

WODEHOUSE AND MIKES: A CASE OF TRANSCONTINENTAL HUMOR

Dr. Muhammad Reza Kazimi

As one looks back at the critical heritage surrounding Sir Pelham Wodehouse (15 October 1881- 15 February 1975), one feels that what Hilaire Belloc had said about him, was not the first, but the last word.

Now the end of writing is the production in the reader's mind of a certain image and a certain emotion. And the means towards that end are the use of words in any particular language; and the complete use of that medium is the choosing of the right words and putting them into their right order. It is *this* which Mr. Wodehouse does better, in the English language than anyone else alive.¹

We may return to this Introduction later, but then, there is Wodehouse's own description of his art:

I believe that there are two ways of writing novels. One is mine, making a sort of musical comedy without music and ignoring real life altogether; the other is going right deep down into life and not caring a damn²

This shows that to him, rhythm was the touchstone of his style. Music also means that the instrumental and not the vocal calls the tune, that is less dependence on words and more on the acoustics. It also means, as Belloc said, that both the choice and order of words were in harmony.

Wodehouse does help us out when we go from *Something Fresh* (London, Methuen, 1916) to *Leave it to Psmith*. (London, Herbert Jenkins, 1923) Although I first attempted to trace the evolution of his style when his stories travelled from *My Man Jeeves* (1919) to (the third book of this series): *Carry on Jeeves*. (1927) but these versions provide hardly any clue to his artistic

¹ Hilaire Belloc, "Introduction" *Weekend Wodehouse* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1939).

² P. G. Wodehouse, *Performing Flea* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 89 [original 1953].

purpose. The changes were occasioned by the change in plot or character and not by style. The few such instances I have marked are being given here for whatever they are worth; and to spare any future critic this exercise. For a beginning, let us compare the passage that introduces Jeeves, from both the books:

- Jeeves, my man you know, is really a most extra ordinary chap. So capable. Honestly, shouldn't know what to do without him. On broader lines he is more like those chappies who sit peering sadly over the marble battlements at the Pennsylvania Station in the place marked "Inquiries". You know the Johnnies I mean. You go and say: "When's the next train for Melonsquashville, Tennessee"? And they reply without stopping to think: "Two-forty-three, track ten, change at San Francisco" and they are right every time. Well, Jeeves gives you just the same impression of omniscience.³
- Now, touching this business of old Jeeves---my man you know--- how do we stand? Lots of people think that I'm much too dependent on him. My Aunt Agatha, in fact, has even gone so far as to call him my keeper. Well, what I say is Why not? The man's a genius. From the collar upwards he stands alone. I gave up trying to run my own affairs within a week of his coming to me.⁴

What do we have here? "My man Jeeves" is about the only phrase common to both versions. Stylistically, the earlier passage has "Chappies" and "Johnnies"; the only colloquial element so far. Thematically, the only difference is impersonal knowledge and personal knowledge. Wodehouse deprecated any critic going in for such close analysis of his work, and once referred to "one learned Usborne"; but the lemon squeezer type of literary criticism that T.S. Eliot decried, is perhaps the only tool we possess. Now let us compare the passages giving readers the first description of Jeeves:

The moment I saw the man standing there, registering respectful attention, a weight seemed to roll off my mind. I felt like a lost child who spots his father in the offing [There was something about him that gave me confidence]

³ P. G. Wodehouse, *My Man Jeeves* (London: George Newnes, 1919), 2, Gutenberg Project #27.

⁴ P. G. Wodehouse, *The Jeeves Collection* (London: Chancellor Press, 1992), 343.

Only the words in the square brackets have been discarded in the revised version. The meaning is complete without the last sentence, but the effect is not. It is gainsaid that Wodehouse was writing in his mother tongue, because the idiom lies beyond the meaning. It was this aspect of Wodehouse's expression that was singled out by Sir Ivor Evans in his *A Short History of English Literature*.⁵

George Mikes (15 February 1912-30 August 1987), on the other hand, was born in Hungary, and learnt his English almost as an adult. He was not half as prolific as Wodehouse, but he had a comparable popularity, and we can say that his use of the English language was masterly. Terse, precise and lucid, his aim was unerring, hitting his targets over a large number of countries in the bull's eye. George Mikes intersects because he was the harshest critic to write on Wodehouse in the latter's lifetime. This criticism appears in a little discussed book by Mikes, called simply *Eight Humorists*. (London, Allan Wingate, 1954).

