think, snails.'
> 'Oh, yes, sir. "The year's at the Spring, the day's at the morn, morning's at seven, the hill-side's dew-pearled—"
> 'But the larks, Jeeves? The snails? I'm pretty sure larks and snails entered into it.'
> 'I am coming to the larks and snails, sir. "The lark's on the wing, the snail's on the thorn—"
> 'Now you're talking. And the tab line?'
> 'God's in His heaven, all's right with the world.'
> 'That's it in a nutshell. I couldn't have put it better myself.' (Wodehouse, 2008b: 284)[137]

[137] The Robert Browning quote is repeatedly invoked in the saga, not only in *The Code of the Woosters* but also in *The Mating Season* (Wodehouse, 2008g: 77), *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit* (Wodehouse, 2008d: 201), and *Much Obliged, Jeeves* (Wodehouse, 2008h: 203).

Ultimately, this ties in with Bertie's references to Providence and with Auden's conception of a Christian comedy of forgiveness. By the end of the narratives, the harmony that is secured merely signifies that everything is in its right place, and that no tangible character is absolutely unrelatable. While this occurs only after the topsy-turvy chaos that the characters are plunged into again and again, the narratives are pervaded by allusions to a kindly Providence, a joy that will ultimately come, and which Bertie constantly mistrusts but ultimately believes in – or hopes for. This is not to say that the books are written in a particular religious spirit *per se* – anything as dogmatic as that would be amiss in a genre that constantly challenges rigidity – but instead in a vague sense of spiritual resignation, often resembling the stoicism of Epictetus, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius that it occasionally directly invokes. In *Much Obliged, Jeeves*, although all ends well, the rogue, ill-principled valet Bingley does not entirely get his comeuppance, and Jeeves comments on the situation by quoting the poet Lucretius:

> 'In short, on every side one sees happy endings popping up out of traps. A pity that Bingley is flourishing like a green what-is-it, but one can't have everything.'
> 'No, sir. *Medio de fonte leporum surgit amari aliquid in ipsis floribus angat.*'
> 'I don't think I quite followed you there, Jeeves.'
> 'I was quoting fromt he Roman poet Lucretius, sir. A rough translation would be "From the heart of this fountain of delights wells up some bitter taste to choke them even among the flowers.'
> (…)
> 'Gloomy sort of bird.'
> 'His outlook was perhaps somewhat sombre, sir.'
> 'Still, apart from Bingley, one might describe joy as reigning supreme.' (Wodehouse, 2008h: 204-205)

Thus even Providence has its limits. Asked in an interview whether he had any religious beliefs, Wodehouse replied, in characteristically guarded manner, "it's awfully hard to say", which is perhaps the only appropriate answer (Wodehouse *apud* McCrum, 2005: 412). Whether religious in origin or not, the guiding principle of Bertie's code is that

of love: love for one's fellow human even in spite of the unpleasant aspects of their company, which is necessary. The comedic nature of the narratives ensures that we are aware of both of these things – our feelings and our duty, and that we take pleasure in the complicated nature of our existence: ridiculous in its conventions and natural limitations, but nevertheless capable of beauty. In these terms, life resembles a game of sorts, one played by given rules that create what feels like unnatural limitations, but which are nevertheless pliable, and must be followed in a spirit that respects human nature and, as Jeeves would put it, no less, the psychology of the individual.

IV. Conclusion –The Comedic Genre, the Present and the Future

> That is why he wrote: to approach that place of unchallenging glamour. It's why generations of readers have followed him, then and since. It's why people today watch the Kardashians.
>
> (McAloon, 2018)

The epigraph above is from an article published in the *Guardian* in 2018. The article, titled "Fiction remains funny – the best comedy is found in dark, unhappy novels", reflects an enduring, yet contradictory idea. The article's point of departure is the fact that in 2018 the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for Comic Novels was not awarded to any of that year's entries. According to judge David Campbell, "There were a lot of witty submissions, bloody good novels, but they weren't comic novels" (Campbell *apud* McAloon, 2018). The author of the article then concludes, on the one hand, that

> the novels emerging in our era will by necessity be very different from what we might traditionally think of as a 'comic novel', the kind featuring hapless, Woosteresque men humiliating themselves in amusing ways. For better or worse, there seems to be less of an appetite for that at the moment. What comes next will have to operate outside those boundaries. (ibid.).

