

## Worcestershirewards: Wodehouse and the Baroque\*<sup>1</sup>

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*I should define as baroque that style which deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) all its possibilities and which borders on its own parody.*

(Jorge Luis Borges,  
*The Universal History of Infamy* 11)

*Unfortunately, however, if there was one thing circumstances weren't, it was different from what they were, and there was no suspicion of a song on the lips. The more I thought of what lay before me at these bally Towers, the bowed-downer did the heart become.*

(P. G. Wodehouse,  
*The Code of the Woosters* 31)

A good way to understand the achievement of P. G. Wodehouse is to look closely at the style in which he wrote his Jeeves and Wooster novels, which began in the 1920s, and to realise how different it is from that used in the dozens of other books he wrote, some of them as much admired as the famous master-and-servant stories. Indeed, those other novels and stories, including the Psmith books of the 1910s and the later Blandings Castle series, are useful in showing just how distinct a style it is. It 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. The *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* describes the baroque style as “marked generally by use of complex forms, bold or-

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debdugan02023.htm>>.

namentation, and the juxtaposition of contrasting elements often conveying a sense of drama." Later in the definition "grotesqueness" and "flamboyance" are used, among other words. (J. Mitchell Morse might have used the label 'rabelesian,' his term for an exuberant style.)<sup>2</sup>

With that definition in mind, along with whatever associations the word has developed for us relating to painting or architecture or music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, let us consider a passage from *The Mating Season* (1949), one of the later Jeeves-Wooster novels:

When I was a piefaced lad of some twelve summers, doing my stretch at Malvern House, Bramley-on-Sea, the private school conducted by the Rev. Aubrey Upjohn, I remember hearing the Rev. Aubrey give the late Sir Philip Sidney a big build-up because, when wounded at the battle of somewhere and offered a quick one by a companion in arms, he told the chap who was setting them up to leave him out of that round and slip his spot to a nearby stretcher-case, whose need was greater than his. (38)

Sentences like these do not occur in Wodehouse's books outside of the Jeeves and Wooster novels, and he wrote dozens that do not tell of their adventures. The character, the personality of Bertie Wooster required such a new style when Wodehouse created him in the early 1920s, for the creation of this especially unique character encouraged the development of a new first-person voice that constitutes the style of the novels. This new baroque Wodehouse may also have been a response to the incipient modernism of the late 1910s that Wodehouse rejected, apparently; but that he may have met on its own grounds by creating a radical new style which is such a contrast to the rather traditional romantic themes that the Jeeves-Wooster books appear to follow.

The most important popular critics, including Hilarie Belloc, Evelyn Waugh and George Orwell, all of whom had great admiration for Wodehouse's novels, were quite attentive to his earlier non-Jeeves-Wooster books. With the exception of Usborne, to whom I shall return, no one has defined the unique change in style that came with the

voice of Bertie Wooster. The best way to consider the change is to look at the first style developed by Wodehouse as a young writer in the period 1900-1920.

## 2.

If Bertie Wooster is a unique character, he was not the first character of his kind. A similar kind of character, usually called a “knut,” had first appeared in late nineteenth-century music hall skits, portraying an irresponsible young man-about-town who gets in comic difficulties. Later he appeared in plays and fiction, from characters in *Punch* to Algernon Moncrieff in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (cf. Usborne 130-35).

Wodehouse began writing sports stories for schoolboy magazines at the age of eighteen while working for the East India Bank in London where his father had found a job for him, refusing to allow him to attend a university. Within two years he was earning enough money to quit the bank job; and he worked as a writer for the next seven decades. From the schoolboys stories that Waugh and Orwell grew up reading in the Edwardian era, about cricket matches at good schools, he gradually progressed to a more sophisticated, if related world, the upper-class life of London, and country house and village life in Shropshire and Worcestershire. Dulwich College, his public school, was a good one (Raymond Chandler was another alumnus), Wodehouse’s parents were well off, and his social world high enough that he was to begin a series of novels and connected tales with various upper class settings, such as Blandings Castle, home of the Earl of Emsworth, a locale and character that lasted through numerous books and several decades. This is from the novel *Something Fresh*, published in 1915, several years before Jeeves and Wooster appeared:

