Plum Time in Nevereverland: 
The Divine Comedy of P. G. Wodehouse

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"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

Viewed as an ultimately ineducable man, Bertie Wooster undermines the biographical foundations of the novel as a literary form. In any given “installment of the Bertram Wooster story,” he will always be seen to forget as a character the same lovely tag lines of literature that as a narrator he remembers so well to have forgotten. Of course, Jeeves never forgets anything and can always supply any demand for the proper lines or their proper authors. And at first each of his lessons seems taken to heart, because in Bertie’s narratives both the initial ignorance and the supplied knowledge have been clearly remembered down to the last nonsense syllable. But as soon as Bertie stops writing and enters his world again, oblivion resumes its sway. Old favorites fade over and over. In volume after volume, for example, Jeeves has to remind him what the troops of Midian are said to do in Hymns Ancient and Modern (they “prowl and prowl around”). And although Bertie has been through Eton and Oxford he never can get straight Jeeves’s rem acu tetigisti (“you have touched the matter with a needle,” i.e., “exactly so”). Yet every time Bertie comes to narrate his latest aphasias, he is once more blessed with total recall.

Literary lapses are fully consistent with larger problems of
learning. Bertie can no more help getting engaged to the same women over and over again—though previous narratives clearly prove he should know he shouldn't—than he can help enacting the eternal return to Totleigh Towers or Steeple Bumpleigh—though previous reincarnations as a narrator prove he knows he will get in the soup promptly on arrival. In spite of his helplessness and infinite regression, however, Bertie's autobiography is far from being Kafkaesque. The world he lives in is not hellish, but (as Evelyn Waugh said) paradisal.

Though amnesia and passivity seem to rule his life, all his verbal fumbling and personal diffidence are redeemed as soon as Bertie begins to write. In a strikingly original style with shining new similes leaping out of a tumbling torrent of slangy cliché, biblical reference, and literary allusion, his spirited narration proceeds as if he were blessed by divine inspiration like some Mayfair Caedmon. At least without an equally radical explanation, his state of literary grace as a narrator seems incomprehensible. How—under centuries-old novelistic conventions of temporal verisimilitude—could he ever otherwise be understood to have written the books in which he appears? It is as if Leopold Bloom were to wake up on 17 June 1904 and sit down to write *Ulysses*.

This serial literary apotheosis in a serial novel makes part of the comic art of P. G. Wodehouse, and the comedy would not be nearly so amusing without its play on novelistic conventions. This point becomes very clear in any comparison of the Wooster narratives with their transmogrifications into plays. Absent the dynamics of interaction between Bertie as narrator and Bertie as character, everything tends to fall flat. Trapped without its temporal perspective in the block universe of a mere living present, the transcribed dialogue dies, Bertie seems only inept, and Jeeves himself only stuffy or arch and self-regarding, not respectful, all-knowing, and all-forgiving. In their deft deployment of literary conventions as well as their intricate plotting, the novels belie Wodehouse's own typically modest characterization of them—"musical comedies without music."

One fundamental convention of narration in the first person is
that the narrator has learned something about his or her earlier life, if only what parts of the plenum of experience may be justifiably left out of its verbal record. Naturally, a narrator's ambition is to achieve some greater composition—to understand and express the life left in. And if life exists in time, the language of narrative in expressing some meaning for a life also expresses a sense of time. Paul Ricoeur says that through "emplotment" the art of narration creates a knowledge of time by creating a world of events in which "'one because of that' prevails over 'one after that'". By making a meaningful temporal order of occurrences, narrative redeems them from mere sequence. Ricoeur claims that by achieving a verbally expressed composition out of the welter of events in history (or out of the welter of imaginary events possible to fiction), the art of narration "figures and reconfigures" the mystery of time, humanizing it for our understanding. By means of these figurative powers of narrative, time becomes comprehensible. But if time implies change and Bertie's autobiography ultimately expresses an absence of change, how can we understand his life or his time or the narrative art of P. G. Wodehouse?

Besides trying to recall quotations, Bertie's life consists largely of his getting "into the mulligatawny" and of Jeeves's getting him out. That's what Jeeves seems placed on earth to do. What is more, Jeeves knows his place and never resents it. What do you think of that? Jeeves exists to serve not only Bertie—who he fully understands is "mentally negligible"—but also any of Bertie's odd friends and relations who might require his help—"They all come to you, don't they, Jeeves, from the lowest to the highest?" Happily for them, Jeeves's service is so effective that (for example) no need for money ever lasts for more than a few days. While some people like Bertie himself "have the stuff in heaping handfuls," others temporarily experience a desperate need for "a bit of the ready" and rely on Jeeves's schemes to redistribute the wealth, though the money of the young master is never required for the plan. And while all Jeeves's plans are crowned with success (as Bertie might say), a new edition of Spinoza is about the most this gentleman's personal gentleman ever gets from anyone for his pains. Jeeves is always pleased with his reward, however, fully
satisfied to have been of service. What do you think of that?

