



"As in all good farce, there is underlying wisdom, and we certainly approach more truly to life in Mr. Wodehouse's deliberate travesty than we do in following the adventures of crashers and heartbreakers in which the other writers expect us to believe." Gilbert Thomas

YOU WILL HAVE NOTICED THAT we have gone into a larger mailing envelope for PLUM LINES. Our Efficiency Department concluded, after years of study that, since PLUM LINES must be folded only once to fit this env., 1.20 seconds will be saved in preparing each copy for 'stuffing,' as we in the publishing business say. Surely a triumph for Progress!

ADVANTAGES OF MEMBERSHIP IN TWS or WHY IT IS worthwhile to pay 1986 dues even if you're not sure it IS worthwhile. The mere fact of mbrshp in our Society looks impressive in resumés and, later, in obits. You are entitled to purchase Mulliner's Buck-U-Uppo in either Formula A or B at a considerable discount; you may buy stocks and bonds in the Ukridge Enterprises, Ltd., an investment bound to pay off eventually; you are entitled to read as many of Plum's stories as you can find, and to brag about the quality of your reading matter. Then for members, there is PLUM LINES, our non-profitable quarterly, which keeps cognoscenti posted on the World of Wodehouse, relying on our network of correspondents in far flung places, some places slung farther than others, of course. So DON'T toss your dues statement in File 13...be a paid-up member.

THE SEWANEE REVIEW, an old, prestigious literary journal, is subsidized by a small liberal arts institution, The University of the South. Mr. George Core, its editor graciously granted us the privilege of reprinting Dr. Galligan's article, "P. G. Wodehouse - Master of Farce." Further reproduction of the article requires permission from Sewanee Review, Sewanee, TN 37375-4009.

*He gave us gifts of joy that we might laugh and, laughing, learn to smile....*

DO KEEP AN EYE OUT for Edward Duke's one-man (12 characters) show, "Jeeves Takes Charge." It has recently reappeared in San Francisco and Los Angeles, much to the delight of our members there. Where next? OM hasn't the faintest idea...just keep an eye peeled... AND, SPEAKING OF SHOWS, "Jerome Kern Goes to Hollywood" opened 24 January at the Ritz Theatre, New York City. A musical revue, it features the show songs of Kern and twelve of his lyricists, among whom...of course...was Plum.

Mrs. Ann Smith, TWS, secretary for Guy Bolton and the Wodehouses, promises to write an account of her interesting experience ... sometime in the future (the NEAR future, we hope), time for reminiscing and writing being in short supply at the moment. You may be sure that we will remind her from time to time, for her account will be of interest to all of us.

Carl Wells is the new president of our San Francisco chapter, having succeeded Doug Stow, busy in establishing a small (but, we hope, lively) business. The matter of planning our 1987 convention rests upon capable shoulders, we are sure.



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P. G. WODEHOUSE - MASTER OF FARCE

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- Edward L. Galligan -

P. G. Wodehouse wrote so much over so many years and made it look so easy that it was, in turn, easy for us to take him for granted and fail to recognize that he was a master of a difficult and valuable form -- farce. Yet it is now obvious that he was a Master, but never an Old Master, always (even in his eighties and nineties) a Young Master, bubbling with delight and absolutely submissive to the demands of his form. The celebration of his centennial (in October 1981) had the happy effect of bringing many of his books back into print and of spurring the publication of several books about him.

The best of the Master's works that have come back into print is The Code of the Woosters. It displays vividly and at moderate length his perfect tone in language and his extraordinary skill in plotting; it remains, even though it was written in 1938, very funny; and it gives us what I think all great farce gives us -- a fresh image of benign idiocy. Even readers who do not respond to its humor or dare not entertain the possibility that idiocy is a necessary restraint upon intelligence can find it instructive, for it corrects as fully as any single work can the widespread misapprehension that farce is simply a system of extravagance. The Code of the Woosters is as beautifully restrained as the "Minuet in G."

