

“Across the pale parabola of Joy”: Wodehouse Parodist

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In his stories and novels Wodehouse never comments on his technique but, fortunately, in his letters to Bill Townend, the author friend who first introduced him to Stanley Featherstonough Ukridge, he does drop some professional hints, for instance:

I believe there are two ways of writing novels. One is mine, making the thing a sort of musical comedy without music, and ignoring real life altogether; the other is going right down into life and not caring a damn. (WoW 313)

This is augmented by a later remark concerning autobiographic interpretations, especially of Shakespeare:

A thing I can never understand is why all the critics seem to assume that his plays are a reflection of his personal moods and dictated by the circumstances of his private life. [...] I can't see it. Do you find that your private life affects your work? I don't. (WoW 360)

In 1935, when he confessed to “ignoring real life altogether,” Wodehouse had found his form. Looking at his work of some 25 years before, we can get an idea of how he did so. In *Psmith Journalist* (1912), for instance, that exquisite is indeed concerned with real life, but, ten years later, in *Leave it to Psmith*, he joins the Blandings gang and, finally, replaces the efficient Baxter as Lord Emsworth's secretary, with hardly a trace of real life left in him.

Opening one of Wodehouse's best stories or novels is like saying, “Open Sesame!” or “Curtain up!” and from then on, in a way, nothing is but what is not. The lights in the auditorium go out and there is

nothing but the play which is, of course, the result not of a conjuring trick, or even of genius alone, but of highly professional hard work.

For years Wodehouse worked in a team of theatrical professionals who made plays, e.g., the so-called *Princess Shows*, which were very popular and highly praised by the most fastidious critics in their day. Wodehouse wrote the lyrics but also helped with the plot and dialogue and this was, perhaps, instrumental in his cultivating a kind of prose fiction that was indeed, not in a metaphorical but technical sense, “musical comedy without music.” In one of his letters to Townend, in 1923, he wrote:

The more I write, the more I am convinced that the only way to write a popular story is to split it up into scenes [...]. (WoW 252)

and:

The principle I always go on in writing a long story is to think of the characters in terms of actors in a play. (WoW 255-56)

So the narrative technique he increasingly wanted to perfect was essentially scenic. And what he wanted to show is, emphatically, not life—but what is it? What happens, when London and New York, where Psmith had been employed as bank clerk and journalist, fade away, and his maker transports him to Blandings Castle? It seems that Wodehouse went even further than Virgil did (according to “An Essay on Criticism” 132-35):

Perhaps he seem'd above the critics' law,
And but from Nature's fountains scorn'd to draw:
But when to examine every part he came,
Nature and Homer were, he found, the same. (Pope 61)

Wodehouse obviously found not only that “Nature and Homer were [...] the same,” but that—for the purposes of his musical-comedy-fiction—Nature was less useful and fitting than Homer, or Sir Thomas Malory, or Sir Walter Scott, or Alfred Lord Tennyson, or Edward Lear, to name but a few. So he gave up following nature altogether and

followed those who also had followed their elders and betters; and this is a course which, when followed most strictly, is likely to lead to parody, be it literal or burlesque.

A Damsel in Distress (1919) is a novel modelled closely on Tennyson's *Maud*, though not yet purged completely of reality. Of course everyone knows the story, but here is its *protasis* in Wodehousean terms: Lady Maud Marsh, the heroine, loves a mysterious stranger, whom she met a year ago, predictably, in Wales. But the family, that is to say the inevitable ogrish aunt, Lady Caroline Byng, will have none of it and keeps Maud shut up in Belpher Castle. The father, in this case, is nice and harmless but no help whatsoever, because Lady Caroline has him under strict control. The bad brother, Percy, is indeed bad but completely grotesque; overdressed and fat and supercilious. Came a day, when Maud, reading in the society column that her Geoffrey is back in town, goes there on the sly and, walking along Piccadilly, is sighted and pursued by Percy. To hide from him, she enters a cab which, needless to say, is occupied by George, the real hero, who had fallen in love with her at first sight, long before:

"I'm so sorry," she said breathlessly, "but would you mind hiding me, please." (*Damsel* 28)

Of course, George does not mind but

gazed upon Piccadilly with eyes from which the scales had fallen [...] though superficially the same, in reality Piccadilly had altered completely. Before it had been just Piccadilly. Now it was a golden Street in the City of Romance, a main thoroughfare of Baghdad [...] a rose-coloured mist swam before George's eyes. His spirits, so low but a few moments back, soared like a good niblick shot out of the bunker of Gloom. (*Damsel* 29)

