

“As I have heard Jeeves put it”:
A Response to Lawrence Dugan’s
“Worcestershirewards: Wodehouse and the Baroque”*

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Lawrence Dugan’s very interesting attempt to draw a clear line between P. G. Wodehouse’s achievement in the first-person narratives of Bertie Wooster and in the rest of Wodehouse’s work is worth the notice of all Wodehouse scholars. Dugan is right that we have not fully explored the gap between Bertie’s babbling stew and the language Wodehouse uses elsewhere, both as a third-person narrator (as in most of his fiction) and in the dialogue he creates for other characters in the Jeeves-Wooster saga and elsewhere. It is Dugan’s contention that Bertie represents a unique development in Wodehouse’s work, and possibly a modernist achievement in its own right. In my response, I would like to focus on one of the markers of Bertie’s speech that Dugan finds as constitutive of the true, the rare, the real Bertie: his “misquotations” (241).

Dugan is correct to argue that what marks Bertie’s allusiveness as peculiarly his own follows in large part from Bertie’s status as a first-person narrator. Here a basic problem of narrative emerges: how to draw a believable line between the knowledge of the author and that of his characters. Wodehouse has read everything that Bertie has, and more, and Bertie shows off a good deal of Wodehouse’s reading, yet Bertie cannot be depicted as erudite. Wodehouse does a better job with this problem than some of his fellow writers in the modernist era. When one reads Virginia Woolf, for example, one feels that the

*Reference: Lawrence Dugan, “Worcestershirewards: Wodehouse and the Baroque,” *Connotations* 20.2-3 (2010/2011): 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>>.

consciousness presented in character after character is basically Woolf's own, or that it is at least the consciousness she hopes the reader will *believe* is hers. Similarly, for all the large cast of works like *Absolom, Absolom!* or *As I Lay Dying*, there is a sameness in Faulkner's mode of representing first-person thought, underpinned by the reader's sense that Faulkner must himself have thought this way, luxuriating in his word choices and piling on descriptive clauses, each more redolent than the last. The problem Wodehouse faces is how to mine the rich repository of classical, Biblical, and English literature in the Bertie narratives without damaging our sense of Bertie as a fool.

Bertie's education in this regard is key: some explanation of his wide if deeply errant knowledge of literature can be explained by his attendance at Malvern House (fictional), Eton (real), and Magdalen College, Oxford (real), and we are further to understand that at Malvern House Bertie once received the yearly prize for Scripture knowledge. Admittedly, at the comic climax of *Right Ho, Jeeves*, the drunken Gussie Fink-Nottle claims Bertie's prize was not fairly earned:

"[O]f course, Bertie frankly cheated. He succeeded in scrounging that Scripture-knowledge trophy over the heads of better men by means of some of the rawest and most brazen swindling methods ever witnessed even at a school where such things were common. If that man's pockets, as he entered the examination-room, were not stuffed to bursting-point with lists of the kings of Judah—" (503)

But Gussie's charge aside, there is ample proof that Bertie knows his Bible, even though his quotations of Scripture are usually partial, inapposite, or mangled. Here from the opening chapters of *How Right You Are, Jeeves* are several moments in which Bertie brings the language of the *King James Bible* to the fore:¹

At this moment of nervous tension the telephone suddenly gave tongue again, causing me to skip like the high hills, as if the Last Trump had sounded.

(32; the reference is to Psalms 114:5-6, "What ailed thee, O thou sea, that thou fleddest? thou Jordan, that thou wast driven back? / Ye mountains, that ye skipped like rams; and ye little hills, like lambs?")

Anyway [...] he poured out his soul to me, and he hadn't been pouring long before I was able to see that he was cut to the quick. His blood pressure was high, his eye rolled in what they call a fine frenzy, and he was death-where-is-thy-sting-ing like nobody's business.

(36; from 1 Corinthians 15:55, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?")