The restraint begins with the narrative point of view, first-person, and of the narrator, Bertie Wooster, an amiable, dim-witted, rich young Englishman. For the writer of a loosely ordered novel the choice of the first-person point of view may be a form of self-indulgence, but for the writer of a very tightly plotted novel the necessity of having the narrator present in every important scene can be a considerable inconvenience, especially if, like Wodehouse, the writer refuses to cheat by having other characters strain to give the narrator detailed accounts of scenes which he missed. It makes the matter more difficult if the narrator is incapable of analyzing motives and purposes; Bertie has enough trouble perceiving what anyone, himself included, is doing without trying to grasp why he is doing it. He is also close to being inarticulate. His native language, so to speak, is man-about-town English as it was spoken in London before 1914, a blend of cliches, public schoolboys' tags, and upper-class slang, curiously enriched by a good deal of postwar American slang. Bertie can draw on the linguistic resources of his valet, Jeeves, who reads Spinoza in his spare time and has memorized all the treasured bits of English poetry.

The very limitations of his narrative method enable Wodehouse to achieve grander results. In particular Bertie's intellectual opacity makes it easier for the reader to accept -- more accurately, pretend to believe in -- the preposterous characters that Wodehouse's farcical plots must deal with. For example, one of the numerous subplots in The Code of the Woosters calls for a girl so superlatively dopey that she could 1)

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think that Bertie was asking her to marry him when he was only trying to plead the case of his friend Gussie Fink-Nottle, 2) be willing to marry somebody as dopey as Gussie, who is so absorbed in the study of newts that he brings a tankful of them when he comes to visit her, and 3) remains so convinced of Bertie's nonexistent ardor that she offers her hand to him whenever she breaks her highly frangible engagement to Gussie. Impossible? Yes. Still a pretense of belief becomes possible when we read Bertie's comment on Madeline Bassett: "I call her a ghastly girl because she was a ghastly girl. The Woosters are chivalrous, but they can speak their minds. A droopy, soupy, sentimental exhibit, with melting eyes and a cooing voice and the most extraordinary views on such things as stars and rabbits. I remember her telling me once that the rabbits were gnomes in attendance on the Fairy Queen and that the stars were God's daisy chain. Perfect rot, of course. They're nothing of the sort."

Bertie's idiocy is so flawlessly and vividly rendered by his narration that we must take only one more small step to give credence to the idiocy of the other characters in the farce. It helps that Wodehouse never places further strain on our credulity. If it were possible for a beautiful young woman of marriageable age to be so dopey, then she would speak and act exactly as Madeline Bassett speaks and acts. The same is true for all the other characters in the novel: a "fish-eyed freak" of a newt fancier like Gussie would fall in love with a Madeline; a muscle-flexing would-be dictator like Roderick Spode (who dresses his followers in black shorts, not black shirts) would also nurse a passion for a Madeline; a dog-fancier like Staphanie Byng would fall in love with an impecunious curate like The Reverend H. P. (Stinker) Pinker, who is so clumsy that he couldn't walk "through the great Gobi desert without knocking something over"; and fanatical collectors of old silver like Sir Watkin Bassett and Bertie's Uncle Tom would see an eighteenth century creamer in the shape of a cow as worth any amount of theft and blackmail. Grant Wodehouse his farcical premises and everything else follows. Nonetheless one is more willing to grant the premises when Bertie is the narrator. When the narrative is in the third person, such as The Luck of the Bodkins, the granting comes harder. Wodehouse couldn't write a clumsy sentence, and he never used a word inaccurately; one wonders how a person with a style like that can swallow a story as preposterous as this. I have some trouble even with the much-admired farces in the Blandings Castle series, which are also told in the third person. But the short stories about golf, gathered in The Clicking of Cuthbert and The Heart of a Goof, and the Mulliner stories, gathered in The World of Mr. Mulliner, work splendidly because they are narrated by classic types of liars, the Oldest Member at the golf club and a fisherman who holds forth in the bar-parlor of the Angler's Rest.

