

The God and the Machine

Owen Dudley Edwards

Once Wodehouse transported Mike to Sedleigh from Wrykin and Mike hated it on sight, the god appeared. And from the very first the god began to send up not only Sedleigh but public schools and the public school story :

'Hullo', he said

He spoke in a tired voice.

'Hullo', said Mike.

'Take a seat', said the immaculate one. 'If you don't mind dirtying your bags, that's to say. Personally, I don't see any prospect of ever sitting down in this place. It looks to me as if they meant to use these chairs as mustard-and-cess beds. A Nursery Garden in the Home. That sort of idea. My name', he added pensively, 'is Smith. What's yours?'

'Jackson', said Mike.

'Are you the Bully, the Pride of the School, or the Boy who is Led Astray and takes to Drink in Chapter Sixteen?'

'The last, for choice', said Mike, 'but I've only just arrived, so I don't know'.

'The boy—what will he become? Are you new here, too, then?'

'Yes! Why, are you new?'

'Do I look as if I belonged here? I'm the latest import. Sit down on yonder settee, and I will tell you the painful story of my life. By the way, before I start, there's just one thing. If you ever have occasion to write to me, would you mind sticking a P at the beginning of my name? P-s-m-i-t-h. See? There are too many Smiths, and I don't care for Smythe. My father's content to worry along in the old-fashioned way, but I've decided to strike out a fresh line. I shall found a new dynasty. The resolve came to me unexpectedly this morning. I jotted it down on the back of an envelope. In conversation you may address me as Rupert (though I hope you won't), or simply Smith, the P not being sounded. Cp. the name Zbysco, in which the Z is given a similar miss-in-baulk. See?'

Mike said he saw. Psmith thanked him with a certain stately old-world courtesy. (*World of Psmith* 10-11.)

It is curious that a specifically Greek form was chosen for the differentiation of Psmith. It is also curious that he states that its inspiration is described as immediately antecedent to his appearance as is that of his

Socialism and the title 'Comrade' for his acquaintances. In theory, he has been to Eton. Yet Wodehouse's loyalty to Wrykin (Dulwich) was never transferred when his subjects became obvious graduates of Eton and Harrow: his comments on the latter are always ironically complimentary, and their products very seldom reflect any credit on them.¹ Psmith has the characteristics, not of a superannuated schoolboy from a greater Wrykin, but of a god forced for a time to serve among mortals. He makes his single friend, as Apollo made his in Admetus. He acquires his most noticeable mortal qualities—his name, his form of address—immediately at the commencement of his servitude. He retains throughout all his adventures a curious invulnerability: no schoolboy in the literature could carry on conversation with a master of the type he carries on with Mr Downing, and even with the headmaster. No other fictional employee would be imaginable who would thus address himself to Mr Bickersdyke. No journalist would risk his neck among gang-leaders in the way Psmith does with his most off-the-cuff irrelevancies. Nor could any figure save a god retain his enthusiasm for a friend so incapable of progress from a schoolboy mentality. Holmes and Watson are analogies for Psmith and Mike at many points—indeed the Holmes cycle is specifically referred to in the first book about them, if not with reference to them²—but Dr Watson has obvious qualities of maturity if not of brilliance. Mike does not.

Psmith, in *Leave it to Psmith*, sustains another fall from heaven—his third, counting his sudden descent into the Bank in *Psmith in the City*—and this time the treatment is more directly Aristophanean, and the godlike exemplar is more clearly a sober Dionysus. There is much seeming irrelevance about his hideous if unseen life in the fish market. His new state of impecuniousness is frequently mentioned, yet wholly ignored in his priorities. It is simply needed to get him where he has to go. There are other godlike or supernatural prototypes. Something of Pan creeps in, especially in the last book: or should we not make too much of that chrysanthemum and the gamekeeper's cottage in the west wood? Something of Puck is also present, as again in the later books Psmith shows a curiously inhuman pleasure in making mischievous allusions to the conversational talents of morons, Mike included. And then, at the end of the last adventure, he vanishes, taking his chosen bride—highly significantly named—with him. His disappearance from any subsequent reference recalls the god who, once departed, is by his own command forgotten. All we have left is:

And with a stately gesture of farewell, Psmith passed out on to the terrace to join Eve.