Not that we cannot trace an evolution here and certainly his *Shakespeare & Myself* (London, Andre Deutsch, 1952) does not have the same stylistic level, as *How to be an Alien*, (London, Andre Deutsch, 1954) We can even say that Mikes hit his midseason form earlier than Wodehouse, in the sense that he acquired mastery over the language after having matured as a writer. George Mikes too employed the English language to the fullest extent of its potentials, and using the stylistic tools of satire made his readers laugh at his observations. Yet, toothbrush, sarcasm or satire always appeal to the rational. (*Shakespeare and Myself*) This is not necessary for humor.

The earliest critics of P. G. Wodehouse, and they include celebrities in their own right, like Hilaire Belloc cited above, J.B. Priestly and V. S. Pritchett concentrated on style. Let us recall a few:

Where Mr. Wodehouse scores, where he is, in point of fact inimitable, is in his masterfully idiotic phrase making. The talk of the thoughtless, the inarticulate, becomes in his hands an instrument of power. He has raised speech into a kind of poetry of the absurd....There are only about twenty people in this Wodehouse world and we all know them well.

⁵ Sir Ivor Evans, *A Short History of English Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 4th ed. 1990), 264 [original 1940].

In nearly every story these go through the same comic evolutions....but we must not grumble at Mr. Wodehouse's almost impudent lack of inventive power.⁶

At the end of all praise comes the complaint that the plots are threadbare. No wonder the preceding praise made less of an impression on Wodehouse than the precariously balanced criticism.. V.S. Pritchett, on the other hand does not complain of the sameness of plots and characters, in fact, he has a word of praise for them, but as far as the focus of his praise goes, he is at one with Priestley:

The strength of Wodehouse lies not in his almost incomprehensibly intricate plots---Restoration comedy again—but in his prose style and there above all in his command of mind splitting metaphor. To describe as “the sand in civilization’s spinach” enlarges and decorates the imagination.⁷

Unlike Priestley’s review, a broadcast by Pritchett on *Money in the Bank* caused Wodehouse to send him (Pritchett) a letter expressing his gratitude.⁸ What lies beyond the style is also hinted at by Wodehouse, but never elaborated. Advising his friend William Townend over one of the latter’s stories, Wodehouse warned him against diffidence, against fearing to make the mixture too rich.⁹

Let us proceed now, to the main critical notice of P.G. Wodehouse, the most unsympathetic one, penned by George Mikes. His first criticism is of an ideological nature. He cites an article published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, in which Wodehouse is supposed to have made the first of the observations listed below. In the series. A. is attributed to P. G. Wodehouse, B. onwards are the words of George Mikes directly quoted:

⁶ J. B. Priestley cited in Frances Donaldson (ed.) *Yours Plum*, PB (London: Penguin, 1992), 166.

⁷ V. S. Pritchett, cited by Sam Jordison, “P. G. Wodehouse: Creative Writing Lessons” London, *The Guardian*, 7 May 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com>.

⁸ P. G. Wodehouse to V.S. Pritchett, cited in Sophie Ratcliffe, *P. G. Wodehouse A Life in Letters* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 2011), 392-93.

⁹ P. G. Wodehouse, *Performing Flea*, 89.