The key to Wodehouse's mastery is the completeness with which he accepts the constraints of his form. That form is essentially the American musical comedy of the first quarter of this century adapted for fiction. It must be light -- to use the word favored by reviewers, frothy -- devoid of any content that anyone of a mental age beyond eight might label serious. Its characters must be the simplest kind of stereotypes, and they must be sufficiently varied as to age and sex as to supply parts for a modest-sized company of ingénues and harridans, swains and comic villains. Its young lovers must be verbally ardent and wildly jealous, without displaying the simplest awareness of sexuality, while its harridans and villains must be thoroughly desiccated and monomaniacal. It must be heavily plotted along recognizably conventional lines, and the

It must arrive at subclimaxes at regularly spaced intervals. Above all, this kind of farce must have deft comic pace, establishing a rhythm of smiles and laughter akin to the rhythms of words and music in the great popular songs of the period. In short it is both a demanding and a seemingly trivial form; therefore its practitioners must resist the temptation to fudge on its demands or to condescend to its triviality. Wodehouse never gave in to either temptation.

He took fabulous care in plotting. For a novel like The Code of the Woosters he would write a preliminary synopsis that could run to sixty or eighty thousand words. Plot always flows from characters: it never requires that a personage in the tale act inconsistently with his own bizarre personality. Subplots mesh smoothly, and the crises that they cause arise rhythmically and naturally. The plot is both comprehensive and economical: it encompasses every detail in the novel so that there are no false leads or loose strands, and it makes do with the least possible arbitrary devices and coincidences. It may use one of the clichés of dramatic or fictional plotting, but only if it is given some unexpected comic twist. Even that darling of the Greeks, the god out of the machine, is practically banned from Wodehouse plots. The nearest thing to a resolving deity that one can find is Jeeves in the stories and novels narrated by Bertie Wooster, but Jeeves is present -- in spirit if not in actual fact -- from beginning to end of each tale, and the relationship between the brainy servant and the "mentally negligible" master is the central joke of the entire series. Each piece plays a game for and with the reader. He always knows that Jeeves will discover the means of rescuing Bertie from his difficulties and that Bertie will finally give in to Jeeves on whatever matter these "two men of iron will" (as Bertie puts it) are clashing over; he just doesn't know how it will be done. Jeeves' solutions are never miraculous; occasionally he will pull a small rabbit out of his size-eight hat, but mostly he simply exercises a little common sense in behalf of Bertie and his nitwit friends.

The plot of The Code of the Woosters is so simple that it could be summarized in a single sentence: every developed character is at one time or another concerned either to gain or to maintain possession of an eighteenth-century silver creamer. But it is so intricate that it would take several thousand words to explain that sentence. Each character has a distinctly different motive that is in keeping with his own idiosyncrasies, and each at one time or another tries either to persuade or to force Bertie to steal it, or suspects that he has stolen or will steal it, though Bertie is the only one who simply despises the thing and actually has nothing to do with either stealing or keeping it. The issue of the creamer arises on the fifth page and is finally resolved on the second page from the end, with Jeeves arranging comeuppance for the three comic villains and happy endings for all the sympathetic characters. And on the next to last page Wodehouse ties a pretty ribbon to this package: he settles the conflict between Jeeves and Bertie, which had been introduced on the second page of the novel, by having Bertie agree to go on a cruise around the world if Jeeves would explain why the word Eulalie brought Roderick Spode to heel, thereby making all the happy endings possible. The would-be dictator's terrible secret is that he is "the founder and proprietor of the emporium on Bond Street known as Eulalie Soeurs." Thus the novel which began with Bertie waking up on a foggy morning -- "we are now in autumn," Jeeves informs him, "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" -- can end with Bertie tucked under the covers on a rainy night: "And presently the eyes closed, the muscles relaxed, the breathing became soft and regular, and sleep which does

something which has slipped my mind to the something sleeve of care pour over me in a healing wave."

You cannot ask for better farcical plotting. Farce must take a group of preposterous characters through a series of ridiculous actions in a way that remains, granting the author's original premises, perfectly credible. It must always teeter on the brink of chaos, yet it must finally reveal itself as fully controlled. To get such results it must have what The Code of the Woosters has -- a plot that combines the best qualities of a fun-house mirror and an algebraic equation.