Having said this, how can the claim of realism be sustained? What

¹Harrow elicits some sardonic tributes in *Pigs Have Wings*. Eton is practically carved up in *Heavy Weather*, as being the origin of Ronnie Fish at his worst. The former allegedly gives Harrow best, but see 'The Awful Gladness of the Mater': 'Roland . . . had been educated at an inferior school—Harrow, or some such name, Dudley understood that it was called' (*World of Mulliner*, 245).

²In fact, it is Mr Downing, the hostile master, who makes elephantine efforts at Holmesian investigation (*World of Psmith*, 80-99).

seems to have happened is that Psmith gave Wodehouse precisely the degree of liberation he needed. Wodehouse was, I think, a naturally happy person who disliked seeing life raw while believing in being credible. Psmith initially gave him the degree of escapism he required to harness to very accurate accounts of life as he had seen it. We may put *Leave it to Psmith* to one side on this point; it had other work to do. The first three novels are, from the view of the historian, among the best things he wrote.

It is with a pleasing sense of fitness that we invoke the name of the historian. Wodehouse invariably refers to himself in his own works as 'the historian', and sardonically parodies standard methods in historical narrative in doing so. And in this age still dominated by the scholarship of Sir Lewis Namier, what more appropriate first names than Pelham and Grenville could a historical source have? If nothing else about Wodehouse will win the respect of the profession, it should be this.

The student of Edwardian London who wants to learn of the problems of public school men entering commerce, of Clapham Common Christian Socialism, of the social value of football in weakening barriers of rank, of election meetings and their audiences, of the social composition of banks and the interests of their employees, can go to no better source than *Psmith in the City*. It is probably the nearest Wodehouse ever came to autobiography, although there was to be much valuable autobiographical material in *Psmith, Journalist* and in anything he wrote touching on theatres and Hollywood. And it was also as grimly naturalistic as his writing ever became. The kindly cashier who, distracted by the illness of an idolised son, fails to spot a forged cheque, finds himself at the mercy of a former Socialist colleague, now his malevolently capitalistic manager :

He was talking more to himself than to Mike. It was dreadful to see him sitting there, all limp and broken.

'I shall lose my place. Mr Bickersdyke has wanted to get rid of me for a long time. He never liked me. I shall be dismissed. What can I do? I can't make another start. I am good for nothing. Nobody will take an old man like me'. (*World of Psmith* 222.)

That episode, it may be recalled, is resolved initially by the self-sacrifice of Mike, and then by the blackmailing of Mr Bickersdyke by Psmith through the minutes of meetings in which he had participated in his Socialist days. Yet these minutes were originally in the keeping of the cashier, Mr Waller. His salvation was in his own hands; but it would have been completely against his character and training to have used them. There is an odd note here. It is as though Wodehouse is arguing that Socialism spouted on platforms to indifferent and disorderly mobs is no more than a useful aid for a self-assured capitalism, because it naturally behaves according to capitalism's rules. Psmith succeeds by defying those rules. Indeed, for all of his godlike qualities, all Psmith does is to do what others could, if they were not so much the prisoners of convention. The chorus-girls' strike in *Jill the Reckless* is

one such action. Once the rules are defied, as Psmith defies them time after time, the system is helpless. Yet for all of his Socialism, Psmith never saw much to be said for the masses. Nor did Wodehouse. Mr Waller's case almost implies that the masses are unworthy of Socialism; Mr Bickersdyke's election seems to argue they are unworthy of democracy too. Yet on the negative level Wodehouse time and again makes surprisingly bitter attacks on those whom the system serves. His most detestable character, the Princess von und zu Dwornitzchek, has a little trouble with the income tax authorities but :

'... The Treasury people were making the most absurd claims'.

'Soaking the rich?'

'Trying to soak the rich'.

'I hope they skinned you to the bone'.

'No. As a matter of fact, I came out of it very well. Have you a cigarette?'