On the other hand, he suggests that people read Wodehouse merely for escapist reasons, equating his work with the allure and quality of reality television programmes supposedly depicting the lives of the wealthy, such as *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Ultimately, McAloon seems to be suggesting that the period in which Wodehouse and those before him wrote may not have required something very different from a traditionally comic play or novel from its writers, but that ours does. Something, it stands to reason, must have changed. But is there anything radically different and threatening in our current reality that was not so during the vast period in which Wodehouse wrote? The threat of nuclear warfare?

Wodehouse's part in World War II has already been discussed, and he lived through the most heated period of the Cold War. Climate change, global warming? If it is awareness that we are speaking of, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was first published in 1961. Moreover, McAloon's comments about Wodehouse writing comedy to "atone for his strange pact with the Nazis" (McAloon, 2018) seem to obliquely imply that the only reason why Wodehouse was capable of writing comedy in troubled times was either because he was an amoral, self-serving scoundrel who was impervious to the pain of those around him or because he could not face the nature of his supposed dark deeds and had to take refuge in opaque silliness. The aspersions cast on the author are irrelevant for the purposes of this thesis. But once more they are entwined with his work: comedy is seen as something that only someone who is emotionally challenged or who cannot relate to the grief of others can produce: it is no longer plausibly mimetic, and thus no longer relevant. But which times can we truly assess as being just tastefully troubled enough for comedy? When was comedy ever truly mimetic? The late 16th century of Miguel Cervantes, a crippled ex-soldier, in a Europe plagued by death and religious warfare? The 18th century of Laurence Sterne, who wrote *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* during the Seven Years War? Though there has often been a great deal of realism in its use of incongruities and the grotesque – as we have established – comedy was indeed never steadfastly mimetic, nor was it ever meant to be. It was never a portrait of an innocent world that once truly was but has ceased to be, although as we have seen, it profits from that nostalgia, from a sense of a golden age that we have been cast from – from an Edenic, Arcadian myth of unity, a unity that we crave but which thinkers from Schopenhauer to Camus, to Raymond Williams have claimed is simply neither in our past nor, according to the former two at least, in our future. In the absence of faith, the incongruity of life cannot easily be reconciled. As we have seen, Kierkegaard believed that the humorist

is one step behind the knight of faith – he recognises the suffering in human existence but turns away from it. He does not embrace it as his purpose. In the absence of such an acceptance, I suggest, following Freud, that humour allows us to emotionally transcend the dissatisfaction brought about by our inevitable limitations, and that adopting a comic perspective on the incongruity of life is a way to heuristically reconcile ourselves to it by deriving pleasure from our existence**,** and temporarily inhabiting a carnivalesque second world with which to balance the limitations provided by Nature and convention alike.

Such an ability to derive pleasure from life thus becomes a force *for* life, something that positively impacts an individual's will to live, or in Spinoza's terminology, the *conatus*. These benefits can be detected on a smaller scale, as argued by Davis, writing in 2001 on the subject of farce:

> [In 1977] I argued (following Burton in fact) that ortho (or right) mental and emotional balance might well be favored by exposure to the violent but harmless comedy of farce and slapstick, at the heart of which lies a cheerful, guffawing laughter annexed to a limited empathy for the victim in whom one recognizes oneself and one's own condition. Some twenty years on, I still think so. And, given the growing stresses of contemporary life, I think it heartening that, around the world, therapists are increasing their appreciation of the value of laughter, standup comedians are flourishing and comedy video-sales are booming, bringing delight and relief to hard-pressed audiences. (Davis, 2001: 49)

I cannot dispute what often feels like the unprecedented nature of our own troubled times. It is undeniable that the degree to which we are facing threats such as climate change and the current rate of technological development is a source of immediate anxiety about an impending doom hanging over humanity. There is perhaps a need for radical change. But very real, very direct encounters with death and destruction have, throughout history, hardly stopped authors from resorting to the comic perspective for solace, insight and respite. Expertly crafted comic novels may have, for one reason or another, become a scarcity.