Wodehouse's mastery involves much more than that. He is funny, not just occasionally, but consistently, in story after story, in novel after novel. He is funny both as to situation and as to dialogue. He can build and elaborate a traditional gag, such as the stealing of a constable's hat, making it yield a variety of kinds of laugh in a number of different situations planted throughout the novel until he releases it, along with several other running gags, in the climactic chapter. Yet he can also twist a word to raise a smile or fetch a comparison from the farthest reaches of comic similitude. Gussie Fink-Nottle looks like "an annoyed turbot," and Stiffy Byng wiggles "from base to apex in girlish enthusiasm." And Bertie speaks (in The Inimitable Jeeves) of tomes of crisis in his family "when Aunt is calling to Aunt like mastadons bellowing across primeval swamps."

Wodehouse possesses one of the most valuable gifts a professional funnyman can have -- an ear for repetition and variation. If people are going to laugh, they have to feel comfortable with the material. The fresher his material, the more carefully the comedian must introduce it to his audience. Once he has found the material that works for him, he dares not stray very far from it. Any comedian will seem limited, dully predictable, even downright repetitious to a person who does not respond to his humor (and there is no such thing as a universally funny joke). He must often come perilously close to sheer repetition, but he must finally manage to veer away from it. Like a race car driver a comedian must have nerves of steel -- or, to borrow a pun from Ring Lardner, nerves of steal.

Wodehouse has them. In Right Ho, Jeeves (1934) and in Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves, the engagement of Madeline Bassett to Gussie Fink-Nottle is as important an element of the story as it is in The Code of the Woosters (1938); there is more overlap between any two of these than there is between any two or three books by any "serious" novelist, Faulkner included. Yet each of the three plays a charming variation on the problem that endangers the engagement and thereby threatens Bertie with the fate worse than death, marriage to Madeline. The first time it is Gussie's shyness; the second time it is still his shyness, though this time he gets into trouble by bolstering his courage with a notebook cataloguing the faults of Madeline's father, the dreadful Sir Watkyn, rather than by drinking brandy before giving the commencement address at the local grammar school. But the third time it is gluttony, not shyness, that upsets his engagement: when Madeline forces him on to a vegetarian diet he switches his affections to a cook who will supply him with steak-and-kidney pie. An unsympathetic reader may see Wodehouse as plagiarizing himself in these three novels; a responsive reader will see him as demonstrating the possibility for variation within rigidly defined limits, like a great dancer waltzing on a small stage.

Wodehouse converts the novelist's need for references and

allusions into an occasion for more exercises in comic economy. He never exceeds the limits of knowledge that schoolboys used to have drilled into them, quotable gem by gem, and in any given novel he works with only a handful of sources. In The Code of the Woosters they are two books of the Old Testament, Macbeth, Hamlet, "Pippa Passes," "Ode to Autumn," the ending of A Tale of Two Cities, and the story of Archimedes discovering the principle of displacement in his bathtub. The game he plays with the Archimedes story is typical of him. Jeeves introduces it, for it is not the sort of thing Bertie would know. Bertie soon mangles it telling it to Gussie, who wouldn't know it either. Much later Bertie harks back to it to explain his own delight in a discovery; and near the end of the novel Jeeves finishes the series of references by announcing to Bertie that he is now in a position to say "Eureka!" "Say what?" "Eureka, sir. Like Archimedes." "Did he say Eureka? I thought it was Skakespeare." But Wodehouse isn't satisfied with only verbal allusions to Archimedes. Bertie and Sir Watkyn step into bathtubs too; Sir Watkyn discovers Gussie's newts in his; Bertie a delightful toy duck in his.