Where are we? In Piccadilly, or in Fairyland, or on an allegorical golf course? But however real or mythical the scene, in one respect we have firm ground under our feet: we may be sure that we are moving in literary circles. For immediately after the Arthurian legends and *The Thousand and One Nights* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* comes Sir Arthur Conan Doyle:

What would Sherlock Holmes have done? (*Damsel* 44)

comes Longfellow:

A dreadful phrase, haunting in its pathos, crept into [George's] mind. “Ships that pass in the night!” (*Damsel* 44)

comes Lady Fortune in person:

Luck is a goddess not to be coerced and forcibly wooed by those who seek her favours. (*Damsel* 45)

comes the report in the *Evening News* of the enraged Percy who, prevented by an obliging policeman from hitting George, hits the policeman instead, who duly marches him off to Vine Street police station. This makes the reporter break into verse:

... *Who knows what horrors might have been, had there not come upon the scene old London City's favourite son, Policeman C. 231. “What means this conduct? Prithee stop!” exclaimed that admirable slop [...]. [But eventually Percy] gave the constable a punch just where the latter kept his lunch. The constable said “Well! Well! Well!” and marched him to a dungeon cell [...].*

(*Damsel* 46)

That “Well! Well! Well!” rings a parodic bell. We are meant to see through the incognito of that *Evening News* reporter: his name is Hilaire Belloc and he has been present all along, for the child Godolphin Horne in Belloc clearly is the father of the man Percy Lord Belpher in Wodehouse:

Godolphin Horne was Nobly Born;
He held the Human Race in Scorn,
[...]
And oh! the Lad was Deathly Proud!
He never shook your Hand or Bowed,
But merely smirked and nodded thus:
How perfectly ridiculous!
Alas! That such Affected Tricks
Should flourish in a Child of Six!
(For such was Young Godolphin's age).
Just then, the Court required a Page, (Belloc 29-31, ll. 1-2, 5-12)

but when Godolphin Horne is suggested, murmurs of dissent are heard all around, and even Lady Mary Flood,

(So Kind, and oh! so *really* good)
 Said, "No! He wouldn't do at all,
 He'd make us feel a lot too small."
 The Chamberlain said, " ... Well, well, well!
 No doubt you're right.... One cannot tell!"
 He took his Gold and Diamond Pen
 And Scratched Godolphin out again.
 So now Godolphin is the Boy
 Who blacks the Boots at the Savoy. (Belloc 34-36, ll. 38-46)

Percy and Godolphin, the metre and the rhythm, the stylistic level and the tone fit, and the policeman borrows some of the Chamberlain's words, and Wodehouse, like Belloc, writes cautionary verse that culminates in a moral:

At Vine Street Station out it came—Lord Belper was the culprit's name. But British Justice is severe alike on pauper and on peer; with even hand she holds the scale; a thumping fine, in lieu of gaol, induced Lord B to feel remorse and learn he mustn't punch the Force.

(Damsel 46)

We are in literature and we are in the theatre. That is where George belongs in the plot (he is the composer of the musical now running at the Regal Theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue), and what happens, when the girl has boarded George's taxi which moves slowly on with brother Percy in hot pursuit, is a "spectacle" with carefully made-up and attired characters. Strangely enough, one shop-girl in the crowd calls the other "Mordee" (*Damsel* 31). So besides the Lady Maud of Belper Castle there is a very different Maud ("Mordee" to friends) with her own untold story which might happen in a sentimental novel or play called—quoting Wodehouse—"Only a Factory Girl" (*Jeeves* 190). We are watching a show. George protruding from the window of the taxi like a snail feels that he is part of a theatrical scene: he "was entertained by the spectacle of the pursuit" (*Damsel* 31). And a man in the crowd says "'It's a fillum! [...] The kernerer's 'idden in the keb'"

(*Damsel* 32). So, the stars as well as the bit part-actors, which are in the scene, feel that they are in a scene. It's the old trick of a stage within a stage. If we have missed this, we are reminded of it by the nice young man who takes Percy home after the night spent in Vine Street police station. “‘This [...] is rather like a bit out of a melodrama. Convict son totters up the steps of the old home and punches the bell’” (*Damsel* 48).