In fact, not only are envy and ingratitude unknown, but Bertie lives forever in his mid-twenties in a world devoid of other common causes of human suffering. Violence, relations between the sexes, arson, blackmail, and drunkenness— to take only a few examples—are always just as harmless and amusing as money troubles. The weather is almost always perfect. Mumps (never accompanied by testicular complications) is the worst disease really encountered, hangovers the worst discomfort— "I felt like a sandbagged leper." You can kick a boy scout in the rump and the result is not permanent damage to nerve or bone, not a criminal charge or a civil lawsuit, but the gratitude of the boy's father, which leads to the success of young lovers.

 Granted, in the public sphere the plague of Communism sometimes infects people like G. D'Arcy ("Stilton") Cheesewright, causing him to shun momentarily the eager support of a rich uncle and to believe he is joining the working-class struggle by becoming a rural constable. People of the "rouglier sort" sometimes throw eggs and old vegetables at political speakers. There is a protest march. But that's about it on the left. It is also true that fascism does appear in Wooster's England through an organization formed by Bertie's enemy, Spode, later Lord Sidcup. Yet his Black Shorts do little more than chant "Heil, Spode!" while wearing rugby pants off the field of play. Like ghosts defined pragmatically by William James, they might as well not exist. As for capitalism, everyone in his world (including Bertie) knows that he and most of the young and idle rich at the Drones Club are complete social parasites, but no one cares. No one cares! What do you think of that?

What everyone does care about is the fast-paced pursuit of still more happiness in unambiguous and fully satisfying forms. And thanks to the fish-fed brain beneath his size-nine hat, Jeeves has the power to supply every demand in Bertie's world and to overcome every threat to its normal steady state of pure pleasure. But where does he get the heart to do so? How does "one after that" become "one because of that" for him? How are we to understand the motives of a superman in the selfless service of a booby?
It might be argued that the lack of an answer is precisely the basic joke of the series and a sacred mystery, like the never-revealed name of what the Newsomes manufacture in Henry James's *The Ambassadors* or what Captain Vere says to Billy Budd behind the closed doors. But surely criticism should not give up without a fight. Jeeves always counts on the discovery of clear and distinct motives to form his plots. Why should we not try to take him on his own terms?

At this point, an unamused critic interested in social justice might say that the only relevant motives here are those of the genre, and that "the clever slave" is a type going back at least to Roman comedy, one designed to affirm the justice of the established social order by dramatizing its putative universal acceptance. The fact is, however, that the social order dramatized by P. G. Wodehouse has never existed in England or anywhere else on this planet, according to observers as socially acute and as politically opposed as George Orwell and Evelyn Waugh. In England there are not and never were any noblemen like Lord Emsworth or Lord Ickenham (heading for the bath armed with his great sponge *Joyeuse*), no valets like Jeeves, and no clubs like the Drones with its bread throwing, its swimming bath (complete with a series of ropes and rings suspended overhead for drunken displays of prowess in full evening dress), and its borrowing and lending of fivers by old crumpets and old beans.

But if it is not like the world of a real England, what is the world of Bertie Wooster like and how are we to understand motives within it? If we can understand motives and through their realizations "emplotment," perhaps we can understand how Wodehouse produces a sense of time within the Bertram Wooster story. For me, the titles of two installments based on stock phrases in Bertie's lexicon—*The Code of the Woosters* and *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*—begin to provide an explanatory formula, and the title of one of the last volumes in the series—*Jeeves and the Tie that Binds*—helps to transpose the initial equations and to solve them in terms of time, much in the ways Marcel Proust's *Le Temps Retrouvé* and Anthony Powell's *Hearing Secret Harmonies* do at the ends of other modern serial novels concerned with time and narrated in the first person.
Let's take the feudal spirit. Bertie's name and nickname sound this note in two different registers. Bertram Wooster surely seems dignified and "ancestral" or at least not entirely out of tune with such favorite phrases as "the word of a Wooster was pledged" or "after all the Woosters did come over with the Conqueror." But Bertie's appeal to the feudal spirit involves a set of values that comes to us not so much directly from the Middle Ages as through a redaction of some old-fashioned assumptions by the Public School system, followed by further refinement in the literary medium of school stories like Wodehouse's Tales of St. Austin's and The Gold Bat—the kind of books he began his career by writing just after the turn of the century in his pre-Jeeves phase. Such books at first fit comfortably into the already well-established tradition of Thomas Hughes's Tom Brown's School Days (1857) and Rudyard Kipling's Stalky and Company (1889), until the middle of Mike (1909), when Wodehouse discovered his genius for comedy.