- I am quite unable [I have never been able]to work up any kind of belligerent feeling. Just as I am about to feel belligerent about any country .I meet a decent sort of chap[Some nice fellow from it and lose. My belligerency] We go out together and lose any fighting thoughts or feelings. [Have you ever heard me talk like that?]¹⁰
- You do not need to be brilliantly intelligent to understand the nature of Fascism, but Wodehouse lacks that kind of intelligence. He is an able and ingenious comic writer, but he is not an intelligent man.¹¹
- All Wodehouse books are permeated by an air of perverted snobbishness [about *Something Fresh*] The types he describes are one-dimensional. Mr. Wikham is the aesthetic brute; Emsworth's private secretary is efficient, Joan [Valentine] is the independent, modern girl—a faint and non-political echo of the suffragettes; R. Jones is the crook. George Emerson is the determined young man. Peters is the querulous millionaire.¹²
- In *Something Fresh* for example, Joan refuses to accept half of the L.1000 fee promised for a certain job, unless she is allowed to deserve it by doing her bit.¹³
- Mr. Wodehouse is the bard of stupidity. One wonders if he could draw a really sophisticated character. He never tried.¹⁴
- To be clever was bad form. Indeed, only Jeeves is supposed to be clever, and he is the most dishonest¹⁵
- And, anyway, cleverness, if needed at all, can always be hired for a small weekly sum in the person of gentleman's gentleman.¹⁶

The last criticism, most surprisingly, is echoed by Auberon Waugh in *Homage to P. G. Wodehouse*:

¹⁰ George Mikes, *Eight Humorists* (London: Alan Wingate, 1954), 160.

¹¹ Ibid, 161.

¹² Ibid, 169.

¹³ Ibid, 161.

¹⁴ Ibid, 169.

¹⁵ Ibid, 166.

¹⁶ Ibid, 167.

I have never heard of a man who tipped his own servant.
Jeeves may have the greater intellect, but they are master
and servant after all. Jeeves is a poor man.¹⁷

Let us take up the A passage first. Wodehouse cites it in *Performing Flea* the words in square brackets being Wodehouse's version including the last remark. Wodehouse disputes that the words are his own.¹⁸ He also does not subscribe to them. *Performing Flea* was published only one year before *Eight Humorists* but since it is included in Mikes' bibliography of Wodehouse books he does not have the excuse that he missed Wodehouse's disavowal. Why then did Mikes persist in predicating his criticism on the words Wodehouse disputed ?

As far as the substance is concerned George Mikes dwells overmuch on *Something Fresh*. C contains a description of the cast of characters. The Efficient Baxter is not even referred to by his name, although he is the thread connecting *Something Fresh* to *Leave it to Psmith*, from light comedy as Mikes terms it, to farce.

Nobody who relies on Mikes' depiction in D would ever imagine that the "certain job" he mentioned here was not a plot to steal an item or to act dishonestly, but to restore to the rightful owner the item in question. Is this an honest depiction of Wodehouse's mindset? Let us now recount the dialogue of George Emerson a *persona non grata* as far as Mikes is concerned:

"Admit what?"

That you couldn't stand the prospect. That the idea of being stuck for life with this crowd, like a fly on a fly paper was too much for you. That you were ready to break of your engagement to Freddie [Threepwood] and come away to marry me and live happily ever after.¹⁹

The fact that George Emerson is voicing the same sentiments regarding the aristocracy that Mikes despises is not at all worthy of note! Considering that

¹⁷ Auberon Waugh, in (ed.) Thelma Cazalet-Keir, *Homage to P. G. Wodehouse* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1973), 146.

¹⁸ P. G. Wodehouse, *Performing Flea*, 253.

¹⁹ P. G. Wodehouse, *Something Fresh* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1915), 17th Print, 68.

his most pervading criticism of Wodehouse is his affiliation for the aristocracy, this passage from the novel *George Mikes* dislikes most should not have been passed over.

Is George Emerson a villain? In the final part Emerson regrets having pursued his suit, in quite a contrite manner:

If this cable hadn't come, I suppose I would have gone on bothering you to the day of your wedding.²⁰

Let us mark another difference one we had mentioned at the outset. The depiction of Lord Emsworth in *Something Fresh* and his depiction in the later stories in the Blandings saga. Here is Lord Emsworth remonstrating with the Efficient Baxter:

Lord Emsworth's frigid disapproval did not relax. "Pray do not apologize Baxter. The desire for food is human. It is your boisterous mode of securing and conveying it that I deprecate. Let us all go to bed."²¹

Compare this scene with the far more artistically drawn scene from *Summer Lightning*, (London, Herbert Jenkins, 1929).