They were variously occupied. In the long chair nearest the door, the Hon. Frederick Threepwood—Freddie to pals—was reading. Next to him sat a young man whose eyes, glittering through rimless spectacles, were concentrated on the upturned faces of several neat rows of playing-cards. (Rupert

Baxter, Lord Emsworth's invaluable secretary, had no vices, but he sometimes relaxed his busy brain with a game of solitaire.) Beyond Baxter, a cigar in his mouth and a weak high-ball at his side, the Earl of Emsworth took his ease. (58)

The contrast to Bertie Wooster's voice in the passage quoted above is obvious. The third-person narrator is observant and ironic, a far cry from Bertie's unmistakable, contorted, emphatic voice.

The novel *Psmith in the City* was published in 1910. The term 'period piece' might have been created for it, if by that we mean something that is excellent for its time. The book has stayed in print sporadically, and it is worth noting that Orwell was especially fond of the Psmith and Mike books. In this scene in a restaurant, one young man is trying to express his gratitude to another:

Psmith called for the bill and paid it in the affable manner of a monarch signing a charter. Mike sat silent, his mind in a whirl. He saw exactly what had happened. He could almost hear Psmith talking his father into agreeing with his scheme. He could think of nothing to say. As usually happened in any emotional crisis in his life, words absolutely deserted him. The thing was too big. Anything he could say would sound too feeble. [...] The occasion demanded some neat, polished speech; and neat, polished speeches were beyond Mike.

"I say, Psmith—" he began.

Psmith rose.

"Let us now," he said, "collect our hats and meander to the club, where, I have no doubt, we shall find Comrade Bickersdyke." (196)

Outside of the Jeeves-Wooster series, Wodehouse wrote in this bland, sophisticated style.<sup>3</sup> Contrast this to Bertie Wooster in a restaurant in *The Inimitable Jeeves* (1924):

I was still brooding when I dropped in at the oyster-bar at Buck's for a quick bracer. I needed a bracer rather particularly at the moment, because I was on my way to lunch with Aunt Agatha. A pretty frightful ordeal, believe me or believe me not, even though I took it that after what had happened at Renville [a racetrack] she would be in a fairly subdued and amiable mood. I had just had one quick and another rather slower, and was feeling about as cheerio as was possible under the circs, when a muffled voice hailed me

from the north-east, and, turning round, I saw young Bingo Little propped up in a corner, wrapping himself around a sizable hunk of bread and cheese. (47)

Until the Jeeves-Wooster novels no young man-about-town in a Wodehouse book was seen “wrapping himself around a sizable hunk of bread and cheese” in a corner, certainly not at the Oyster-Bar, whatever the circumstances, which were not “circs.” Both incidents described above involve upper-class characters in reasonably similar settings. One man is reflective, the other is scared. Yet we are much closer to the comic distraught voice in the second passage than we are to the first. Wodehouse in the first passage is almost Olympian in his perspective, showing us the young man, the stylised emotion, the obvious solution, and this is generally true not only of his third-person Edwardian narrator, but of those he created much later when, for instance, he wrote several novels about Uncle Freddie, the Viscount Ickenham.

This contrast between clarity and irony on the one hand, and baroque comedy and confusion on the other, can be traced to Bertie Wooster’s character and voice.

### 3.

There are fourteen novels in the Jeeves-Wooster series, several of them picaresque collections of incidents and characters, while several more follow a single story-line from beginning to end, with chapters having less the character of individual stories or episodes. This is the chief fault line in the books: those that are novels in the strictest sense, for instance *Joy in the Morning* (1946; published as *Jeeves in the Morning* in the U.S.) and *The Code of the Woosters* (1938); and those in which the chapters are more closed compartments with doors to other chapters, before and after. *The Inimitable Jeeves* (1924) and *Very Good, Jeeves* (1930) are examples of this looser, picaresque construction.

The plots have two consistent characteristics: a very tight farcical construction, and the style I have outlined. Once Wodehouse opens

the door to the farcical events he describes, his plots adhere to a seamless logic. Comic conclusions are arrived at, explained and reconciled, usually by Jeeves, but in the doing, not the telling. That is Bertie Wooster's critical role and the basis of my argument.