Wherever it comes from, what Bertie calls the feudal spirit inspires the Wooster corpus. Among its characteristics and assumed absolutes is a natural and sempiternal social hierarchy, one cemented by reciprocal personal loyalties with duties extending above, below, and sideways. These values with others solidly support the rationales for motive in the absurd plots. Bertie often evokes the feudal spirit in praise or mild reproach of Jeeves's apparent degree of support at a given moment, but his code is not a self-serving one, especially as far as his friends are concerned:

"Bertie! You wouldn't let down a pal?"
"Yes, I would."
"But we were at school together, Bertie."
"I don't care."
"The old school, Bertie, the old school!"
"Oh, well—dash it!"

Beowulf's troop of loyal companions was called his hondscole. These hand-school ties of honor have in more than one sense become
Bertie’s old school ties, and Bertie cannot help helping a liege-pal no matter how much he doesn’t want to or how undignified and unfeudal may be the actions that such help will come to require. The slapstick monsters he must steel himself to slay and the low deeds he must perform in high chivalric service are made internally plausible throughout the series by the feudal spirit in the Code of the Woosters—a code of honor that he lives by, however mock-heroically.

Bertie’s nickname wastes no time getting to the mockery. Only our persistence in a childish or comic lisp keeps Bertie Wooster from revealing Birdie Rooster and turning the would-be *preux chevalier* into a strutting, preening chanticleer “from brilliantined topknot to rubber soled shoe,” this last naturally covered with the mark of the beast itself—spats, the eternal metonymy of changing fashion. At least it’s true that, like a rooster, Bertie always appears “cocky” in his self-important and trivial triumphs—“when Aunt Dahlia was running that *Milady’s Boudoir* paper of hers, I contributed to it an article, or piece as we writers call it, on *What The Well-Dressed Man Is Wearing.*” Like a rooster Bertie seems ridiculous, but at the same time admirable and touching in his sturdy self-confidence because he believes so fully in the value of his fantastic pastimes. His delight, say, in obtaining a Sinbad the Sailor costume (with ginger whiskers) for a fancy dress ball combines sincerity with authenticity, as does his confident contempt for anyone coming in the costume of a mere Pierrot—“I consider it roughly equivalent to shooting a sitting bird.”

The decline of an aristocracy from feudal to futile surely makes part of a running joke in the books, but in other ways the feudal spirit really does work to infuse a personal world into an impersonal age. Bertie’s universe is not our own—the fearful sphere of Pascal whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. In Bertie’s life everyone still understands all the meanings of up and down, and Jeeves’s mastery of “the psychology of the individual” only proves that everyone operates on the same simple bases of fully intelligible motives like irritation and gratitude. The great modern shift from status to contract in human relations has never really occurred, in spite of Bertie’s driving a two-seater complete with self-starter. Jeeves
only appears to work for his young master—*a gentleman's personal gentleman* does not define what he does for a living; it registers his status.

No one in this world can any more imagine creating or changing his status on his own than anyone could imagine deciding no longer to be a *son* or a *daughter* or a *brother* or a *sister*. Identities of status are social givens—they cannot be decided upon by means of agreement between or among legal equals as contracted identities can. Marriage will change a person's status and so will honors like knighthood—but these identities are granted and sanctified from outside and above the individual. Because relations of status are particularly clear in families, Bertie's blood relatives stop for purposes of comedy at aunts and uncles—there are no more parents here than there are in comic books, and for the same reasons. Uncle Donald and Uncle Mickey and Uncle Porky provide automatic calls on loyalty and protection without needing to bring in any deeper evocations of respect or responsibility with their potential for authoritative limits to high jinks and good fellowship.