He reasoned closely. There were, he knew, on the premises of Blandings Castle other male adults besides Rupert Baxter; but none of these could climb up waterspouts and disappear over balconies. To Baxter, on the other hand, such a pursuit would seem the normal ordinary way of passing an evening. It would be his idea of wholesome relaxation. Soon, no doubt, he would come out onto the balcony again and throw himself to the ground. That was the sort of fellow Baxter was---a man of strange pleasures.²²

Although the spoken expression of his thought causes Lady Constance (his sister) to call Lord Emsworth an idiot (the same assessment of Lord Emsworth's mental level as Mikes has of Wodehouse), there is far more intricacy, far more elaboration and above all far more exaggeration in its

²⁰ Ibid, 219.

²¹ Ibid, 198.

²² P. G. Wodehouse, *Summer Lightning* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1929), 4th print, 295.

classic meaning, and moments later Lady Constance is confronted with an unexpected scene:

Her young guest, Miss Schoonmaker, was standing by the window, looking excited and alarmed. Her brother Clarence, pointing a gun expertly from the hip, was staring fixedly at the bed. And from under the bed, a little like a tortoise protruding from its shell, there was coming into view the spectacled head of the Efficient Baxter.²³

It is because Mikes obsessed over *Something Fresh* that it was found necessary to follow his trail, otherwise, when we come to E, that is Wodehouse's inability to draw a sophisticated character "Wodehouse does not even try", says Mikes. If by sophisticated character Mikes means a serious character, then there is the last story in *The Man Upstairs* (London, Methuen, 1919) called "In Alcalá". Here is the heroine when the hero, finally proposes:

No! she cried sharply, as if it hurt her to speak. 'I wouldn't play you such a mean trick. I'm too fond of you, George. There's never been any body just like you. You've been mighty good to me. I've never met a man who treated me like you. You're the only white man that's ever happened to me, and I guess I'm not going to play you a low down trick like spoiling your life. George, I thought you knew. Honest, I thought you knew. How did you think I lived in a swell place like this, if you didn't know? How did you suppose everyone knew me at Rector's? How did you think I'd managed to find out so much about Winfield Knight? Can't you guess?'²⁴

After one lengthy quotation from one short story, I believe it is not necessary to quote verbatim from the other such instances. Peggy does not have a dignified profession, but for that reason she is a sophisticated character. Others are the hero and heroine from *The Little Nugget*, (London, Methuen, 1913) , most seriously depicted, and it really needs an interesting side plot to change the bitterness to love. But most of all Mikes, misses out on *the Coming of Bill*, (London, Herbert Jenkins, 1920) a very serious novel, in which

²³ Ibid, 298.

²⁴ P. G. Wodehouse, *The Man Upstairs* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 19), 297, [original 1914].

marital relations are socially depicted to the point of cynicism. Here we had Wodehouse in reverse, a novel opportunity to analyze his art after divesting it of humor; but this serious novel was never taken seriously.

The last two denunciations from both George Mikes and Auberon Waugh under F and G come under not literary, but social criticism. It is unwarranted, in the sense that this equation had already been made in Sir James Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, 1902. Wodehouse did not deliberately set out to create an unequal pair, he found it full of possibilities and employed it to the advantage of his readers from *My Man Jeeves* to *Aunts are not Gentlemen*. (London, Barrie and Jenkins, 1974)

Is Wodehouse committed to the aristocracy? He satirizes the rich in the person of his Aunt Agatha, in the story "Pearls Mean Tears" Another story "Ukridges Accident Syndicate" contains an almost revolutionary denunciation of people who had gathered unwarranted wealth. As for Mikes' criticism of Wodehouse's caricatures of babies, he could not have known of Wodehouse's deprived childhood, the story having come out in David Jasen's *P.G. Wodehouse: A Portrait of a Master*, (New York, Mason and Lipscomb, 1974) twenty years after *Eight Humorists*.