Wodehouse is acutely sensitive to clichés, as much so as Orwell was. But, less puritan than Orwell, Wodehouse delights in playing mockingly with them. Bertie is the ideal narrator for him because Bertie is not bright enough to get a firm hold on a cliché. Sometimes he reaches for one and comes up with the wrong word, as when he exclaims at some astonishing news from his aunt "Incredulous!" Often he has to check himself in mid-cliché, as in "There was a brief -- and if that's the word I want -- a pregnant silence." Or he will get the emphasis wrong: "I may even have smiled -- wanly, of course." Or he will garble it: "One man's peach is another man's poison, and vice-versa." To which he adds with characteristic insensitivity to tone: "Even my Aunt Agatha, I remembered, had roused the red-hot spark of pash in the late Spencer Grigson." Sometimes he will pride himself on his understanding of a cliché: "A man thinks he is being chilled steel -- or adamant, if you prefer the expression -- and suddenly the mists clear away and he finds that he has allowed a girl to talk him into something frightful. Samson had the same experience with Delilah." And on some choice occasions he has to labor to understand one at all, as when Jeeves reports that Constable Oates has heard "the sound of stealthy footsteps," and Bertie must inquire, "Someone stepping stealthily, as it were?"

Though it sounds like a preposterous thing to say about a writer whose ninety-odd books are populated largely by upper-class Englishmen and whose ideal setting is an English manor on a long summer weekend, Wodehouse was as much an American as an Englishman, and his American qualities are essential to his mastery. He grew up in England, largely in the care of relatives, went through public school at Dulwich, and would have gone to Oxford if the collapse of his family's fortunes hadn't forced him to become a bank clerk in London; but as soon as he could scrape the money together he came to New York. From 1909 on he lived mostly in New York and in international resorts in Europe, spending relatively little time in England before 1940 and none after that. In 1955 he fulfilled his "life's ambition" and became an American citizen.

If England gave him his basic material, America gave him his way of treating it. In England he wrote primarily fiction of a traditional sort about life in public schools; in New York he began to write highly distinctive fiction about people who had gone to public schools. Those early school stories, especially Mike, have had their admirers in England; but the others have flourished in all the literate countries of the world,

attaining the status of a subgenre of their own. The Americanism of Wodehouses is most apparent in the language the characters speak, a unique blend of English schoolboy and American playboy slang, the English slang being the sort that an American thinks an Englishman ought to speak and the American, the sort an Englishman thinks an American must speak. Far more important but much more difficult to pinpoint is the Americanism of their rhythms. The novels and stories alike have a way of moving that can be learned only on this side of the Atlantic. They bounce jauntily, unpredictably, taking two extra beats to make a joke here, hurrying past a line there; they bring in characters and complications just a little faster than you think they will and stress both sentences and scenes in unexpected places. Above all they waste as little time and space as possible with exposition and explanation: they seem always to be getting on to the next thing -- except when they are pausing to take two or three extra turns around a small joke. The difference in rhythm between the Wodehouses and English or European farces is like the difference between the songs in the great American musical comedies of the 1920s and those in the European operettas that preceded them -- like the difference between a Strauss waltz, such as "Blue Danube" or "Vienna Woods," and George Gershwin's lightly mocking "By Strauss" or Fats Waller's impish "Jitterbug Waltz." Wodehouse was never as jazzy as Gershwin or Waller, but he could keep time to Jerome Kern's beat. Wodehouse wrote the lyrics for some of the Princess Theater shows (1916-18) in which Kern first marked out for himself and others the possibility of a distinctively American theater music. "Leave it to Jane," "Till the Clouds Roll By," and "Bill" all carry lyrics by Wodehouse.

Wodehouse had a long and profitable career in the theater, writing lyrics, collaborating with Guy Bolton, and adapting European plays like Ferenc Molnar's The Play's the Thing, but all of his theater work was done on the side. From the day he discovered that clerking in a bank wasn't for him (which seems to have been his first or second day at the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank) until almost the day he died in February 1975, he worked at his true craft, writing farcical fiction. His dedication to it was enough to put a monk to shame. Day after day, no matter where he was or what his circumstances were, Wodehouse wrote. In Hollywood, London, Nice or Long Island he wrote. And even when he was held prisoner as an enemy alien by the Nazis, he still wrote, finishing two gaily comic novels in those dismal circumstances. As Wilfrid Sheed has observed, with mixed feelings, the closest English public schools have come to producing a writer of Flaubertian dedication is Wodehouse. If Sheed thinks it would be a good thing if there were more of Flaubert in our literature, I would argue that it might be a good thing if there were more of Wodehouse in French literature.