Bertie and Jeeves enjoy the best parts of family life anyway. Acting on "feudal" assumptions, each can defer sincerely and without embarrassment to the others respective superiorities in his differing realm. This paradox is not hard to understand psychologically, whatever the historical nature of the feudal spirit may be. For example, a child may clearly know and accept as natural that he or she is often regarded as the most important person in the world by more powerful and competent parents who are the most important people in the world. True, reading Jeeves's consistent deference to Bertie from our own doubtless more socially advanced and emotionally adult perspective, we may keep expecting an ironic manifestation of Jeeves's *real* attitude toward Bertie's ignorance and ineptitude, but it never comes. It never comes, with the result that Wodehouse can affect us over and over again through both an expectation and its lack of fulfillment, like a modulation in the rhythm of a line of verse. Otherwise relations between Bertie and Jeeves are as stable as a pyramid, dramatizing a mutually enhancing connection between rich and poor,
position and talent, simplicity and cleverness, ignorance and knowledge, need and bounty—an interdependence beautiful in its natural reciprocity and lack of invidious feeling. Wodehouse achieves this complex effect in part by expressing the feudal spirit in a style that is mock-heroic but also and simultaneously straight pastoral, the same combination that William Empson finds at work in *Don Quixote*. The idyllic virtues of Bertie’s world serve a commonly acknowledged romantic nostalgia, a yearning for a place a long, long time ago in a galaxy or Middle-earth far, far away where everyone knew how everyone fit in, and everyone will always choose the personal sword, even when the impersonal ray gun is obviously available.

Still, noblesse oblige—the feudal spirit is not all take and no give for Bertie. As the prime medium of expression for status, the theme of honor regularly plays out in Bertie’s life not only in loyalty to friends but also often in the form of engagements to be married, commitments that he is anxious to break off as an individual but helpless to escape as *preux chevalier*. For these are not tales of hairbreadth scapes i’ th’ imminent deadly breach of promise. A gentleman knows that only a lady may honorably break engagements, so the plots require over and over again new ways of making an unwanted woman cease to want Bertie of her own accord. Engagement here also differs radically in its meaning from engagement in a realist narrative like James’s *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), where it is designed to stop change and hence to transcend time. “I engage myself to you for ever,” Kate Croy tells Merton Densher, and she means among other things that any subsequent marriage would be merely a legal and a contractual matter. In Bertie’s case, marriage would affect his status and hence introduce change into his timelessness. Of course he does have clear and specific personal reasons for his failures of desire:

> Scanning the roster of the females I’ve nearly got married to in my time, we find the names of some tough babies. The eye rests on that of Honoria Glossop, and a shudder passes through the frame. So it does when we turn to the B’s and come upon
Madeline Bassett. But taking everything into consideration and weighing this and that, I have always been inclined to consider Florence Craye the top. In the face of admittedly stiff competition, it is to her that I would award the biscuit.

Honoria Glossop was hearty, yes. Her laugh was like a steam-riveting machine, and from a child she had been a confirmed back-slapper. Madeline Bassett was soppy, true. She had large, melting eyes and thought the stars were God's daisy chain. These are grave defects, but to do this revolting duo justice neither had tried to mold me, and that was what Florence Craye had done from the start, seeming to look on Bertram Wooster as a mere chunk of plasticine in the hands of the sculptor. The root of the trouble was that she was one of those intellectual girls steeped to the gills in serious purpose, who are unable to see a male soul without wanting to get behind it and shove. We had scarcely arranged the preliminaries before she was checking up on my reading, giving the bird to "Blood on the Banisters," which happened to be what I was studying at the moment, and substituting for it a thing called "Types of Ethical Theory."

Thus Bertie on having met Florence Craye once again, only to sow immediately if unintentionally the seeds of still another re-engagement. The three fiancées here (the roster is very far from complete) present versions in female form of male types long known to public school and university fiction: what the British used to call the “hearty” (Honoria Glossop) and the two forms of the “aesthete”—the emotional (Madeline Bassett) and the intellectual (Florence Craye). Part of the comedy is their lack of any resemblance to the actual stock fictive females within such boys’ books. Another aspect of the joke is the forced recollection of the equivalent male stereotypes who do appear in Wodehouse’s stories. The main point is that by defining himself through distaste against a range of extreme personalities, male and female, Bertie maintains his own identity all the more fully as normal in his own eyes. To support further the philistine effect, Wodehouse mutes Bertie’s usual habit of lively literary reference in the passage because intellectuality is one of its subjects.
In fact, whenever Bertie's style begins itself to move too close to the highbrow, Wodehouse will have him back off with an "if that's the word I want" or an "as Jeeves would say" or some other self-deprecation. His characteristic biblical references are also missing here, partly for the same reason and (given that marriage is a sacrament) partly to avoid any jarring hint of blasphemy. Usually Bertie's biblical allusions make interesting exceptions to the rule of his tenuous hold on knowledge. More about them in a minute.

Florence Craye wins the worst fiancée prize because she is not only an intellectual but also an artist, author most famously of the novel *Spindrift*. Bertie fears her especially because she wants to exercise her art on him, changing him (especially ethically) and thereby introducing time into his world even before marriage. Jeeves on the other hand does not want to change Bertie in any way, never asking for more than the sacrifice of a banjo, or a white mess jacket with brass buttons, or a garish cummerbund. He asks for these relinquishments only to *prevent* change by maintaining Bertie's normality—that is, to keep him behaving and appearing as a gentleman should. To mold or not to mold Bertie makes a series-long theme informed not only by Florence's "Types of Ethical Theory" or by Jeeves's sense of the comme il faut, but also by types of theological and aesthetic theory that include their own forms of engagement and disengagement.