Is Jeeves poor? George Mikes and Auberon Waugh both seem to refer to this passage from *Carry On Jeeves*:

'What did Mr. Little say about it?'
 'He appeared gratified Sir'
 'To go into sordid figures, did he--- '
 'Yes, Sir. Twenty pounds. Having been fortunate in his elections at Hurst Park on the previous Saturday'
 'My aunt told me that she-'
 'Yes, Sir. Most generous. Twenty -five pounds'
 'Good Lord Jeeves, You've been coining the stuff!'
 'I have added appreciably to my savings, yes, sir. Mrs. Little was good enough to present me with ten pounds for finding her such a satisfactory housemaid. And then there was Mr. Travers—'
 'Uncle Thomas?'

‘Yes, Sir. He also behaved most handsomely, quite independently of Mrs. Travers. Another twenty-five pounds. And Mr. George Travers-’
 ‘Don’t tell me that Uncle George gave you something, too ! What on earth for?’
 ‘Well, really Sir, I do not quite understand myself. But I received a cheque for ten pounds from him. He seemed to be under the impression that I had been in some way responsible for your joining him at Harrogate, sir’
 I gaped at the fellow
 ‘Well, everybody seems to be doing it,’ I said, ‘so I had better make the thing unanimous. Here’s a fiver.’
 ‘Why thank you, sir. This is extremely-’
 ‘It won’t seem much compared with these vast sums you’ve been acquiring.’
 ‘Oh, I assure you ,sir’
 ‘And I don’t know why I am giving it to you.’
 ‘Still there it is.’
 ‘Thank you very much ,sir.’²⁵

One wonders whether Wodehouse read this essay of George Mikes. He was usually incensed by hostile criticism as his letter to Nancy Spain²⁶ makes plain.

Wodehouse called his letter to Nancy Spain ‘a beauty.’ He may have drafted a stinker but may have thought better of it, and refrained from posting it. Although he made the fantastic confession that Honore’ de Balzac’s *Pere Goriot* bored him, Wodehouse was nevertheless well read enough to be a discerning critic. He had now come up against a critic who was a successful humorist himself.

The many books of George Mikes show him adept at characterizing the traits of nations. Yet, he judges Wodehouse unfairly. George Mikes had sufficient powers of observation to prevent him from misconstruing Wodehouse’s characters or plots. It follows that Mikes’ misleading of readers was malicious. Let us now see the nature of the humor George Mikes serves up.

²⁵ P. G. Wodehouse, *The Jeeves Collection* (London: Chancellor Press, 1992), 512-13.

²⁶ Sophie Ratcliffe, *P. G. Wodehouse: A Life in Letters* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 2011), 464.

Rewarding in itself of course, going over the opus of George Mikes could also provide a clue to why a humorist should be so bitter in his denunciation of a fellow humorist.

If we see Mikes' *oeuvre* it becomes clear that he was not wanting in the appreciation of either the milieu or the language of Sir Pelham Wodehouse. Let us begin with his delineation of English and French manners of expression:

To be precise, the Englishman thinks, is pedantic. To say exactly what you mean is a foreign way of displaying skill, of showing off. You must leave something to the non-existent imagination of your companions. Accordingly, the Englishman understates his case....The Frenchman insists that his words should reflect the precise color and shade of his thoughts.²⁷

I explained for Tibor's sake the mysteries of , say, the *accusativus cum infinitive* and asked him a few questions afterwards. If he answered properly I merely shouted at him, if he answered wrongly, I beat him up.²⁸

Mr. Nehru too, issued a peace appeal; when international tension reached its peak, he attacked and occupied eight small islands in the Indian Ocean; when challenged at the United Nations as well as in his own parliament; he replied with another resounding speech condemning aggression.²⁹

Mr. Khrushchev's personal poll at the next election rose from 99.7 per cent to 99.8 per cent.³⁰

Advertisements have a special logic of their own. They tell you by implication that if you use a certain orange squeezer in your kitchen, you remain young, lovely, and beautiful. If you wash with a certain soap you become rich. If you wear a certain type of underwear you inherit a large sum from a wealthy uncle.³¹

²⁷ George Mikes, *Little Cabbages* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968), 58 [original 1955].

²⁸ George Mikes, *How To Unite Nations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) 70 [original 1963].