To give a broad summary: in these books, Bertie Wooster, a wealthy Englishman living in about the year 1912, perhaps thirty-two years old, with a good imagination, about average intelligence, and terrible judgement, gets into trouble, and his valet, Jeeves, gets him out of it, and explains to Bertie how he got him out of it, all the while maintaining the courtesies of the master-servant relationship. Bertie narrates all of this to the reader. Many details can be added to the profile, for Wodehouse carefully created a world of details surrounding them (Bertie is an alumnus of Magdalen College, Oxford; he is a very good dart player; Jeeves loves to fish and has an Uncle Charlie who is a butler in Hampshire) for the sake of realism, but these are the absolute essentials, with Jeeves explaining things to Bertie and Bertie telling the story.

Jeeves' word is law; what he says is right, not because of social position, but the exact opposite, social merit. He is smarter and more skillful than anyone else, helping Bertie when he is up against an outraged aunt, an offended ex-fiancee, an important British Fascist, or an angry Judge. Yet it is all told to us by Bertie, who gives us an overview of the social landscape, and it is his array of difficulties that motivate all of the action.

But what kind of problems? For one thing, a demanding woman is almost always at the center of Bertie's acts. In the very first Jeeves story, "Jeeves Takes Charge," included in one of the picaresque books, *Carry On, Jeeves* (1925), he receives marching orders in the clearest possible manner from his fiancée of the moment, Florence Craye, who is leaving *his* uncle's country house in Shropshire for the weekend to attend a ball at another house twenty miles away, and who has instructions for Bertie: steal the manuscript of his elderly uncle's scandalous memoirs, about to be sent to a publisher, which will disgrace all involved, including her father who was the uncle's pal thirty years

before, in the 1880s. Bertie is quoting her, and so not speaking in his usual twisted syntax:

I mean it. You may look on it as a test, Bertie. If you have the resource and courage to carry this thing through, I will take it as evidence that you are not the vapid and shiftless person most people think you. 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. It will be perfectly simple for you to intercept the manuscript, Bertie. It only requires a little resolution. (17)

In *The Code of the Woosters*, perhaps the best novel that Wodehouse ever wrote, Bertie Wooster leaves his London flat and spends several days at the house of Madeline Bassett's father in the country, of course taking his valet Jeeves with him. Madeline is his former fiancée and now Gussie Fink-Nottle, Bertie's close friend, is engaged to her. Bertie is quite happy for them, but wants to give them a wide berth, and is dismayed that he must spend several days at her father's large country house because she insists that the engagement is in peril and that he is the only one who can keep it intact. By chance, he must also deal with her father, Sir Watkyn Bassett (a judge), and his possession of a valuable piece of silver—a cow-creamer that his own Uncle Tom covets. Bertie must steal this silver cow-creamer, for if he does not, his uncle will allow his wonderful chef Anatole to go to work for Sir Watkyn in exchange for it. This horrifies Bertie, for he is often a guest of his Uncle Tom and Aunt Dahlia, and being a good sophisticated upper-class Englishman—Bertie is no blimp—he is a Francophile to the bone. He loves French cooking, and speaks French, although this is the only European side of him.<sup>4</sup> The only possible solace for Bertie at the opening of *The Code of the Woosters* is that both tasks can be accomplished at the same locale.

The story's farcical plot is wonderfully executed, with each chapter of about ten pages leading into the next, and various loose-ends that the reader had forgotten about being snatched up and handled by Wodehouse, until the end of the book. It begins with a key recurrent plot device mentioned above that is common (and unique) to the

series. Bertie's Aunt Dahlia cajoles him into her service, i.e. to steal the silver cow-creamer, just after the telegram from Madeline arrives demanding his presence at her father's house. The importuning female is a character who recurs repeatedly in the Jeeves-Wooster novels and stories, and she is as essential a plot device as the master-servant relationship itself, for she requires the creation of a very peculiar narrative persona, Bertie Wooster, who is likable, anxious to please, upper-class and has a very unusual combination of innocence and pride that manifests itself in a chivalrous attitude toward the opposite sex and a bizarre manner of speaking. Given the plot I have outlined above, a character emerges whom Bertie himself would have to label "a chump" (*Carry On, Jeeves* 29). Yet he is anything but that because of his remarkable talk, the voice that tells the stories. The creation of that voice makes him farcically plausible. Many other themes persist throughout the books, and it is obvious that the marriage theme is one of them, or as Robert A. Hall has pointed out, "resistance to marriage" (27). But the demands of a woman, young or old, send Bertie Wooster on his adventures. Here are two examples from *The Code of the Woosters*:

But Love will find a way. Meeting Madeline Bassett one day and falling for her like a ton of bricks, he had emerged from his retirement and started to woo, and after numerous vicissitudes had clicked and was slated at no distant date to don the spongebag trousers and gardenia for buttonhole and walk up the aisle with the ghastly girl. (13)

At all times and on all occasions, owing to years of fox-chivvying in every kind of weather, this relative has a fairly purple face, but one noted now an even deeper mauve than usual. The breath came jerkily, and the eyes gleamed with a goofy light. A man with far less penetration than Bertram Wooster would have been able to divine that there before him stood an aunt who had got the pip about something. (26)

The women in the novels are usually in their twenties or fifties, of marrying age or mothers and aunts. Bertie is a gentleman to the core—the unkind reference to a "ghastly girl" above is not typical and of course is not heard by the object of it. They need something, help of



some kind, and Bertie can provide it. The lady in question may be his good aunt, Dahlia, or his bad aunt, Agatha, or some combination of aunts ("Aunt crying to aunt like mastodons across the primal swamp"; *The Inimitable Jeeves* 122-23) or a girl to whom he was once engaged, or simply a lady friend he wants to please. The essence of the plots is that they always come to Bertie, and he answers the call. The men Bertie must face on behalf of the women he aids are, to put it simply, physical or legal threats, and in a sense much simpler problems. At the house he must visit he confronts Madeline's father; and Roderick Spode, a fascist leader of a group called the Black Shorts.<sup>5</sup> They threaten jail or violence. The women rarely threaten anything, they only warn, but they motivate nearly every one of the Jeeves-Wooster novels. In the farcical world of these tales, there is one man whom women can impose upon constantly, and he is Bertie Wooster.

How is he made believable? Why do they come to him? Why does he do what they want? Wodehouse's earlier books, and those that come after Jeeves and Wooster, are full of smart upper-class Englishmen who would do nothing for a demanding woman if they did not think the demand practical, from Psmith in the series of early novels in which he appears, to Uncle Fred (the Viscount Ickenham in the Blandings Castle books); who would not act anything like Bertie, who might perform a deed for a lady in distress that is quite risky, or dangerous, but only if he thought it necessary or it amused him, not simply because she wanted him to do it.

Bertie Wooster is different, he takes his marching orders from his female friends, enemies and relatives, making only the briefest of protests about the impracticality or danger of what is demanded, as scared or apprehensive as he may be. This is a given but is re-established at the beginning of all of the books. He is like a comic knight who is given a quest and performs it. The comedy lies in his unknighly voice describing himself, the ladies, the men he must confront, and Jeeves, his valet, who saves him.

The reason for this is that Bertie is proud (or vainglorious) and humble (or a chump), two qualities that everyone from the man in the

street to a philosopher such as Pascal argue do not sit well together. Wodehouse is in partial comic agreement with the great Pascalian model. He sees pride and humility as two poles of self-esteem, but he brings them together in one man. This is not a realistic mixture, but a farcical one. It shows us man at his worst, as Aristotle tells us comedy does, but it is redeemed by the engaging foolish hope that we hear in the narrator's voice rather than the despair that Pascal tells us we should expect.<sup>6</sup>