In his *Spiritual Creation*, Henry James Sr.—father of the novelist and the philosopher and author of *The Secret of Swedenborg*—provides a useful concept of opposition that further illuminates differences between Florence and Jeeves. In James's terms, Florence would appear as "the artist" and Jeeves as "the creator." James argues in Chapter XII that artists transmit their personalities into all their productions through their styles. Thus Michelangelo "impresses" his genius "on the docile obedient marble," just as Florence wants to mold Bertie like a "chunk of plasticine." Jeeves, on the other hand, like "the creator," does not at all intrude on the object of his attentive efforts. This detachment recalls James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Stephen's view of the
proper relation between the personality of the greatest kind of creative writer and his work. Such a writer's personality "finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes it, so to speak." He "like the God of the creation remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence." The attitude of Stephen's modernist creator toward the object withdrawn from is that of a disinterested—even uninterested—scientific detachment. He is said to be "indifferent—paring his fingernails." But for Henry James Sr., the creator is like Jeeves—detached, refined, and unobtrusive to be sure, yet still full of interest in his creation in every sense of that interesting word. James writes that:

Notoriously the delight of the artist is to impress his own distinctive genius on his work, to reproduce himself in it as much as may be, to stamp it with the lustre of his own commanding individuality. . . .

[God, however, is not an artist but a creator.] We may say accordingly that what the creator characteristically does, unlike the artist, is diligently to diminish himself to the level of the created nature, in order thereby that the creature may become elevated to the level of the divine nature; diligently to efface every suggestion of himself in his work, whereby he could be imagined to have any interests at variance with those of his creature, indeed any being or life apart from him. In short, to tell the whole story in a word, the creator is no way bent, as we stupidly imagine him to be, on making his creature noble, virtuous, estimable—for such things, even if they could be outwardly import ed into the creature, would always be ludicrously inapposite to his derived, reflected, and most beggarly existence.

The richest human life is no doubt a beggarly existence compared with divine existence, and by that standard we like Bertie are all mentally negligible. We can perceive divine virtues only as in a glass darkly, just as we can understand time only in human terms by figuration and not in itself—that is to say, in divine terms. But as a figuration of James's type of the creator, Jeeves surely fits the description,
both in his self-effacing refusal to have any interests at heart other than Bertie’s own and in his unfelt need to reform or ennoble him.

When P. G. Wodehouse was ninety he published Jeeves and the Tie that Binds (1971), which came to be in fact the penultimate book in the series, though it seems to have been designed at the time to conclude it. At the end of the story Jeeves says he has destroyed the discreditable evidence devoted under rule 11 to Bertie’s career in the club book of The Junior Ganymede. Naturally Bertie, who has so often unsuccessfully begged him to do so, asks him what his motive was and Jeeves replies:

“Its function is solely to acquaint those who are contemplating taking new posts with the foibles of prospective employers. This being so, there is no need for the record contained in the eighteen pages in which you figure. For I may hope, may I not, sir, that you will allow me to remain permanently in your service?”

This brings us to the last page of the book with history abolished, and to no one’s surprise Bertie agrees to Jeeves’s request; but he does ask another question about motive:

“You may indeed, Jeeves. It often beats me, though, why with your superlative gifts you should want to.”

“There is a tie that binds, sir”

“A what that what’s?”

“A tie that binds, sir.”

Here once again we see Bertie at a loss to grasp a quotation. Of course his readers may also miss the point momentarily because Jeeves uncharacteristically repeats the allusion rather than giving its source in full. The complete line, however, shows us that we should have known the answer all along and deep down perhaps we did know it, though what I am about to say may require some momentary suspension of modern disbelief. Jeeves has asked to serve permanently, but the tie he refers to here is not that of the old school and the feudal spirit. It is a tie announced in iambic hexameter by the first line of a popular sacred song from Hymns Ancient and Modern:
“Blessed be the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love.” Consider: If Jeeves is always shimmering in and out of Bertie’s presence, if he has an unlimited knowledge, if everyone comes to him from the lowest to the highest, if he acts like a miracle worker who can satisfy every need, like a loyal servant, but also like a loving friend or a father who forgives all Bertie’s faults, if he has removed the sins of the past and wants to serve him permanently, if he is like James’s creator, if he is bound to Bertie by the tie of Christian love—if all these things are true, it should be quite clear that Jeeves is Jesus. Say that fast three times out loud and you’ll know it’s true too. It certainly explains his motives. He loves Bertie and wants to make him happy. He acts as he does because the greatest of all shall be the servant of all.