'Here you are'.

'Thank you. Yes, I won out all along the line'.

'You would!' (*Summer Moonshine* P, 185.)

One very minor item in *Psmith in the City* is a revelation of the limits to Wodehouse's good nature. This was the introduction of Comrade Prebble, Mr Waller's fellow-orator and guest, and the joke about him was that he had no palate. This vastly amused the crowd at Clapham Common, but there is unpleasant evidence that it was intended to amuse the readers also. This sort of thing is one of the nastier legacies of the public school. A cleft palate was the probable target of well-to-do schoolboy humour no less than that of Clapham Common hooligans, and Wodehouse's use of it argues a certain moral kink on his part of the kind he lampooned in the masses. And he came back to it. Lord Emsworth's pigman in *Heavy Weather*, Pirbright, is inarticulate in a Shropshire dialect which is presumably reasonable enough (J, 33-34, 104, 242) : the dialect, deliberately absurd, is a smack at the dialect-pushing school of writers (whom Wodehouse, on the evidence of *Love Among the Chickens* (J, 236), disliked). But Pirbright's successor, Edwin Pott in *Full Moon*, has no roof to his mouth, and this again is apparently intended to be funny. Our date of publication here is 1947, when Wodehouse was 65 and hence old enough to know better. More unpleasantly still, Pott is the subject of fairly nasty comment from the Hon. Galahad Threepwood, normally one of the most lovable characters in the entire canon. Admittedly he begins by rebuking his sister Hermione on the point :

'... A little gnome of a man with no roof to his mouth who smelled worse than the pig'.

'Niffy, eh? It probably covered an honest heart. Niffiness often does. And we can't all have roofs to our mouths . . .'. (*Full Moon* J, 173.)

But a little later he tells her husband :

‘Yes, no need for you to stick around, Egbert. Buzz off. And’, he added, indicating Edwin Pott, who had withdrawn respectfully into the background until his offices as a witness should be required, ‘take that odoriferous gargoye with you . . .’. (236.)

Perhaps it was intended as a reminder that Gally, for all his charm and egalitarian attitudes, was not the brother of Lady Hermione Wedge and Lady Constance Keeble for nothing. But I doubt it.

This cold-bloodedness and schoolboy cruelty in other writers is something which often expresses itself in racial slurs. Much of the magazine popular fiction of Wodehouse’s nonage abounded with that kind of thing. In his own case, the record is not clean, but it is far above the norm of his day. Edwardian humour often seemed to assume that a Jew, an Irishman, a Scot or a Welshman had only to be introduced to raise a laugh; and a Black, in a comic context, was generally depicted as a ludicrous object for his efforts to appear human. There were exceptions, though primarily in the late Victorian period: Rider Haggard presented a Black as Noble Savage in *King Solomon’s Mines* with much nobility and little savagery, and Conan Doyle passionately defended the marriage of Black man to White woman in ‘The Yellow Face’, but the twentieth century swung the other way. The late Sherlock Holmes story ‘The Three Gables’, which Conan Doyle permitted to appear under his signature and which may be by him, has some very unpleasant racist asides. Belloc, Chesterton, Buchan and others reached extremes of a really dangerous kind. The xenophobic 1920s took the ugly strain further, from the genteel anti-Semitism of Dorothy L. Sayers to the Fascistoid flogging of Jews in Bulldog Drummond.³

Wodehouse lacked the passion either to approach Conan Doyle at his best, in this respect, or to rival his embattled racialist contemporaries. It must be stressed, initially, that Wodehouse’s gentle satire at the expense of his fellow-writers dictated much reference to bad stories about Irishmen, Scotsmen and Jews. The *locus classicus* is when Jeeves