Usborne is the one critic who discusses Bertie's personality carefully. He gives the best summation of his character that I have found. His long chapter in *Wodehouse at Work*, titled "Bertie Wooster" (150-76), is essential as an analysis of the basic innocence of Bertie's character. In his view Bertie is a genial goof, but he also acknowledges that he is a perplexed gallant. He stresses that Bertie has never really developed, but unlike other critics he realizes that he never really could as long as Wodehouse wanted to write the farces that he did. There was never any lack of invention in Wodehouse, his imaginative well was about as deep as any on record, but to let Bertie grow old was to let him slip away. Usborne recognizes the distinctiveness of Bertie's speech—perhaps I should say acknowledges it, for almost anyone would hear it—and ties it to his undeveloped, youthful personality. He emphasizes his critical role as a first-person narrator and the world he creates through his unique language. He notes also the similarity between Psmith and Jeeves, both very intelligent and concerned men, although superficially aloof, who stage-manage their tales, speaking in distinct idioms in which he hears traces of Bertie. This comparison of Psmith and Jeeves is quite astute, for we do not hear in their languid periods Bertie's energetic voice. As Usborne himself says, "Jeeves speaks copperplate *Times* Augustan to Bertie's *Sporting Life* vernacular" (201).<sup>7</sup>

All of the key literary tropes appear scattered throughout the other books, although never with anything like Bertie's tangled combinations that break them up and reassemble them in his own peculiar manner, which I call baroque. As said above, Morse's label 'rabele-

sian' (although he does not discuss Wodehouse) for enthusiastic, and parodic, literature, might also fit. In *Mulliner Nights* the condescending narrator, with a smooth voice rather like that of the hero in the Psmith books, occasionally breaks into a patch of Bertiese as he speaks in another character's voice, male or female:

"I mean a goof," said the girl. "A gump. A poop. A nitwit and a returned empty. Your name came up the other day in the course of conversation at home, and mother said you were a vapid and irreflective guffin, totally lacking in character and purpose." (88)

Hobnobbing in cabs, by Jove ! Revelling tete-a-tete at luncheon-tables, forsooth! [...] [I]f Muriel supposed that he was going to stand by like a clam while she went on Babylonian orgies all over the place with pop-eyed, smirking, toothbrush-mustached Guardees, she was due for a rude awakening. (120)

Thompson is another critic who comes close to my perspective. She argues for the absolute distinctiveness of Bertie's speech, although not for the reasons I propose. "Wodehouse's insistence upon clichés, repetition, and quotation, however, also creates a less obvious, but pervasive, set of devices in the Jeeves-Wooster series" (276). She goes on to say:

Wodehouse also displays his obsession with writing in the Jeeves-Wooster series in a way that sets it apart from his other works. Of all Wodehouse's characters, Jeeves and Bertie are the most fascinated with language [...]. While all the other works use the distinctive Wodehousian prose, the Jeeves-Wooster series permits its two central characters to linger over conditions of language. (278-79)<sup>8</sup>

Alexander Cockburn has given a good summary of Bertie Wooster's role with an important key to understanding him: "Above all it is Bertie who weaves the idiom of the stories; everything is cast in that unique language, a stew of half-remembered quotations, slang, repetitions, formulaic expressions. It is Bertie who dreams up the great similes and bleats out the dense word play" (viii). Robert McCrum says of Reggie Pepper, a character who is a sort of trial-run of Bertie

Wooster: "But Reggie is not Bertie. He's a rougher and more selfish character; he lacks Bertie's baffled inner monologue" (98). Bertie is unselfish, but he is a "baffled hero," as Evelyn Waugh said of one of his own characters, if ever there was one (*Helena* 103). To enhance that baffled quality, to make it comic and convincing, Wodehouse created the contorted slangy speech of Bertie Wooster.

#### 4.

Let us consider a final non-Jeeves-Wooster passage from *Uncle Fred in the Springtime* (1939), a novel in the Blandings Castle series, which like almost all of Wodehouse's material involves the British upper-class in *circumstances* somewhat like Bertie Wooster's, but with much different plots. It is written almost twenty years after the appearance of Jeeves and Wooster:

It was for this reason that Jane, Countess of Ickenham, had prudently decided that the evening of her husband's life should be spent exclusively at his rural seat, going so far as to inform him that if he ever tried to sneak up to London she would skin him with a blunt knife. And if, as he now stood on the steps, his agreeable face seemed to be alight with some inner glow, this was due to the reflection that she had just left for a distant spot where she proposed to remain for some considerable time. [...] [H]er absence would render it easier for him to get that breath of London air which keeps a man from growing rusty and puts him in touch with the latest developments of modern thought. (18)

This was written many years after the creation of Bertie Wooster, yet Wodehouse reverts to his transparent third-person style when the story is not about Bertie. *Uncle Fred in the Springtime* has many similarities to *The Code of the Woosters*, including the London-country house axis, an upper-class ambience, the dominating lady, the easy going gentleman with plans for having fun; but the voice is not that of Bertie Wooster. It is a third-person comic voice using a clear style, an occasional cliché ("she would skin him") but making fun in a classical manner of the discrepancy between what a man wants to do and what he is allowed to do, between the status he should have in his house-

hold and the status quo. And the Viscountess is the only woman who attempts to tell the Viscount what to do.