Whether this is temporary, time alone will tell. Davis observes that traditional pure farce for instance, though it certainly endures, was during the 20th century somewhat co-opted for the purposes of dark humour and the theatre of the absurd, in the creation of which farcical techniques were used to convey an understandably negative view of the masquerade by writers such as Ionesco and Beckett (Davis, 2001: 15-16). This was perhaps already the undertone in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and its portrayal of empty, hypocritical conventionality.

Yet laughter for its own sake lives on. Huizinga's fatal shift towards seriousness, perhaps accurate when applied to certain forms of literary criticism, appears to be an exaggeration when applied to day-to-day life. On anecdotal evidence alone, dealing humorously with everyday misgivings as a practice has and most likely will remain alive and well. It may instead be the case that its place in art and literature has temporarily changed in the vein of what writers like David Foster Wallace have described as a post-modern tendency towards cynical irony, or what critic James Wood has referred to, (including Foster Wallace's fiction) as the ubiquity of "hysterical realism": gargantuan in scope and humorous, but occasionally too wry, too self-aware to the point of lacking humanity (Wood, 2000)[138]. This brand of post-modern fiction is eccentrically funny, farcically chaotic, and typically not comically harmonious. It has tremendous merits, but preferences in style have their ebbs and flows.

As regards to a more earnest kind of humour, a parallel can clearly be established with Rabelais' temporary drop in critical appreciation after his time (Bakhtin, 1984: 64) – his

[138] "I want to persuade you that irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule are distinctive of those features of contemporary U.S. culture (of which cutting-edge fiction is a part) that enjoy any significant relation to the television whose weird pretty hand has my generation by the throat. I'm going to argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and that for aspiring fiction writers they pose especially terrible problems" (Wallace, 1997: 47).

humour, originally widely appreciated, was for a time seen as puerile and inane – and in fact, it is occasionally difficult today to witness his penchant for absurd exaggeration without a certain feeling of childish overindulgence. In our time, the increasing awareness of the endless contradictions of life, made painfully evident by the 24-hour news cycle, can easily make anything light-hearted which coalesces into a happy ending appear to be parochial and simplistic. Increasingly, it is also difficult to shock. A need for variety and reinvention in terms of style and format often seems to drive these changes in taste and in artistic production.

Yet Wodehouse's work, happy endings included, continue to resonate. On another level, with even greater mass appeal, so do American sitcoms such as *The Office (US)*, *Brooklyn 9-9* and *Parks and Recreation*. To compare even these comforts with those allegedly provided by the distractions afforded by reality television is misguided. Post-modern irony, with all its qualities, is not the only form of humour endowed with any seriousness or value. Camus' answer to the apparent meaninglessness of the pantomime or masquerade, again, is to imagine Sisyphus' condition as a happy one – to consider the repetition of his routine the repetition of something pleasurable, or of something that does not entirely negate pleasure. Bertie is, in this sense, though an occasional victim of despair, a content Sisyphus, committed to his cause, though constantly despairing of it, and able to derive some pleasure along the way. What better way to temper this disappointing routine than with humour? What better way to rise above it? To dispute the relevance of comedy is to dispute the fact that, occasionally, our will to live requires edging along – whether or not there are greater things to be accomplished. If one thing is central to literature, it is that it is a form of communication that allows writers, in their loneliness, to communicate with the reader in theirs, thereby assuaging it. Literature that aesthetically elevates life to the point

where, without any deliberate deception, it gives the reader joy, is immensely valuable. In the words of Italo Calvino – and this is, as discussed, all the more palpable in comedy – literature can indeed serve a particular existential function: "the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living" (Calvino, 1988: 26).