After this obvious, general persiflage, a very specific one takes place when it comes to bringing us a little nearer to the heroine, Lady Maud, and, incidentally, to Albert the page-boy at Belpher Castle. Maud, who is fond of the *Ingoldsby Legends*, would prefer Albert to be like a silk-and-satined medieval page, and tries to educate him with the help of Tennyson's “Mariana”:

“Read me some of this,” she said, “and then tell me if it doesn't make you feel you want to do big things.” (*Damsel* 75)

When Alfred begins to read we are treated to the Cockney version of “With blackest moss the flower-pots [...]” copied in *My Fair Lady* some thirty years hence.

Needless to say, Albert is not reformed by Tennyson's poetry. Seeing pigs killed is what fascinates him. But this speaks against Albert, not Tennyson, who charms both the romantic heroine and hero with his poetry. To Maud it seems that “Mariana” might have been written with an eye to her special case, so vividly do its magic words echo her own story.

*She only said, 'My life is dreary,
He cometh not,' she said.
She said 'I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!'* (*Damsel* 77)

It is exactly the same with George, who

has just discovered the extraordinary resemblance [...] between his own position and that of the hero of Tennyson's *Maud*, a poem to which he has always been particularly addicted—and never more so than during the days

since he learned the name of the only possible girl. When he has not been playing golf, Tennyson's *Maud* has been his constant companion. (*Damsel* 111)

So Tennyson's poetry remains on its high romantic pedestal, the sympathy of both the heroes craving ours, the readers'. And if we are made that way, we like it all the better for being, like the heroes themselves, romantic with a vengeance: the course of their true love runs far from smoothly, but there is always golf. Similarly, "Mariana" is a lovely poem, but there are always the Cockney potentialities of the flower-pot sequence. If we get too deeply involved by empathy and sympathy and too depressed by that "I am aweary, aweary," we may switch to Alfred's, or Eliza Doolittle's, cockney recital of "'Wiv blekest morss [...]" (*Damsel* 76).

Far from being brought in opposition with a more life-like, more up-to-date, more enlightened kind of literary reality, the poems appear as the masterly rendition of an ever-recurring myth, recurring, for instance, in this story, whether or not Lady Maud or the "Mordee" of that cockney crowd is its heroine. There comes, however, a kind of epitasis and anagnorisis in the sequence of scenes, when even golf doesn't seem able to provide relief from romantic melancholy: George, mistaken by "the family" for the man Maud wanted to meet in London when she hid in George's taxi, thinks he has reached journey's end, but has to discover, suddenly and tragically and (apparently) inevitably, that Maud only wants him to help her regain the man she has fallen in love with the year before in Wales.

It is all very romantic and tear-jerking but, again, we are saved from drowning in sentimentality: Shakespeare comes to the rescue when George, recovering from the first shock, finds that he seems to be "in the position of the tinker in the play whom everybody conspired to delude into the belief that he was a king" (*Damsel* 145). Certainly all is not lost for a man who is able to compare himself with Christopher Sly. Moreover we, the readers, have been in the know all along about "the man from Wales." He is an absolute bounder and, worse, will turn out to have grown fat during that year of absence. Finally, a *deus*

ex machina appears in the costume of a crook lawyer who presents the papers to him concerning a breach of promise, and Maud can wave him good bye with a clear conscience.

Up to this funny *dénouement*, Maud’s and George’s story is so very similar in all its essentials to Tennyson’s “Maud” that it appears as a self-parody modelled on the parodied romance. It shares its sentiment, its remoteness from reality, not only with regard to content but form as well: if the old romance is clothed in verse, the “modern” novel is a (musical) comedy in prose.

Wodehouse loves making fun of Tennyson’s poetry, especially its supposedly ennobling effect. All that “Trouble Down at Tudsleigh,” where a young girl imitates Lady Godiva to the letter, is a case in point. But as an exact replica of a Tennysonian romance, *A Damsel in Distress* stands alone. There is only one other case in which the romantic love-story dominates a short story (not a novel), but now it is the squashily sentimental novel in general that is parodied, not a specific work.

We are spared the effort of composing a summary of this short story by Wodehouse himself, who wrote in a letter to Townend:

The short story I have just finished, entitled *Honeysuckle Cottage*, is the funniest idea I’ve ever had. A young writer of thrillers gets left five thousand quid and a house by his aunt, who was Leila May Pinkney, the famous writer of sentimental stories. He finds that her vibrations have set up a sort of miasma of sentimentalism in the place, so that all who come within its radius get soppy and maudlin. He then finds to his horror that he is—but it will be simpler to send you the story [...]. (WoW 259)

Well, there was a clause in the aunt’s testament to the effect that James (the thriller-writer) has to live for some months every year in the cottage, if he wants to get the money. He does of course, and so he finds himself transformed into the hero of a typical Leila May Pinkney-story complete with fragile golden-haired girl and soldierly guardian and all the other clichés. This is how he first becomes aware of what he has let himself in for:

He shoved in a fresh sheet of paper, chewed his pipe thoughtfully for a moment, then wrote rapidly:

For an instant Lester Gage thought that he must have been mistaken. Then the noise came again, faint but unmistakable [...]