The French have had and still do have great farceurs -- Georges Feydeau and Jacques Tati, to name only two -- but they do tend to take their rationality solemnly. The great, lovely, reassuring, perennial significance of The Code of the Woosters and of every other novel and story that Wodehouse ever wrote is that the ability to reason is an overrated gift. As everyone who has laughed deeply knows, that is the significance of so much great comedy; but what counts is freshness of image, not originality of message. Wodehouse has given us in our time and in our language new images of benign idiocy so that we may realize that it is better to be sweetly stupid than aggressively brilliant. With one exception the intellectually competent people in the world he has created are monstrous. The women among them are relentlessly bossy, like Bertie's Aunt Agatha, "who eats broken bottles and wears barbed wire next to the

in," or like Florence Craye, who plans to make a new man out of Bertie and begins their engagement by making him read Types of Ethical Theory instead of the murder mystery he was "studying at the moment," Blood on the Banisters. The competent men are even worse: they are headmasters who terrorize schoolboys, like the Reverend Aubrey Upjohn, or would-be dictators who yearn to terrorize the entire nation, like Roderick Spode. In the long run these fiercely competent people are stupider than the nitwits they seek to squash.

The exception to the Wodehousian rule that intelligence is a tool of selfishness and aggression is Jeeves. Jeeves is, in the old-fashioned phrase, "in service," and his abilities are at the command of Bertie and his friends. Jeeves is selfish only in that he will strike quickly and hard to preserve his relationship with Bertie. That relationship has puzzled many readers: the naive ask why someone as capable as Jeeves would be content to remain a servant; the less naive think that Wodehouse is satirizing the English class system. But Wodehouse didn't have a satiric bone in his head (as Bertie might have put it), and Jeeves, who is a man who loves his little comforts, is very comfortable sitting in the kitchen reading Spinoza. We must see that relationship as symbolic, as expressing Wodehouse's deepest insight -- that rational intelligence becomes monstrous and ultimately self-destructive if it is not held firmly subservient to the ideals of affability and civility. Wodehouse would have us understand that Jeeves is exactly right when he tells a momentarily depressed and listless Bertie that getting the correct adjustment of his trousers always matters; for when we devote ourselves to apparently trivial things like trousers life can be gay, but when we take our troubles and selves seriously it will certainly be dreary.

Quite possibly Wodehouse saved the world from something monstrous when he devoted his high intelligence to the making of "frothy farces," though he never entertained such a thought. Certainly he would have denied that his work embodies symbolic meanings and deep insights; he left that sort of thing to the "big shots" like Faulkner and Hemingway, and he was embarrassed by any suggestion that he might belong in their company. Wodehouse's only boast is the modest one he makes in Author! Author!, a collection of his letters to William Townend: "With each new book of mine I have that uneasy feeling that this time I have picked a lemon in the garden of literature. Good thing, really, I suppose. Keeps me on my toes and makes me write every sentence half a dozen times. My stuff may not be the sort of stuff that admits you to halls of fame, but I work at it. When in due course, Charon ferries me across the Styx and everybody is telling everybody else what a rotten writer I was, I hope at least one voice will be heard piping up, 'But he did take trouble.'"

Pelham Grenville Wodehouse (1881-1975) did take trouble, and he was a master of the very difficult art of farce. How lucky we are that he lived so long and wrote so much.

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Dr. Edward L. Galligan, TWS, heads the Department of English at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan. In his H. L. Mencken - A Choice of Days, essays....selected and with an introduction by Edward L. Galligan, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1980, he proved that he is an authority on more than one author. We are proud to have him as a member.