This is the direct opposite of Bertie's circumstances, and, of course, of the voice describing them, which never shifts even into the temporary neutrality of a landscape description that is found, for instance, in the first-person novels of Hemingway. Even when he tries to be aloof, the real Bertie comes through. He is always redacting recent events in his life or that of friends, problems that have arisen, and the solutions suggested or affected by Jeeves, in his distinctive speech. This also is from *The Inimitable Jeeves*:

Great pals we've always been. In fact, there was a time when I had an idea I was in love with Cynthia. However, it blew over. A dashed pretty and lively and attractive girl, mind you, but full of ideals and all that. 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 favorably of Napoleon. So what with one thing and another the jolly old frenzy sort of petered out, and now we're just pals. I think she's a topper, and she thinks me next door to a looney, so everything's nice and matey. (125)

A good deal is made by critics, including both Hall and McCrum, of the farcical, formulaic circumstances of the Jeeves-Wooster plots, and their similarity to musical comedy in pacing and scene changing, as opposed to the more realistic (and melodramatic) comedy of some of the other novels, like *Something Fresh* (1924). Wodehouse, sometimes collaborating with Guy Bolton and others, wrote the book or lyrics for such musical hits as *Sally* (1920) and *Anything Goes* (1934) and many other West End and Broadway shows, and is an important figure in the evolution of musical comedy. He spoke frequently of the practical lessons of writing these shows and the simplification of character to which it led. The Jeeves-Wooster plots are much less realistic, more complicated and farcical than most of his other books. The emotions are simpler and more polarized, lyric contentment and comic desperation are more frequent, but this does not necessarily lessen the complexity of the task the artist has set for himself.

## 5.

I have chosen seven characteristic elements of the style of the Jeeves-Wooster books and isolated them in very short examples. They include: Wodehouse's use of the first-person narrator; slang; clichés; misquotation; outrageous similes and metaphors; transferred epithets; and a mock-aesthete attitude, a very subtle reversal of the aesthete mockery found in modern writers from Max Beerbohm to James McCourt. Wodehouse uses so many rhetorical devices that these categories could be tripled in number, but I think restricting ourselves to these produces the essence of the style in very clear examples.

So distinctive is Bertie's voice that most of these will demonstrate other qualities besides the heading they are under.

*The First Person.* This is the *sine qua non* of the Jeeves-Wooster books, yet, except for the Mulliner stories, they are the only that he wrote (that I know of) out of over ninety books of fiction, in the first-person. This is from *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves* (1962):

The smile which had been splitting my face faded. It's never easy to translate what Jeeves says into basic English, but I believe I had been able to grab this one off the bat, and what I believe the French call a *frisson* went through me like a dose of salts. (59)

*Outrageous Metaphors and Similes.* As suggested, the example above could also serve under this heading, but here is an interesting example of a simile; followed by a fruit metaphor for a young lady:

She drove off, Gussie standing gaping after her transfixed, like a goldfish staring at an ant's egg. (*The Mating Season* 116)

In my previous sojourn at Totleigh Towers circumstances had compelled me to confide in this young prune my position as regarded her cousin Madeline. (*Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves* 80)

*Mock-Aesthete Attitude.* A breath of the 1890s will sometimes sound through Bertie's voice when he is in a less Edwardian mood. This is from *Right Ho, Jeeves* (1934):

Beginning with a *critique* of my own limbs, which she said, justly enough, were nothing to write home about, this girl went on to dissect my manners, morals, intellect, general physique, and method of eating asparagus with such acerbity. (128)

*Slang, Cliches and Mis-quotation.* For brevity's sake all three can be considered in these sentences from *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit* (1955) in which Bertie reflects on his own manly character in the third-person:

It is pretty generally recognized in the circles in which he moves that Bertie 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. (161)

*Transferred Epithet.* This rhetorical device has received the most attention from various critics, including Hall and Warren. According to Warren, the term was created by Hall (255).<sup>9</sup> It is the use of an unsuitable adjective to modify a noun. In the following examples the words "cigarette," "forkful" and "sip" get such modifiers:

I lit a rather pleased cigarette. Things were beginning to clarify. (*The Mating Season* 9)

He uncovered the fragrant eggs and b., and I pronged a moody forkful. (*Very Good, Jeeves* 9)

I took an astonished sip of coffee. (*Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves* 89)

Hall says that this device is rather infrequent in Wodehouse, although it occurs often enough to be noticed by several critics and is certainly part of Bertie's repartee, usually in a thoughtful moment early in a novel.

Another Wodehouse device is what Billerey-Mosier calls "the systematic use of the definite article to refer to body parts in place of the expected possessive adjective." I have not included it in my list of the

most distinct style marks, but he is quite right to notice it. Both of these examples are from *The Mating Season*:

Then, as if a bomb had suddenly exploded inside the bean, he shot up with a stifled cry. (33)

I inclined the ear invitingly. (61)

Hall notes another of Bertie's verbal turns which I have not included in my list; in fact it is the shortest of devices, the eccentric use of initials: "Such was the v. that rose before my e., as I gaped at that c.d. [closed door] and I wilted like a salted snail" (*Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit* 44). While I have read the book, I had never noticed that sentence and must credit Hall with isolating one of the most distinctive Wooster utterances, among thousands. He also identifies such effects as "neglected positives," i.e. "couth" as opposed to uncouth and "gruntled" as opposed to disgruntled (*Comic Style* 84). Hall is apparently one of the very few critics (Usborne is another) who has read all of Wodehouse.

For my catalogue of Wooster Baroque I came up with a partial list of my own, refining it after reading him; but anyone who wishes to see a list of dozens of other variations of rhetorical devices, e.g., metonymy used with initials as in the above, or zeugma, should read at least chapters 5 and 6 in Hall's *The Comic Style of P. G. Wodehouse*. Yet Hall never argues that these are all characteristics of the Jeeves-Wooster novels and generally not of the other books. Of course, his wonderful examples come from those novels, but these devices are not pointed out as part of the makeup of Bertie's personality, as I have insisted they should be.<sup>10</sup>

## 6.

Laura Mooneyham has raised a very interesting question: was the apparently anti-modernist Wodehouse, the professional writer for the



*Saturday Evening Post* and Broadway and the West End, much more of a modernist than he seems at first glance?

Mooneyham stipulates some essential characteristics of modernism, emphasizing the movement away from the market-driven literary production of fiction in the mid- and late-nineteenth century to the Parnassian approach that Pound, Joyce and Proust established, either by example or by fiat. The close attention to time and perspective and all of the narrative intricacies for which Henry James had paved the way came onto the literary scene just as Wodehouse was creating the Jeeves-Wooster characters, while in his early forties. At that point, in the early 1920s, his career was committed to a type of writing that violated one great tenet of modernism, it was straightforwardly funny, as opposed to being funny from an ironic perspective. "Wodehouse remained beyond the pale because he practised a discredited genre, and because he wrote to be popular," Mooneyham writes. Above all modernism was opposed to "the culminating happiness and formal closure that comedies promise" (118). Her careful weighing of these two against each other, classical comedy (high and low) and modernism, gives an especially clear picture, looking back eighty years, at how theoretical approaches were materialising in the literary world, and how Wodehouse reacted to them. She does not say a great deal about critical reaction to his work, but it was generally accepted for what it appeared to be; the possibility that it might have lasting value did not occur to critics until in fact it had lasted. Wodehouse was quite current on literary matters, and she notes his jokes about vorticist painters and free-verse poets. She of course also considers the possibility that he was a modernist himself, and I think her tentative conclusion that he had modernist qualities can be strengthened. "There are two areas in which one might claim the title of modernist for Wodehouse: his use of language and his employment of narrative self-consciousness" (127).