His mouth set in a grim line. Silently, like a panther, he made one quick step to the desk, noiselessly opened a drawer, drew out his automatic. After that affair of the poisoned needle, he was taking no chances. Still in dead silence, he tiptoed to the door; then, flinging it suddenly open, he stood there, his weapon poised.

On the mat stood the most beautiful girl he had ever beheld. A veritable child of Faërie. She eyed him for a moment with a saucy smile; then with a pretty, roguish look of reproof shook a dainty forefinger at him.

'I believe you've forgotten me, Mr. Gage!' she fluted with a mock severity which her eyes belied.

James stared at the paper dumbly. (*Mr Mulliner* 150-51)

The miasma is stronger than James, and so, in the end, he is on the point of proposing to the girl, Rose, when, like the crook lawyer in *A Damsel in Distress*, a *deus ex machina* comes to the rescue. It is the gardener's dog, William, a mongrel to end all mongrels, who has, in fact, kept intruding from the very first, but really takes over only now. After having upset the tea-table and thus interrupted the proposal, he starts to chase Rose's cherished little dog Toto, and thus makes James chase him in order to save Toto, whom, after having passed farmer Briskett's farm, farmer Giles's cow-shed, and the Bunch of Grapes Public House, he finds hiding in a small drainpipe.

"William," roared James, coming up at a canter. He stopped to pluck a branch from the hedge and swooped darkly on.

William had been crouching before the pipe, making a noise like a bassoon into its interior; but now he rose and came beamingly to James. His eyes were aglow with chumminess and affection; and placing his forefeet on James's chest, he licked him three times on the face in rapid succession. And as he did so, something seemed to snap in James. The scales seemed to fall from James's eyes. For the first time he saw William as he really was, the authentic type of dog that saves his master from a frightful peril. A wave of emotion swept over him.

"William!" he muttered, "William!" (*Mr Mulliner* 169-70)

And so, at the end of this story, where he wholeheartedly ridicules a kind of literature that cannot but be a self-parody, Wodehouse again sympathizes with the original in out-pinkneying the Pinkney: The hero vanishes from the readers' eyes not betrothed to the lovely Rose,

but bound in eternal friendship to the ugly mongrel William, who has saved him from becoming the hero of a sentimental love-story only to make him the hero of a sentimental dog-story:

William looked up into his face and it seemed to James that he gave a brief nod of comprehension and approval. James turned. Through the trees to the east he could see the red roof of Honeysuckle Cottage, lurking like some evil dragon in ambush. (*Mr Mulliner* 170)

And this is the last short-story entirely modelled on a parodied type of literature. As an episode, of course, the sentimental novel will come up again and again, especially in its modern form, the film-script.

In *Laughing Gas*, for instance, where sentimentality has (nearly) completely vanished, three would-be script-writers kidnap (as a publicity stunt) the child-star Joey Cooley (who in fact is not Joey Cooley at all but an English earl changed temporarily into the boy by a dentist who has applied laughing gas). Now (treating him to an excellent breakfast of pancakes) they insist on telling him a story they have concocted, which, they are sure, cannot but widely surpass the fame of *All's Quiet on the Western Front* and *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Frequently interrupting each other, they are interrupted eventually by little Joey Cooley, who points out the lack of a love interest:

“Love interest?” said George. He brightened. “Well, how does this strike you? Coast of South America, girl swimming out to the anchored ship. The air is heavy with the exotic perfume of the tropics [...] and a cloud of pink flamingoes drifts lazily across the sky, and there’s this here now practically naked girl swimming out to—”

[...]

“Don’t you worry about love interest,” said George. “Let’s get on to where you blow in. These gangsters scuttle the ship—see—and they get off in the boat—see—same as in *Mutiny on the Bounty*—see—and [...] supposing that in this boat there’s a little bit of a golden-haired boy [...]