William Empson claimed that the values of Western civilization were like a web strung between two poles: Christian values at one extreme and those clustering around the word “honor” at the other. Just as the medium of expression for the value system of the feudal spirit based on status is honor, so the medium of expression for the value system of Christianity based on grace is love. Motives are formed and actions are justified on grounds in some relation to those principles that, for example, urge pride and the duty to revenge wrongs and those that urge humility and the duty to love and forgive. Jeeves resolves this opposition because his motives are explicable both on the bases of the feudal spirit and honor and also on those of Christian grace and love—albeit in the form of a Sunday school simplicity, much as honor in the books takes its simplicity of form from the public school. Put in another way, The Code of the Woosters is The Great Code of Northrop Frye—typology. Jeeves as Jesus reconciles the Old Testament code of honor and pride with the New Testament code of love and humility.

Put in another way indeed! We are here again in the realm of those big words that make us so unhappy, as Stephen Dedalus says. But even Stephen Dedalus—for whom history is a nightmare from which he is struggling to awake—cannot detach himself as an indifferent creator from history’s embodiment in language, something he learns when the half conscious recollection of an off-color joke
destroys his inspiration in the middle of composing an exalted love poem, merely because he happens to employ a figure of speech that also appears in the joke. Still, even big words do not make us unhappy—in spite of their powerful histories of association—when their implications manifest themselves within a comic novel. Entering by that backdoor, they are hardly in a position to present themselves as oppressive. From at least Chaucer onward, literature in English has welcomed the comic treatment of both honor and Christianity; and with Bertie and Jeeves—though we may not be in a real England—we are certainly in real English. Jorge Luis Borges says that “the use of any word presumes a shared experience;” and countless minor details in all Wodehouse’s books presume the shared past of a Christian civilization. For example, opening one Jeeves novel at random quickly produces the place name Steeple Bumpleigh, the simile like an Archbishop blessing pilgrims, and the expletive damn.

It is true that Churchmen in the stories appear to be very secular beings who spend even less time on theology than Trollope’s clerical characters do and who have as little apparent connection to the evangelical spirit as the silver fish slice that makes Bertie’s invariable wedding gift. Take for example Bertie’s friend, the Reverend H. P. (“Stinker”) Pinker:

he had played Rugby football not only for his university but also for England, and at the art of hurling an opponent into a mud puddle and jumping on his neck with cleated boots had had few, if any, superiors. If I had wanted someone to help me out with a mad bull, he would have been my first choice.

When we meet Stinker at Totleigh Towers he is serving as the local curate and planning to steal the local constable’s helmet, the better to serve his lady love and fiancée, Stiffy Byng. Further up the hierarchy, “the Bishop and assistant clergy” appear to Stiffy obvious steps in Stinker’s postcriminal career path:

“You know that vicarage that you have in your gift, Uncle Watkyn. What Harold and I were thinking was that you might
give him that, and then we could get married at once. You see, apart from the increased dough, it would start him off on the road to higher things. Up till now, Harold has been working under wraps. As a curate, he has had no scope. But slip him a vicarage, and watch him let himself out. There is literally no eminence to which that boy will not rise, once he spits on his hands and starts in."

"Start him off on the road to higher things" is very good here, but with "literally no eminence" Wodehouse spits on his own hands to make the depths of Stiffy's calculating innocence—in which values of honor and Christianity are seamlessly joined—incalculable.

Within the laity, Edwin the boy scout's Sisyphean efforts to keep up his quota of daily acts of kindness always result in a ruined scrapbook, a burned-down cottage, or some other disaster. Another major Christian virtue, chastity, is treated with equal but opposite farcicality. In the first place, no one has even so much as heard of unchastity. Next, Bertie never explains why he becomes engaged except in terms of being smitten (for example) by Florence Craye's "profile" or by Madeline Bassette's "blond hair with all the trimmings." And why do so many women like Bertie so much? "It's your fault for being so fascinating," explains Nobby Hopgood when Bertie himself seems as puzzled as we are about why the beautiful and intelligent Florence is always so attracted to him. Whether Nobby speaks here with or without her tongue in her cheek, her own affections are warm but pure like those of everyone in the books. She herself burns with the desire to enter Bertie's bedroom, for example, but only because she wants to wake him with a wet sponge. In part, precisely because so many Christian themes—like the clergy, loving one's neighbor through acts of kindness, and chastity—are so often and so consistently treated as jokes, Christianity can pervade Bertie's universe as naturally and unobtrusively as Jeeves or the afterglow of some Big Bang.