Finally, she also refers to John Bayley's *The Characters of Love: A Study in the Literature of Personality* (cf. Mooneyham 127). Bayley emphasizes the modern attitude of taking humor seriously:

We are apt to esteem only the kind of humour which can be taken seriously. [...] Of all modern authors, the closest to Shakespeare was certainly Joyce, but for all its marvellous and intricate power to move us *Ulysses* is leaden with its own art, sunken in its richness like a great plum-cake. The lordship of language that makes Shakespeare's world so spacious turns Joyce's into a prison. Absurd as it may sound, we can find more of the Shakespearean buoyancy in P. G. Wodehouse. (285)

Orwell said once about Henry Miller that he was much less a conscious artist than Joyce. A key note of modernism is the artist who is especially conscious of language, or any medium, as a worthy subject in its own right. This is unmistakable in Wodehouse in a way that it is in Joyce, Wilde, Hemingway, and Marianne Moore, and is not in Shakespeare, Pope, and Dickens, who may be far greater artists but for whom writing seems to have been a means to different goals. It is an attitude rooted in late nineteenth century aestheticism, with art for its own sake as the motive.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Worcestershirewards" in my title is from *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit* 171.

<sup>2</sup>See J. Mitchell Morse, *Matters of Style*.

<sup>3</sup>Bertie speaks as an anonymous character in *Young Men in Spats* (1936) and *Eggs, Beans and Crumpets* (1940), two collections of short stories. I have discussed this in an unpublished paper "Bertie Speaks: Identifying the Detached Narrator in a Wodehouse Short Story." The voice is identical to the one described in this paper.

<sup>4</sup>Otherwise, for Bertie, the continent means Monte Carlo and Cannes; he dresses very well, has a world-class valet, is a member of a top-drawer club, loves horse racing, going down to the country to visit friends and 'giving' them lunch in town.

<sup>5</sup>This is modeled on Oswald Mosley's 1930s organization, the British League of Fascists, known as the Black Shirts. When Bertie first discusses them with Gussie Fink-Nottle and calls them "Black Shirts" he is corrected: it is *shorts*, they were all out of shirts when Spode founded his organization (cf. *The Code of the Woosters* 53).

<sup>6</sup>In *Pensée* 435, Pascal states the paradigm most succinctly: "Some considering nature as incorrupt, others as incurable, they could not escape either pride or sloth, the two sources of all vice [...]. [...] For if they knew the excellence of man, they were ignorant of his corruption; so that they easily avoided sloth, but fell into pride. And if they recognized the infirmity of nature, they were ignorant of its dignity; so that they could easily avoid vanity, but it was to fall into despair" (122-23).

<sup>7</sup>Usborne is not as systematic as Hall in categorizing Wodehouse's turns of speech, but unlike Hall he sees they are essential to Bertie, not to Wodehouse's other creations, remarkable as his use of language is in other books.

<sup>8</sup>Usborne agrees that Bertie's speech represents "a genuine hankering for the *mot juste*, the vivid phrase, the exact image" (158). The results achieved are a different matter, comic, expressive, vivid, but not precise.

<sup>9</sup>Warren refers to Robert A. Hall, "Transferred Epithet in P. G. Wodehouse."

<sup>10</sup>Another academic critic who is a very acute listener to Bertie's voice is Robert F. Kiernan. In *Frivolity Unbound: Six Masters of the Camp Novel* he gives a beautifully written overview of Wodehouse's style in the Jeeves-Wooster novels, with excellent examples of Bertie's turns-of-phrase, and those of other characters; but again he does not find in it the practical purpose on Wodehouse's part that I have suggested. Instead he believes it is motivated by the camp genre and the sense of humor and style that creates it.

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Academic journal article Connotations : a Journal for Critical Debate. Worcestershirewards: Wodehouse and the Baroque\*1. By Dugan, Lawrence. Read preview. Academic journal article Connotations : a Journal for Critical Debate. Worcestershirewards: Wodehouse and the Baroque\*1. By Dugan, Lawrence. Read preview. Article excerpt. I should define as baroque that style which deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) all its possibilities and which borders on its own parody. (Jorge Luis Borges, The Universal History of Infamy 11). Unfortunately, however, if there was one thing circumstances weren&ap