And so, in an obstacle race of interruptions they reach their climax:

“Who do you think Public Enemy Number Thirteen turns out to be? Just your long-lost father. That’s all. Nothing but that. Maybe that ain’t a smacko? There’s a locket you’re wearing round your neck—see—”

“And this bozo takes a slant at it while you’re asleep—see—”

“And,” said George, “it’s yessir sure enough the picture of the dead wife he loved ...” (*Laughing Gas* 174-75)

Wodehouse more or less celebrates the little plot, being quite openly grateful to Hollywood for taking it off his hands, and at the same time providing him with all those absolutely unsuitable, grossly inelegant, perfectly lovely clichés heaped together, which have fascinated the reading and theatre-going public at least since the days of Heliodorus’s *Aethiopica*.

Is this kind of parody still sympathetic? Surely it is. Wodehouse wouldn’t miss that kind of film-script for the world. Nor would he, at the other end of the literary scale of styles and values, that lyrical gem,

“Across the pale parabola of Joy.”

This cryptic line pops up again and again in *Leave it to Psmith*, published, long before *Laughing Gas*, in 1923. It is a Blandings-novel in which the chatelaine, Lady Constance Keeble, sees herself playing the role of a patroness of up-and-coming poets. A female specimen of this kind, Miss Aileen Peavey, is already in residence at the Castle. Lady Constance has made her acquaintance on an ocean-liner, wherefore we suspect her from the very first of being the crook she eventually will turn out to be. Nevertheless she has published some poems with some success, though we can only guess from her conversation what her poetry is like. One morning, for instance, she waylays Lord Emsworth to ask him, if he doesn’t think that it was fairies’ tear-drops that made the dew (*Psmith* 96).

This is, however, far from being either the conversational or poetic style of Ralston McTodd, the “powerful young singer of Saskatoon” (*Psmith* 81), who has also been invited by Lady Constance. Since he is, however, already a celebrity, Lord Emsworth is despatched (to his utter dismay) to meet him in London at the Senior Conservative Club and bring him to the castle in person. Of course Lord Emsworth makes a complete mess of everything. McTodd swears that he will never come near Blandings. Psmith, having fallen in love at first sight with the young Lady who is going to Blandings to catalogue the

library, feels sure that his going there too, under the name of McTodd, will be a good deed for all concerned.

And so we find him in a first class compartment of the five o'clock train, moving slowly out of Paddington Station, “taking his bag down from the rack” and extracting “a slim volume bound in squashy mauve” in order to get ready for answering questions concerning his (i.e. McTodd’s) poems, only to find that “[t]hey were not light summer reading.” What he reads (to the accompaniment of Lord Emsworth’s snores) is:

“Across the pale parabola of Joy [...]” (with a capital J)

“Psmith knitted his brow” (*Psmith* 98-99)—and so do, surely, many readers, though not because they are worrying about the meaning of this line (which obviously does not mean a thing), nor because they are in danger of being questioned about it by Lady Constance and Miss Peavey, not to mention the efficient Baxter. Very probably their brow-knitting concerns the question of how McTodd’s stroke of genius makes sense as a parody. If, however, tempted by this problem, they would go to the library and start digging deeply into some of the more celebrated collections of poems of the twenties, they would only waste their time. That brainchild of McTodd’s is far from being a caricature of a rarity. It is an imitation of a pattern easily and frequently to be found in any anthology. Here are some specimens:

1. Against the dry essential of tomorrow (Brooks 114)
2. The steep sierras of delight (Campbell 107)
3. The green anatomy of desire
4. The deep larder of illusion
5. A gradual eclipse of recognition
6. Under the snuffed Lantern of time (Roberts 223-31)
7. ... pierced with the passion of dense gloom (Roberts 166-67)
8. Peaked margin of antiquity’s delay
9. Split the straight line of pessimism (Roberts 201-03)
10. Across the pale parabola of Joy (*Psmith* 98 and *passim*)

It fits perfectly. Apparently turning out something very new and exceptional, all the makers of these phrases follow the same recipe: they mix science (preferably geometry) with emotion or metaphysics by means of synaesthesia plus the subjective genitive which produces metaphor, in order to end, nearly always, in the pathetic fallacy.

As has been mentioned before, in *Leave It to Psmith* Wodehouse had already given reality a miss, and that holds good for comments, too. But four years earlier in *A Damsel in Distress*, a hint at the propagation of an artefact like McTodd's eternal line can be found. The charming and intelligent chorus-girl, who will eventually become Lady Marshmorton, mentions a composer, to whom the manager says that none of his songs in the whole show has a melody, and who answers, yes, perhaps his songs "weren't very tuney, but [...] the thing about his music was that it had such a wonderful aroma" (*Damsel* 25). There we have the "pale parabola of Joy" in a nutshell.