The Jeeves saga does not continue to resonate because it allows for irresponsible, unchallenging or reactionary glamour. Whatever its author's personal faults or merits, it continues to resonate because it consists of expertly crafted comedic narratives whose playground is a familiar tapestry of 19th and 20th-century Western Culture and which reflect and recognise a critical incongruity in the human condition. As comedies, they then aesthetically and comically elevate this condition as well as offer a guarded hope that, through principled good intentions and an ability to navigate the masquerade – that is, the inevitably flawed, mechanical conventions of life – a solid mass of humanity, all on velvet, can perhaps be attained, or is at least being fought for. Like other great works of fiction, the saga gives the reader a sense of eternity, the eternity that is perhaps an extension of the feeling of nostalgia for unity that Freud associated with the oceanic feeling. By adopting the comic perspective we are able to take pleasure in our troubles and consequently alleviate the dissatisfaction brought about by our sense that things are perpetually not as they should be – our sense that there is a break between our minds and reality. Is this a kind of unproductive fatalism? Does it hinder improving social conditions?

On the brink of WWII, Bertolt Brecht once famously wrote "What kind of times are they, when/A talk about trees is almost a crime/Because it implies silence about so many horrors?" (Brecht, 1976: 318). The sentiment is understandable, but the key word here is "almost". They are hard times indeed when to dwell lyrically on Nature is almost a crime, but this is in no way a discouragement of lightheartedness or of revelling in beauty. Brecht's

is a criticism of the times, not of apolitical art. Even in the most troubled of times, not dwelling on the political is for Brecht only *almost* a crime. And for those who think that he, a notorious champion of tackling political topics in theatre and literature, might disapprove of Wodehouse and his constant "talking about trees", they may not know that Brecht's unfinished book about refugees, *Refugee Conversations*, begins – innocently – with a Wodehouse quote (Brecht, 2020: 7). Again on the brink of WWII, in "Bad time for poetry", Brecht mused on the subjects that move him to write:

> Inside me contend
> Enthusiasm at the blossoming apple tree
> And horror at the housepainter's speeches.
> But only the latter
> Drives me to write (Brecht, 1976: 331).

For Wodehouse, such horrors were, personally, indescribable. They could only be alluded to – he felt he could not do them justice. Criticism of comedy such as Kathy MacDermott's relies on something far different from Brecht's sentiment: not on ruing the fact that the world is so acutely troubled that it makes it difficult for a discerning artist to dwell on its inherent beauty, but on the thought that to do so is morally dubious, as it naturalises dissatisfaction. We have seen that although she has skilfully identified Wodehouse *et al*'s method, MacDermott's conclusions do not follow from her premise. Pared down to her proper core, her argument appears to be that giving the reader pleasure is equal to allowing them to linger in an imperfect world rather than distress them enough to make a worthwhile change towards perfection. This does not echo the legitimate, if heavy-handed concerns of Frankfurt School scholars such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer about commercialism in art, but instead this unreasonable, though understandable, sentiment famously attributed to Vladimir

Lenin by Maxim Gorky, and used to great effect by Tom Stoppard in his play *Travesties* to illustrate a view on art radically opposite to aestheticism:

> One evening, in Moscow, in a friend's flat, Lenin, listening to a Beethoven sonata, said to me: 'I know nothing that could equal the 'Appassionata'. I could hear it played every day. Marvellous, supernatural music. When I hear it I always think, maybe with naïve, childish pride: What wonders human beings are capable of accomplishing! (…) But I can't listen to music too often; it gets on my nerves, rouses the desire to say charming nonsense, and stroke the heads of the people who, in spite of living in a dirty hell, are able to create such beauty. And to-day one can't allow oneself the luxury of stroking people on the head; they would bite your hand off. One must hit them on the heads, hit mercilessly, although, in deal, we are against all violence over men…Hm…hm…the job is not an easy one'. (Gorky, 1932: 52)