Years ago, "Kipper" Herring and I had done a stretch together at Malvern House, [...] the preparatory school conducted by that prince of stinkers, Aubrey Upjohn M.A., and had frequently stood side by side in the Upjohn study awaiting the receipt of six of the juiciest from a cane of the type that biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder, as the fellow said.

(7; from Proverbs 23:32, on wine: "At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder").

Bertie's Scripture knowledge does not seem to mark him as learned, however, because he applies it with such steadfast infelicity. And this tonal gap is just one of the devices by which Wodehouse camouflages Bertie's allusiveness. In fact, an essential feature of Bertie's ready employment of literary gems, including Biblical passages, is his disregard of source material; considerations of the original's history, plot, tone, or theme are wiped away. The reader is not allowed the time to weigh and remember the source material; instead, one simply registers the comic gap between the seriousness of the original text and its new employment in the service of farce.² After all, Wodehouse's favorite incidents from Scripture seem to be the narratives concerning Jezebel (eaten by dogs), the boys who mocked the prophet Elisha (eaten by bears), and Herod's slaughter of the innocents. Any sober reflection on these incidents, it need scarcely saying, would occasion somber and even spiritually provoking thought, but serious reflection is exactly what the farcical pace of Bertie's speech and the pell-mell development of plot preclude.

Bertie's allusiveness is also rendered believable by his incapacity to think historically. Though he quotes authors from Solomon to Conan

Doyle, he has no sense of the past. One of Wodehouse's running gags links Bertie's ignorance of the past to his presumption that knowledge begins and ends with his own time and his own set of friends. For instance, Kipper Herring asks Bertie if he knows Thomas Otway, and the response is typical: "I don't believe so. Pal of yours?" (*How Right You Are, Jeeves* 98). If by chance Bertie seems to get something right, he will most often backtrack immediately: "So we were, you might say, rather like a couple of old sweats who had fought shoulder to shoulder on Crispin's Day, if I've got the name right" (7).

The surest way to make the reader believe Bertie has grounds for quoting this or that is for Bertie to cite Jeeves as his authority, and this device is Wodehouse's favorite way of rendering Bertie's erudition plausible. Thus, his accuracy, or partial accuracy, can be explained away because we are invited to imagine that Jeeves ladles out historical information as an adjunct to his duties as a valet; Bertie's statement that "[it is] odd how all these pillars of the home seem to be dashing away on toots these days. It's like what Jeeves was telling me about the great race movements of the middle ages" marks a common theme (10). In fact, this latter technique is one Wodehouse relies upon perhaps too much in the later Jeeves/Wooster tales, but it is still funny to hear Bertie employ complicated tropes while giving credit to Jeeves: "I stood outside the door for a space, letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,' as Jeeves tells me cats do in adages, then turned the handle softly" (78). This rhetorical strategy can work with great economy, as we see when Bertie prepares to push Aubrey Upjohn into the lake: "There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood leads on to fortune. Not my own. Jeeves's" (133). Or the joke can stand a lavish deployment, as when Jeeves is there in person to correct and/or complete the allusions Bertie half-remembers. Passages such as the following occur in every Bertie/Jeeves narrative:

[Bertie:] Do you recall telling me once about someone who told somebody he could tell him something that would make him think a bit? Knitted socks and porcupines entered into it, I remember.

[Jeeves:] I think you may be referring to the ghost of the father of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, sir. Addressing his son, he said, "I could a tale unfold whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood, make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres, thy knotted and combined locks to part and each particular hair to stand on end like quills upon the fretful porpentine."

[Bertie:] That's right. Locks, of course, not socks. Odd that he should have said porpentine when he meant porcupine. Slip of the tongue, no doubt, as so often happens with ghosts. (*How Right You Are, Jeeves* 116)

And to revert to Bertie's Scripture knowledge, in the following dialogue Wodehouse combines Bertie's putative Biblical familiarity with Jeeves's instruction for the following delicious colloquy:

[Bertie:] I know if anyone called me a carrot-topped Jezebel, umbrage is the first things I'd take. Who was Jezebel, by the way? The name sounds familiar, but I can't place her.