And so much for now of that little bijou from Ralston McTodd's *Songs of Squalor* (*Psmith* 145 and 190), be it original or parodic. But we have not yet done with Tennyson's "Mariana," which takes us back to Blandings. As Wodehouse does not seem to like poems devoted exclusively to ill-reeking swamps and worms and toads, he does not like Lord Emsworth's secretary, the efficient Baxter. Rupert Baxter mistrusts everybody, and wants to know everything and that is why, when Lady Constance's famous necklace has been stolen (needless to say by Miss Peavey, the gangster-poetess), Baxter spends the night not in bed but chasing the supposed thief down the stairs and out into the night, realizing too late that the main door has been shut and bolted behind him. Baxter, doing what he always does, thinks, and instantly "Inspiration ha[s] come to him" (*Psmith* 213).

Is this a row of flower-pots, which I see before me? he thinks, and starts digging in them for the necklace—until fifteen flower-pots lie empty, and fifteen geraniums are ruined for nothing, because, of course, the one flower-pot in which indeed the necklace was hidden, had been purloined long before Baxter started his quest. But this is far from being the end of the flower-pot sequence.

Baxter, now including “all geraniums, all thieves, and most of the human race in one comprehensive black hatred,” and having tried in vain to wake someone in the castle by tossing pebbles at windows, decides that “this was no time for pebbles. Pebbles were feeble and inadequate. With one voice the birds, the breeze, the grasshoppers, the whole chorus of Nature waking to another day seems to shout to him, ‘Say it with flower-pots!’” (*Psmith* 214-15).

So he throws one flower-pot after another through Lord Emsworth’s window, who goes and wakes Psmith, who bids him a pleasant good morning and offers him a seat. His lordship apologizes to Psmith and tells him that Baxter has gone off his head.

“He is out in the garden in his pyjamas, throwing flower-pots through my window.”

“Flower-pots?”

“Flower-pots!”

“Oh, flower-pots!” said Psmith ... (*Psmith* 218)

... and came to the rescue.

I have counted—not in the whole book where flower-pots have been thrown through windows before, and will go on playing a prominent part to the end, but in this sequence—no less than 29 repetitions of the word “flower-pot.” “Say it with flower-pots,” all nature said to Baxter, and “Say it with flower-pots,” said his muse to Wodehouse snowing us in with the things, as if he wanted us all to feel in the grip of Baxter’s flower-pot throwing urge. Of course we remember the moss-covered ones from “Mariana” in *A Damsel in Distress*, which were funny as part of the whole stanza with its cockney affinities. But flower-pots alone? Repeated 29 times in rapid succession? Can the word stand this strain?

Well, Sir Philip Sidney and Mark Twain, for instance, would have said it could, not only for funny semantic associations but for musical and, accordingly, rhythmical reasons. The mere syllable [ot], together with some similar ones like [op] and [ock], makes for persiflage. (Really, Tennyson ought to have known!)

Wishing to make fun of clichéd love-poetry, Sidney writes:

Some lovers speak when they their Muses entertaine
Of hopes begot by feare, of wot not what desires: (Sidney 167)

and

Some do I heare of Poet's furie tell,
But (God wot) wot not what they meane by it: (Sidney 204)

And Mark Twain, some three hundred years later and on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, chose the name of Bots for the hero of Emmiline Grangerford's famous funeral elegy, which filled Huck Finn so much with pity for the girl (now also deceased) that he "tried to sweat out a verse or two [himself], but [...] wouldn't seem to make it go somehow." But Emmiline could, and did:

Ode to Stephen Dowling Bots, Dec'd.

And did young Stephen sicken,
And did young Stephen die?
And did the sad hearts thicken,
And did the mourners cry?

No, such was not the fate of
Young Stephen Dowling Bots;
Though sad hearts round him thickened,
'Twas not from sickness' shots.

No whooping-cough did rack his frame,
Nor measles drear, with spots;
Not these impaired the sacred name
Of Stephen Dowling Bots.
Despised love struck not with woe
That head of curly knots,
Nor stomach troubles laid him low,
Young Stephen Dowling Bots. Etc. (*Huckleberry Finn* 84-85)

Both in Sidney and in Mark Twain, the simple negative particle "not" plays its indispensable bit-part to bring out the comic-value of all the other [ots], and so it does in the refrain of "Mariana," when after "pots" and "knots": "He cometh not,' she said."