Whatever the strategic needs of politics, and in hindsight it is particularly easy to question Lenin's line of thinking, an artist cannot be concerned with withholding playfulness, kindness or love in his work in order to advance a greater cause. This hinders the power of their communication. If Wodehouse's "sin", as Orwell called it, has been to isolate a particular reality from its historical consequences and change said reality in such a way that it fills the reader with a joy resembling anything approaching what Lenin reportedly felt upon hearing the *Appassionata* – which advances no cause and adopts no political perspective – this is its own end. If it specifically allows for existential relief, this does not stand in the way of striving for change in the political sphere – it merely suggests that there is no such thing as perfection, but that art can come remarkably close. The second world of carnival and the fertility rituals that humour and comedy are associated with showcase their status as forces for life – disruptive in their flouting of convention, conservative in their preservation of good cheer and, ultimately of *a* convention, which though unnatural, is inevitable in social life. Yet, as satire suggests: one can make improvements. Briefly, and just to conclude this particular point, I would like to point to two works of fiction that are not comedies per se, but which ultimately adopt the comic perspective: Trevor Griffith's

1976 play *Comedians*, and Preston Sturges' 1941 film *Sullivan's Travels*. Both of these works, essentially dramas with comedic elements, culminate in disillusionment and then a return to comedy. Waters, the socially-committed stand-up teacher from *Comedians,* recoils at the hateful though brilliant deconstruction of comedy performed by his pupil Price. He finds no empathy in it, only hatred for the folly of man. Though during his time in the military he himself was shocked, in the Steiner line, by the horrors of Auschwitz to the point that he eventually abandoned his career as a comedian, Waters cannot endorse Price's scathing, hateful performance as it lacks empathy for the darker side of humanity. Waters ultimately regains his ability to laugh and to carry on when told a joke by a Hindu cleaner about a starving Hindu man who kills a cow, sacred to his faith, in order not to starve. When the cow suddenly addresses him, invoking its sacred status, the Hindu man exclaims "what do you know, a talking horse" (Griffiths, 1976: 67) and carries on unabated. In *Sullivan's Travels*, the Hollywood comedy director Sullivan, after many efforts to experience poverty and disenfranchisement in order to transition properly into writing tragedy, is eventually moved by the communal experience of laughter afforded to him, as a prisoner among prisoners, by a Pluto cartoon. He decides to return to comedy, declaring: "There's a lot to be said for making people laugh. Did you know that's all some people have? It isn't much. But it's better than nothing in this cock-eyed caravan" (Sturges, 1941). Perhaps our need for action is urgent to the point that yes, making people laugh may not be much indeed in the grand scheme of things – but something it is, and moments of either solitary or communal joy should not be considered irrelevant. Divesting life of its weight while keeping us aware of said weight, as we have seen is the case with Wodehouse, is a worthy feat.

In conclusion, comedy has never truly suited, ill-suited, or truly faithfully represented any particular era. It may, in particular moments, not be what is required – as with

Wodehouse's Berlin broadcasts. I do not mean to defend Wodehouse's style or his tendency to avoid explicit contact with the most troubling aspects of humanity as a method superior to any other, nor am I defending adopting the comic outlook as the only valid perspective. But a facile correlation of seriousness with solemnity is a blind spot in criticism that must be corrected. Particularly in the case of comedy, it is perhaps due to favouring the analysis of context and motivation as opposed to its poetics and its relation to a long tradition in literature and in human behaviour. The point is merely to restore a certain balance. Novels that draw dark, despairing humour from the absurdity of human existence, such as Louis Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, provide valuable insight in to the human condition. Dark, grim novels whose authors do not appear to be particularly interested in humour, such as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, or William Faulkner *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* (none of which are totally humourless, which is a point in its own right) too are part of a rich tapestry of literary fiction that holds a mirror to different aspects of the human condition, different corners of our minds. They are the one second to Kierkegaard's 10.000 years. In criticism, disregarding one is losing sight of the whole. The Jeeves saga, too, is part of that tapestry, and so is any work that truly embodies or adopts the comic perspective – one that encourages us to live and live well in the face of adversity – and conveys it through a finely crafted, aesthetic whole. Often our daily unhappiness – the state of the world having historically been perpetually disappointing – is indeed a question of perspective. As per Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (Shakespeare, 2019: 135). To lose sight of the comic perspective is to take ourselves not too seriously, but too solemnly – exclusively so.

And solemnity has champions enough.

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