Further, though infrequently seen in church, Bertie does not live by misremembered belles-lettres alone. The Bible is taken for granted as a common fund of reference by him and almost everyone else. As both character and narrator Bertie commands a great
deal of biblical learning in the form of quotations and allusions that he does not forget. In fact, references to sacred text are just as natural to him as his favorite clichés or secular verses; between any of them and his completely original figures of speech he apparently notices no differences in expressive value whatsoever. This discordia concors makes part of our aesthetic pleasure, because in such very mixed company, the new tropes with their poetic prestige seem to countenance and reinstate the déclassé clichés and tag lines to some degree by reminding us of their former glories. Taken together the well-worn figures of speech seem to form the materials of a Janus-like temple dedicated not only to present inanity, but also to past poetic performance. In this and other ways, Wodehouse, like his more respectable modernist contemporaries, holds up a fun-house mirror both to the history of literary style and to the content it has expressed.

Bertie’s atypical mnemonic competence with the Bible is made plausible within the plots by his frequently mentioned prize for Scripture Knowledge won at his preparatory school under Arnold Abney, M.A. Because of the biblical expertise he shows in frequent allusions—to Balaam’s ass, to the deaf adder, to Jael the wife of Haber, or to the wings of a dove, for example—Bertie the character can voice a religious note in the books’ harmonies without Jeeves’s having to do so, thereby keeping him from sounding sanctimonious although constantly in the right. The secular verses that Jeeves quotes or alludes to, however, do sometimes express New Testament values, though always in a comic context—rising “on the stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things,” for example.

In his characterization of Jeeves, Wodehouse seems generally to follow the advice of William Blake, a rebellious follower of Emanuel Swedenborg, who, in one epigram based on his master’s teachings, said “Strip yourselves of sanctity and clothe yourselves in intelligence.” Wodehouse outfits Jeeves in a style so far from the cut of sanctity that George Orwell has called his intelligence “unmoral.” Like the Reverend H. P. Pinker’s police helmet caper, Jeeves’s own plots often involve petty theft, deception, or blackmail; yet all this is
as it should be for one who has fulfilled the old law and brings a new commandment.

Throughout the series, Wodehouse treats the spirit of Christianity in the same ways he treats the feudal spirit—mock-heroically, but also and simultaneously in a straight pastoral style—with the result that there is little if any difference between Bertie's happy and innocent world and a certain kind of Christian heaven. A form and a rationale for Bertie's particular paradise are provided by Swedenborg—Henry James Sr.'s hero and his friend Emerson's choice for the type of The Mystic in *Representative Men* (1850). In *De Coelo et Inferno* (1758), Swedenborg reports on his visits to other worlds in great detail, but the most salient feature of his map of the afterlife is that everyone gets not only the heaven or hell that he or she deserves, but also the one he or she can appreciate. And that means everyone, as Jorge Luis Borges properly insists in his account of Swedenborg's life: “neither riches, nor happiness, nor hedonism, nor worldly life is a barrier to entering heaven. Poverty is not a virtue.” For Swedenborg “the Heaven and Hell in his doctrine are not places, although the souls of the dead who inhabit and in a way create them perceive them as being situated in space. They are conditions of the soul.”

The qualities of these eternal conditions are determined by an earlier life lived in time, though that life is not exactly equivalent to behavior, as a modern Swedenborgian disciple, William Van Dusen, further explains. The italics in the following passage are his:

Swedeborg's description of the multiplicity of worlds or levels of being represented by the concepts of heaven and hell is so fundamentally different from legend and myth that it takes some readjustment of thinking to understand his findings. Fundamentally, a man's life in these other worlds is based on what he really is. In the present world a person explores, develops, and forms himself. We are quite capable of deceiving ourselves and others. In the worlds beyond this one people are sorted out according to what they really are. They move toward the central reality of their existence.
Swedenborg’s temporal distinction between identities in the present and future worlds—between persons being formed for understanding and those persons being finally understood in their central realities—is a distinction analogous to the usual temporal divisions between character and narrator in an autobiographical novel, with the reader standing in for the God of judgment. As readers we see how the character “forms himself” (or is molded by other people) and we see how the narrator attempts to understand the past, or claims to have understood it. But either way, we understand from a narrator’s style “what he really is,” whether or not we agree with that narrator on the meaning of the past. In *Great Expectations*, for example, we see the character Pip’s development as a gentleman and a brute, one quite capable of deceiving himself and others; and well before the end of the book we know the narrator to be a brute still, in spite of his wry treatment of his earlier mistakes of ignorance, cowardice, and snobbery—or rather, because of his wry treatment of them.