Taking his cue from these masters, Wodehouse wrote a poem on a printer who printed “‘not,’ (Great Scott!)” instead of “now” and got only what he deserved when the writer decided that he would

[...] go and pot
 With sudden shot
 This printer who had printed “not”
 When I had written “now.”

Needless to say, the judge, asking “What?” when he heard that the printer had printed “not” instead of “now,” annulled the jury’s verdict and shook the writer by the hand. Subsequently the P.E.N. Committee erected a statue for him because:

“He did not sheath the sword but got
 A gun at great expense and shot
 The human blot, who’d printed ‘not’
 When he had written ‘now.’
 He acted with no thought of self,
 Not for advancement, not for pelf
 But just because it made him hot
 To think the man had printed ‘not’
 When he had written ‘now.’” (Plum Pie 278-80)

In late Wodehouse, hardly a trace is left of Tennysonian post-romanticism, but the inherent fun of the *Godwotwotnotwhat*-staccato prevails. Surely in *Uncle Dynamite* (written in 1948, when Wodehouse was nearing 70), Constable Potter is called Potter only because “Pot-ter” rhymes with “rotter,” (*Dynamite* 401) and because somehow the name sums up Potter’s own style, which rings with Sidneyan parody:

It was Constable Potter who now came before the meeting with a few well-judged words: “Not but what there ain’t a lot in what the lad said,” he observed. (*Dynamite* 409)

It also takes a *Potter* to demonstrate, in what kind of person he finds his *prop*, and that his is *not* an altogether happy *lot*, and *what* happens when he *knocks* out his pipe, and *props up* a ladder he found near a *potting* shed or, when he—doing his *copper’s job*—*chucks* a stone at

Elise Bean's window to ask her, when she *pops* out her head, for a *drop* of something. Look anywhere in the Wodehouse canon and you will find the text strewn with these woodnotes wild of parody.

Talking of *Uncle Dynamite* brings us to another linguistic item with inherent parodic qualities, the word "uncle." Why are uncles (to leave aside aunts for the present) funny? Because Latin has only a diminutive for them? Or because they have a reputation of being notorious wise acres (talking like a Dutch uncle?) Or because an uncle, seen with a nephew's eyes, is an old man? "With spectacles on nose, and pouch on side, [...]." (*As You Like It* 2.7.159)?

Well, Edward Lear (and Wodehouse knew his Edward Lear) did seem to think that uncles are funny, when he filled the magical rhythmic pattern of the Lady-of-Shalott-Stanza with the life-story of his "aged uncle Arly," who (like most butlers in Wodehouse) was obviously suffering from corns, since he always comes back, in the refrain, to the tightness of his shoes:

O my agèd Uncle Arly!
 Sitting on a heap of Barley
 Thro' the silent hours of night.—
 Close beside a leafy thicket:—
 On his nose there was a Cricket,—
 In his hat a Railway Ticket;—
 (But his shoes were far too tight.) (Lear 395)

Why does a phrase like "But (God wot) wot not what" make for persiflage? Well, it just does. Why are uncles funny or—in Wodehouse—rather amusing? Well, they just are. Of course, aunts and uncles have always played a prominent part in Wodehouse. Bertie Wooster has been pestered by aunts from the cradle, and so have most of his friends. On the other hand, sometimes the ancient relatives are not without their uses; the plots of many Jeeves stories centre round impecunious nephews with aunts and uncles as their main source of supply.

When Wodehouse drops sentimentality in his novels, the course of true love begins to function as a mere incentive for the ingenuity of its

promoter, usually an uncle like Lord Ickenham or the Honourable Galahad Threepwood. There still is a romantic heroine and a lovelorn youth, but they are also-rans compared with Gally and Uncle Fred. This dwindling of the story’s romanticism goes together with parody focusing no longer, for instance, on Tennyson, but on Wodehouse. The ironic detachment pervading the Jeeves stories and the Mulliner stories from the very first, now also sets the tone in the novels. In the preface to *Summer Lightning* (1929), a novel which has an uncle for a hero, Wodehouse touches on this change:

A certain critic [...] made the nasty remark about my last novel that it contained ‘all the old Wodehouse characters under different names.’ He has probably by now been eaten by bears, like the children who made mock of the prophet Elisha: but if he still survives he will not be able to make a similar charge against *Summer Lightning*. With my superior intelligence, I have outgeneralled the man this time by putting in all the old Wodehouse characters under the same names [...] This story is sort of Old Home Week for my—if I may coin a phrase—puppets. (*Lightning* 7)

Shoving in that glaringly clichéd “if I may coin a phrase,” Wodehouse implicitly claims for this novel not only the theatricality, detachment and buoyancy of a musical comedy, but the primitive straightforwardness and—shall I say outlawry?—of the Punch and Judy Show.

