

The Two Bertie Woosters: A Response to Lawrence Dugan*

WILLIAM VESTERMAN

In a lively and jargon-free analysis of well-chosen examples Lawrence Dugan pursues his study of P. G. Wodehouse in “Worcestershirewards: Wodehouse and the Baroque.” Bringing in a definition from Jorge Luis Borges, Dugan summarizes his subject: Bertie Wooster’s style is “baroque,” and the baroque is “that style which deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) all its possibilities and which borders on its own parody” (Borges 11). Dugan announces his critical purpose in the first paragraph: “to look closely at the style in which [Wodehouse] wrote his Jeeves and Wooster novels, which began in the 1920s” (228). Part of Dugan’s critical method involves effectively comparing and contrasting passages from the novels that feature Bertie and his immortal valet with passages from other works by Wodehouse that display a very different narrative style.

In Dugan’s second paragraph, the manner he says Wodehouse creates for Bertie is more narrowly defined as “a new first-person voice that constitutes the style of the novels.” At this point, the object of Dugan’s critical attention changes from the writing style of *P. G. Wodehouse* in the Jeeves books to the writing style of *Bertie Wooster*, their fictive author. I don’t think that this is only a quibble. For one thing, surely the creativity that *Wodehouse* displays in the Jeeves novels includes the invention of other styles than Bertie’s baroque—that of Jeeves himself, for example, who always speaks (as Dugan says

*Reference: Lawrence Dugan, “Worcestershirewards: Wodehouse and the Baroque,” *Connotations* 20.2-3 (2010/11): 228-47.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debdugan02023.htm>>.

Richard Osborne says) in “copperplate *Times* Augustan.” Or what about Anatole the cook with his Frenglish, or Aunt Agatha enraged, or a drunken Gussie Fink-Nottle, or Madeline Bassett who soberly speaks of the stars as “God’s daisy chain” in book after book. P. G. Wodehouse constitutes the style of the novels in the series in many different, unforgettable “voices.”

What is more, the style or voice of Bertie the *narrator* of the books differs hugely from the style or voice of Bertie the *character* who lives through the magnificent misadventures. In each of them, of course, Jeeves saves Bertie the character from self-created disaster. And each time Bertie seems to have learned his lesson, speaking as a narrator of his past like one ruefully the wiser on issues such as the danger of ever visiting places like Totleigh Towers and Steeple Bumbleigh at all. His language is eloquent and witty and “baroque” on what has happened in the recent past, but *while* it is happening he is often reduced either to muttering things like “Er, ah” or to embarrassed silences, or to lapses of his steel-trap memory:

“It reminded me of one of those lines in the poem—‘See how the little how-does-it-go-tum tumty tiddly push.’ Perhaps you remember the passage?”

“‘Alas, regardless of their fate, the little victims play,’ sir.”

“Quite. Sad, Jeeves.”

“Yes, sir.” (*Joy in the Morning* 1)

Here as a narrator he clearly remembers what he forgot down to the last nonsense syllable. But as a character he is always at a loss for the exact words of the right quotation, words which Jeeves must supply.

And even after telling us as a narrator what he has learned, Bertie as a character in succeeding novels keeps going back to the same places, where he invariably gets into the same soup—getting engaged to the same women over and over again, for example. As a narrator he always knows better; as a character he is completely ineducable, learning nothing at all from the life story he tells so well and seems at the moment of narration to remember and to understand so fully.

At one point, Dugan begins to discuss the contradiction within Bertie's dual identity, but is so charmed by Bertie the narrator's virtues that he cannot admit that Bertie the character's dramatized defects really matter:

Given the plot I have outlined above [*The Code of the Woosters*], 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. (235)

But doesn't farce seem farcical partly because it is implausible?

And who is the "him" here? I think that Wodehouse takes advantage of our ontological training by literary history to energize his comedy. We have been conditioned by custom to understand that a first-person narrator and the person narrated are the same being, as of course they would be in real life. But to fit Bertie's contradictory fictive identities into the same "person" requires a grace beyond the reach of any art but that of Wodehouse.

One result of the paradox in Bertie's style and his endless cycle of personal fall and redemption by Jeeves is a sense of timeless eternity, a Swedenborgian heaven in which nothing is finally really harmful—not drunkenness, not physical violence, not strained relations between the sexes, nor any of the other ills that flesh is heir to. Also, as in Swedenborg, everyone gets a *personalized* happiness in fully satisfactory terms—a Sinbad the Sailor costume, for example, complete with ginger whiskers brings Bertie bliss. In the Jeeves books as in Swedenborg's eternity everyone gets what he or she deserves unlike the fates manifested us here below. God loves the ineducable, but even the high and the mighty of this world are not excluded from Swedenborg's timeless heaven, just as they find a natural place in Bertie's world. The whole amazing story of this analogy may be found in Swedenborg's *De Coelo et Inferno* (1758). Swedenborg was Henry James, Sr.'s hero and Emerson's choice to exemplify "The Mystic" in

his *Representative Men* (1850), which shows at least the appeal of his visions to a wide range of writers.

It is as if Jeeves were the Jesus of the heavenly world of Wodehouse's books, someone who loves, protects, and rewards Bertie without his needing to deserve the grace of His eternal paradise. Jeeves is Jesus—say it out loud three times fast and you'll know it's true too: The secret lurking in the sound of a name is part of P. G. Wodehouse's art. Another example is found in Bertie's name minus the lisp: "Birdie Rooster," perfect for the cocky character so ridiculous in his preening self-confidence but so admirable in his always being game for anything and willing to take his lumps without rancor. I hope my analogy and my analysis as a whole may be seen as they are intended—to confirm and broaden rather than to refute Dugan's characterization of Bertie's style as "baroque." By combining a voice of witty eloquence with the mutterings of a chump Wodehouse creates a character who resembles humanity as a whole, an entity "which exhausts (or tries to exhaust) all its possibilities and which borders on its own parody."

Rutgers University
New Jersey

WORKS CITED

- Borges, Jorge Luis. *The Universal History of Infamy*. New York: Dutton, 1979.
Swedenborg, Emanuel. *De Coelo et Inferno*. London, 1758.
Wodehouse, P. G. *Joy in The Morning*. New York: Doubleday, 1946.