The cycle that figures Bertie’s ineducable nature disrupts the Swedenborgian time scheme of formation for judgment and final disposition by dramatizing only its final stage. Bertie demonstrates to us over and over that he is beyond being formed or reformed and that pragmatically speaking he never lives into a future different from his past. Under the curve of his sinusoidal movement between amnesia and total recall, time distends to allow for events, to be sure, but the complete graph of Bertie’s serial literary apotheosis from character to narrator figures the timeless central reality of his existence, a world without end. Its reality is reconfigured by the pastoral treatments of both Christianity and honor into an idyllic image of eternal bliss, and although the forms of happiness in his Mayfair Kingdom Come may seem those of a child, of such is the kingdom of heaven.

Even waiving questions of literary time, the happy results of Bertie’s infinitely regressive noneducation are adumbrated by principles analogous to those of Swedenborg’s personalized eternity. Each paradise promotes among other things the romantic belief in a true self. The desire to believe in the existence of a true self—despite the
beggarly existence suggested by the empirical evidence of our behavior and its results—is just as strong and as commonly acknowledged as the desires for a personal world filled with the feudal spirit or a personal savior who loves us no matter what. Because we know Bertie the transfigured narrator—a man of vast memory and striking powers of expression, a liberated Emersonian self trailing clouds of poetic glory—we know Bertie face to face, even as he is known by Jeeves, and even as we know the true selves of Clark Kent and Diana Palmer, in spite of the apparent inanity of their identities in mufti. Bertie the character—the endearing but fumbling fop, the man always at a loss and frequently reduced to muttering “er, ah”—we understand that this figure is only the man seen as in a glass darkly.

In counting on us to take the two Berties to be somehow the same person, Wodehouse fully exploits the strength of narrative convention. Being seasoned readers of autobiographies and autobiographical novels, we struggle to comprehend and to conflate the character and narrator. If we succeed, the redeemed quality of Bertie's narration seems to show him in each individual installment rising on stepping stones of his dead self to higher things, in stylistic if not in moral or any other teleological terms. But the series-long cyclical rhythm of Bertie's identity—from character to narrator and back again—shows he is never really changed by transfiguring experience like some Ancient Mariner. Rather, like a deaf Wedding Guest, he wakes a happier and more ignorant man each morrow morn.

Yet something very odd happens on the last page of *Jeeves and the Tie that Binds*, after Jeeves has explained his motive for requesting permanent service by repeating his allusion to the hymn.

"There is a tie that binds, sir."
"A what that whats?"
"A tie that binds, sir."
"Then heaven bless it, and may it continue to bind indefinitely. Fate's happenstance may oft win more than toil, as the fellow said."
"What fellow would that be, sir? Thoreau?"
"No, me."
The characters we have known so well—the man never at a loss and
the man who always is—for once change places and exchange styles
like W. C. Fields and Mae West at the end of _My Little Chickadee_.
In this momentary reversal of roles, Jeeves becomes the misiden-
tifier of poetry, while Bertie the character with his original blank
verse creation becomes like Bertie the narrator. Only for a moment
though—the character instantly reverts to type.

“A little thing of my own. I don’t know what it means, but you
can take it as coming straight from the heart.”

Bertie the character might not understand what he himself has
just said, but we do, because we understand his true self. His poetry
straight from the heart expresses his gratitude for Jeeves’s love and
care for him, acknowledging them to be beyond his desserts, not
matters of good works but of grace—a grace beyond the reach of art.
The very last words in the book are “Adam’s apple.”

Although Wodehouse published _Jeeves and the Tie that Binds_
when he was ninety, its thematic spirit bears comparison with that
of his first story, written at age seven and only a few sentences long.
Even before his literary debut, the future Doctor of Letters (Oxon.)
and Knight of the British Empire had already learned about mock-
heroic word play through the reconfiguration of the first element in
his imposing name—Pelham Grenville Wodehouse—from _Pelham_
to _P’l’m_ to _Plum_. Plum’s first story is a kind of pastoral. I reproduce
it in the form given by his bibliographer:

About five years ago in a wood there was a Thrush, who built
her nest in a Poplar tree. And sang so beautifully that all the
worms came up from their holes, and the ants laid down their
burdens, and the crickets stopped their mirth, and moths settled
all in a row to hear her. She sang a song as if she were in heav-
en—going up higher and higher as she sang.

at last the song was done and the bird came down panting.

Thank you said all the creatures.

Now my story is done.
Not quite done. There were to be many, many more stories and songs—totaling altogether well over a hundred books published and musical comedies produced—but not much change in Plum time.
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