²⁹ Ibid, 52-53.

³⁰ Ibid, 55.

³¹ George Mikes, *How To Scrape Skies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 160.

They have criminal tendencies. There are indeed some ugly crimes--- lynching for instance--, in which Negroes are involved without fail, in one way or another.³²

Can't you find the card you want Kiddie?
 'No' I replied, 'I want a greeting card to congratulate a great grandfather on the occasion of the birth of color- blind triplets.'
 'Sure'—he nodded seriously, picked out three cards from his stock, handed them to me and asked:
 'Do you want it in English, Italian, or Yiddish?'³³
 'You're kidding. When did you arrive here?'
 'Yesterday'
 'Only yesterday? But you speak very good English'
 'I've been living in London'
 'Do they speak English there too?'
 'Kinda English,' I declared firmly, and the conversation was closed.³⁴

These are sufficient examples. I have left out nuggets from *How to be an Alien* and *Shakespeare and Myself* but I hope my point is made, because these books typify the British, and citing them would be to stress the native characteristics of English. At present Mikes' skill lies in typifying, his being in this task unerring and devastating. George Mikes displays these qualities in a compact and to the point manner, in which not one word is ill-chosen, not one word is superfluous. Wodehouse would need to have all these merits and more, but does he?

To answer this question, we need a final parting quotation from George Mikes:

In Kentucky, no woman may appear in a bathing suit, unless armed with a club. In Arkansas, it is illegal to mispronounce the name of Arkansas. (By the way, for your convenience it is pronounced Ahr-Kan-Saw). In Mohave, Arizona, anyone caught stealing soap must wash himself with it until all the

³² Ibid, 100.

³³ Ibid, 30.

³⁴ Ibid, 57.

soap is used up. In Jonesboro, Georgia, it is against the law to say: 'Of Boy' In Fort Madison, Iowa, the fire department must practice for fifteen minutes before going to extinguish a fire.³⁵

And here, is P. G. Wodehouse on the same subject:

The impression left on the mind when one reads in the papers of the local rules and regulations in force all over is that life in America can be very difficult. Almost every avenue of wholesome fun seems to be barred. In Rumford, Maine, for instance, it is illegal for a tenant to bite his landlord, while in Youngstown, Ohio, stiff sentences are passed on those who tie giraffes to light standards. In Nogales, Arizona, there is an ordinance prohibiting the wearing of braces; in San Francisco, one which won't let you shoot jack rabbits from cable cars; and in Dunn, South Carolina, unless you have the permission of the head-mistress, a permission very sparingly granted, it is unlawful to act in an obnoxious manner on the campus of a girls' school.³⁶

Spot the difference, as the papers would say. George Mikes has a tone of disapproval which of course is only to be expected. While Wodehouse has a tone of irreverence, which describe these laws with comments which show how absurd, but how irrelevant these rules are for the common man. The nuance created while describing the laws applicable to girls schools, where by a simple caveat, the prohibited is brought into the orbit of the permissible, is where the difference lies. Although P. G. Wodehouse writes fiction and George Mikes simulates, I have chosen from the works of Wodehouse, the columns "Our Man in America", based on actual facts, to provide an acceptable and fair basis of comparison.

First a passage dealing with regard to the ideological shortcomings of P. G. Wodehouse:

³⁵ Ibid, 116.

³⁶ P. G. Wodehouse, *Plum Pie* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2007), 155 [original 1966].

The sight of all those expensive cars rolling around, crammed to the bulwark with overfed males and females with fur coats and double chins, made him feel, he tells me, that he wanted to buy a couple of bombs and start the Social Revolution. If Stalin had come along at that moment, Mervyn would have shaken him by the hand.³⁷

As an instance of typification and mimesis, this is seen where lawyers are depicted.