He has a story “The Crime-Wave at Blandings” (1937), in which the efficient Baxter, touring England on his motorbike, looks in at the castle with a view to regaining his old post as secretary, and is eventually plugged in the seat of the pants with young George’s air-gun not only by that right-minded boy himself, but by Lady Constance, Butler Beach, and finally Lord Emsworth in person:

“How far away would you say he was, Beach?”
 “Fully twenty yards, m’lord.”
 “Watch!” said Lord Emsworth.

Into the sputtering of [Baxter’s] bicycle there cut a soft pop. It was followed by a sharp howl. Rupert Baxter, who had had been leaning on the handle-bars, rose six inches with his hand to his thigh [...] To one trapped in this inferno of Blandings Castle instant flight was the only way of winning to safety. The sputtering rose to a crescendo, diminished, died away altogether. Rupert Baxter had gone on, touring England. (*Emsworth* 55-56)

For this kind of scene Wodehouse rightly claims similarity with the Punch and Judy show in all its pristine, slap-stick, topsy-turvy, genial outlawry and undauntedness. And looking up “undauntedness” in *Roget’s Thesaurus*, what do I find? “prowess, derring-do, chivalry, knightliness, heroic achievement, gallant act [...]” (*Roget’s Thesaurus* 855).

The old romances are favourites of the puppet show. And that is where Uncle Fred and Uncle Gally come in again, especially the latter.

“It always makes me laugh,” [says his niece Milicent] “when I think what a frightfully bad shot Uncle Gally’s godfathers and godmothers made when they christened him.” (*Lightning* 20-21)

For the Honourable Galahad Threepwood, “a short, trim, dapper little man of the type one associates [...] with checked suits, tight trousers, white bowler hats, pink carnations, and race-glasses bumping against the left hip” (*Lightning* 21), is a true Galahad in purpose, but a Punch in execution. His code is his own, and he is looked at askance by the Lady Constances and Sir Gregory Parslowes of this world, but highly esteemed and loved by the right minded. His brother in law, Colonel Egbert Wedge (though never letting his wife, Lady Hermione, know), is firmly convinced that Gally is “the salt of the earth” (*Galahad* 96), and so is Sue Brown, the chorus-girl, who eventually turns out to be a kind of honorary daughter of Galahad’s. Sue is visiting the castle (as nearly all the better elements do) under a false name. Becoming aware that Gally knows of this, she confesses to him, and is more than forgiven:

If this chronicle has proved anything, it has proved by now that the moral outlook of the Hon. Galahad Threepwood was fundamentally unsound. A man to shake the head at. A man to view with concern. So felt his sister, Lady Constance Keeble, and she was undoubtedly right. If final evidence were needed, his next words supplied it.

“I never heard”, said the Hon. Galahad, beaming like one listening to a tale of virtue triumphant, “anything so dashed sporting in my life.”

[...]

“You mean”, she cried, “you won’t give me away?”

“Me?” said the Hon. Galahad, aghast at the idea. “Of course I won’t. What do you take me for?” (*Lightning* 159)

This Galahad is a Galahad who writes reminiscences compromising enough to blackmail Lady Constance into letting her nephew Ronnie marry the chorus-girl; who makes friends with all sorts of unsuitable people, and upsets stately homes of England; who intercepts letters, smuggles impostors into castles, and, last but not least, steals pigs. He is a hero belonging to the tribe of Punch and Judy, claiming the fool’s licence in smart clothes, commanding beautiful manners, and speaking perfect English.

Direct literary parody vanishes in Wodehouse together with sentimentality in the course of the twenties. But the patterns (formal as well as moral) and figures of knight errantry never lose their charm for him, and he finally exalts them by making the knight-errant surpass himself in exchanging the sword with the slapstick, and playing the fool in a puppet-show. This parodic ideal, brought to perfection step by step, can be glimpsed from the very beginning, for instance in *A Damsel in Distress*, when the very policeman who is soon to be punched in the stomach by brother Percy makes his entrance:

A rich, deep, soft, soothing voice [saying “What’s all this”] slid into the heated scene like the Holy Grail sliding athwart a sunbeam. (*Damsel* 40)

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