[Jeeves:] A character in the Old Testament, sir. A queen of Israel.

[Bertie:] Of course, yes. Be forgetting my own name next. Eaten by dogs, wasn't she?

[Jeeves:] Yes, sir.

[Bertie:] Can't have been pleasant for her.

[Jeeves:] No, sir.

[Bertie:] Still, that's the way the ball rolls. Talking of being eaten by dogs, there's a dachshund at Brinkley who when you first meet him will give you the impression that he plans to convert you into a light snack [...]. (118-19)

Jeeves thus serves as the primary cover for Bertie's allusions, and where Jeeves's role as tutor cannot explain Bertie's knowledge, Bertie's dog's breakfast of an education must perforce serve as explanation enough. In *How Right You Are, Jeeves*, Bertie cites Shakespeare (*Henry IV, Part II, Henry V, Othello, Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet*, the latter multiple times), Omar Khayyam, Pope, the Psalmist, Matthew Arnold, the Brothers Grimm, Wordsworth, Robert Browning, Poussin, Burns, and Pater. Something of his education evidently stuck. And where his retention is least likely, plausibility is maintained by other comic devices. For instance, when Bertie gives us bits of the famous quotation about the Mona Lisa from Pater's *The Renaissance*, the credibility of the moment is made more credible by the comic device of

hyphenation; describing Aunt Dahlia's unhappiness, Bertie says "Quite a good deal of that upon-which-all-the-ends-of-the-earth-are-come stuff, it seems to me" (174). A similar trick is worked to justify Bertie's citation of Pope's *Essay on Man* when he describes Brinkley Court: "There's far too much of that where-every-prospect-pleases-and-only-man-is-vile stuff buzzing around for my taste" (18). And if all else fails, Wodehouse can make Bertie's scholarship plausible by inflicting him with a healthy dose of amnesia. Here is Bertie trying to remember Scott's *Marmion*, Canto VI, stanza 30, as he describes Roberta Wickham's reaction to the sufferings of her beloved, Kipper Herring:

She was, in short, melted by his distress, as so often happens with the female sex. Poets have frequently commented on this. You are probably familiar with the one who said, "Oh, woman in our hours of ease tum tumty tiddly something please, when something something something brow, a something something something thou." (142)

I would argue that Bertie's distinctive voice is strongly marked not merely by his allusions but by the many comic means Wodehouse employs to make them at all conceivable. Thus does Wodehouse distance himself from Bertie, for there is nothing Bertie knows that Wodehouse doesn't know as well. And Jeeves stands guard to keep Bertie from knowing too much, sometimes interfering in Bertie's affairs to keep him from certain paths of reading. Here is Jeeves explaining why he brought about the end of Bertie's engagement to Florence Craye: "I have had it from her ladyship's own maid [...] that it was her intention to start you almost immediately upon Nietzsche. You would not enjoy Nietzsche, sir. He is fundamentally unsound" (*Carry On, Jeeves* 33). But Wodehouse stands guard for Bertie as well, and thus every allusion Bertie makes comes through the complex comic sieve I have described in this response; these techniques are employed both to make the allusions plausible and to make them funny. Ultimately, it is important to recognize this sieve as one of the main techniques by which Bertie-speak is fashioned and by which

Wodehouse creates Bertie as a linguistic fashioner apart from all others of his creations.

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NOTES

¹Throughout the rest of this essay, I take most of my examples from the relatively late *How Right You Are, Jeeves* (1960) because by then Bertie's narrative practices are fully codified and predictable—though Wodehouse continues to display remarkable ingenuity within these self-chosen constraints.

²Wodehouse presumed most of his readers would recognize most of his quotations. Readers who do not do so are in a curious position, in that it is conceivable that they might infer that Bertie himself has come up with the various striking phrases he borrows. But if a reader catches some of the more obvious references, say, to *Hamlet*, then he or she learns to presume that when Bertie veers out of the vernacular, he is probably quoting—or misquoting—some venerable source.

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