‘And how do you pretend to be a lawyer?’
Lancelot considered
‘Lawyers cough drily, I know that’ he said’ and then I suppose, one would put the tips of the fingers together a good deal and talk about Rex vs. Biggs Ltd and torts and malfeances and so forth.³⁸

And here is a homily, which becomes audacious because it proceeds from Lord Ickenham whose own style of life is the opposite of austere:

‘And if you are going to try to excuse this Twistelton on the ground that he was intoxicated at that time, I can only say that I am unable to share your broad outlook. No doubt he was intoxicated, but I can’t see that that makes it any better. You knew, by the way, I suppose, that he is a dipsomaniac?’³⁹

And here is an episode illustrating Wodehouse’s audacity in stretching belief, using an undertone to make it sound natural:

‘Augustine could still recall the surge of emotion which had come upon him, when, leaning out of the window, he had observed the prelate climbing up the waterspout on his way back to his room. And he still remembered the sorrowful

³⁷ P. G. Wodehouse, *Mulliner Nights* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 5th Print), 137 [original 1933].

³⁸ Ibid, 84-85.

³⁹ P. G. Wodehouse, *Uncle Dynamite* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1948), 211.

pity with which he had listened to the other's lame explanation that he was a cat belonging to the cook.⁴⁰

It is this daring that is behind the scale of inanity in Wodehouse's writings. He never shies away from stretching belief, and the suspension of disbelief itself has an intricacy, which enables it to strike a chord with readers.

Without a symmetrical setting of inanity, Wodehouse would never have been able to make such outrageous exaggeration compelling. The fact that farce could support such bold and intricate art makes plain that Wodehouse could marshal not only the words (the *mot juste*), but also sentiments and emotions at will, and it is this choice of effect that has endeared Wodehouse to generations.

We can account for the differences between the literary styles of Wodehouse and Mikes by pointing to difference in *genre*. Wodehouse writes fiction which requires imagination, which in turn, means a larger scope. Mikes writes non-fiction which basically requires strong powers of observation. From this, we can further conclude that the literary acumen of Wodehouse is creative in its mode, while the literary acumen of Mikes is critical in its mode. These writers have, as a consequence taken different directions.

These, however, do not account for Mikes' rancour : "He is not a writer, he is a habit."⁴¹ Mikes went on to proclaim (in 1954) that Wodehouse's popularity was declining. Take a few titles written in Wodehouse's old age, *A Pelican at Blandings* (1969) *Much Obligated Jeeves*(1971) *Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin*(1972) *Aunts Aren't Gentlemen* (1974) This was the time when Wodehouse confessed to Tom Sharpe (1928-2013): "I sit in the old armed chair and brood and I do get an occasional minor scene, but never anything I can build on."⁴² Despite the ravages of old age Wodehouse's popularity had not declined during Mikes' lifetime.

In the succeeding generation, we saw Sir Malcolm Bradbury (1932-2000) and Tom Sharpe take center-stage. Bradbury discovered that his marvelous power of mimesis was a critical acumen and turned most successfully to

⁴⁰ P. G. Wodehouse, *Mulliner Nights*, 296-97.

⁴¹ George Mikes, *Eight Humorists*, 165.

⁴² Robert McCrum, *Wodehouse A Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004), 413.

literary criticism. His *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel* (1973) being a living testament. Still *Eating People is Wrong* (1959) remains a masterpiece. A more intricate, but more satirical note was struck by Tom Sharpe in *Blott on the Landscape* (1975) A study on *Evelyn Waugh* (1962) was published by Bradbury, but it is in Sharpe's novels that we find esoteric shades of Evelyn Waugh. Dark comedy too is an important ingredient, but in those pieces where Sharpe's humor is riotous, it is also unguarded. *The Wilt Alternative* (1979) which is excerpted by Frank Muir, *The Oxford Book of Humorous Prose* (PB.1992) is excruciatingly side-splitting, but simultaneously it is constricted in propriety.

Wodehouse writes of the Edwardian Era, it is true, but it is not a salute to a dead era. Wodehouse began writing in the Edwardian Era, and in the succeeding decade, his reputation was made. The Edwardian Era is now over a hundred years in the past. Still in the language and literature in which the historical novel from Sir Walter Scott to Robert Graves flourishes, the recreation of a bye-gone era shall not tax the imagination, and for this reason, the works of Sir Pelham Wodehouse still remain in print. They have remained in print for over a century and cannot be given a precipitate burial.