³Colin Watson, *Snobbery With Violence* (1971) is good on tendencies of the period, but is a little inclined to argue by assertion and to use insufficient source-material. The debate at the moment is otherwise bogged down in tedious repetition of the following views: (A) that everybody was racist; (B) that nobody was. Accordingly, I have taken some trouble about this question, not a matter for overwhelming attention in a discussion of Wodehouse. I am depressed by such signs of the times as David Daniell, *The Interpreter’s House* (1975) which seeks to argue that (a) some of John Buchan’s best friends were Jews, (b) he supported Zionism, (c) his nasty remarks about Jews are made by his characters, not him. (a) need not detain us. (b) reminds us that many anti-Semites were delighted at the idea of getting the Jews somewhere else. (c) has a point—from Shakespeare to the present, countless good men have been unjustly tarred with the language they give characters. But Buchan’s anti-Semites are all intended to be very sympathetic figures. Mr Blenkinson’s remark ‘the whitest Jew I know’, prefaced by the remark that he disliked the race, is a detail in *The Three Hostages* not lightly explained away by any counsel for Buchan’s defence. And one could hardly expect Buchan, an effective writer, to hold up the action of his novel by announcing, irrelevantly, that he didn’t like Jews and now they could get back to the plot. An excellent way of conveying anti-Semitism is to ascribe such views to a sympathetic character; which then enables one to employ the tactics of Pontius Pilate (who didn’t like Jews either). The other defence trotted out is that everybody was like that, anyway. They were not.

tells Gussie Fink-Nottle a story about two Irishmen for use in his speech to the Market Snodsbury Grammar School, and Gussie, subsequently having become pickled to the gills, tries to do it justice.

'Gentlemen', said Gussie, 'I mean ladies and gentlemen and, of course, boys, what a beautiful world this is. A beautiful world, full of happiness on every side. Let me tell you a little story. Two Irishmen, Pat and Mike, were walking along Broadway, and one said to the other, "Begorra, the race is not always to the swift", and the other replied, "Faith and begob, education is a drawing out, not a putting in" '.

I must say it seemed to me the rottenest story I have ever heard, and I was surprised that Jeeves should have considered it worth shoving into a speech. However, when I taxed him with this later, he said that Gussie had altered the plot a good deal, and I dare say that accounts for it.

At any rate, that was the *conte* as Gussie told it, and when I say that it got a very fair laugh, you will understand what a popular favourite he had become with the multitude. (*Right Ho, Jeeves*, 1934, P, 172.)

Otherwise, the Irish do fairly well, and, recognising fellow-enthusiasts for verbal gymnastics and linguistic irreverence, Wodehouse has done well by them. It is true that I have occasionally noticed a certain hostility on the part of Irishmen called Gallagher towards *The Small Bachelor* (published 1927. Methuen cheap edition, 230, ch. 17):

Sigsbee H., it may be remembered, had started out to search through New York for a policeman named Gallagher: and New York had given him of its abundance. It had provided for Mr Waddington's inspection a perfect wealth of Gallaghers: but, owing to the fact that what he really wished to meet was not a Gallagher but a Garroway, nothing in the nature of solid success had rewarded his efforts. He had seen tall Gallaghers and small Gallaghers, thin Gallaghers and stout Gallaghers, a cross-eyed Gallagher, a pimpled Gallagher, a Gallagher with red hair, a Gallagher with a broken nose, two Gallaghers who looked like bad dreams, and a final supreme Gallagher who looked like nothing on earth. But he had not found the man to whom he had sold the stock of the Finer and Better Motion Picture Company of Hollywood, Cal.

The 'prentice hand of *Love Among the Chickens* introduced a comic Irish professor from Dublin University (on any estimate, a great deal less comic than live models would have suggested). In the revision, Garnet is no longer warned against mentioning John Redmond to him; the name to avoid is now Carson. Did the apolitical Wodehouse for some reason assume that Dublin University, being in the twenty-six counties, was now instinctively anti-Unionist? Ukridge's tactless politics must have been Home Rule in the 1906 version, to judge by the

explosion; by the 1920s he was discouraging Boko Lawlor with his support, and what little evidence we have points to Lawlor's being a Conservative. (The policeman called him 'subversive', which sounds less than True Blue, but then the policeman was there for the purpose of arresting his supporting speaker, Mr Utridge.)⁴

Finally, there is a very touching portrait of an Irishman, Adair, in *Mike and Psmith*. His Irishness is not greatly stressed, although the name is suggestive. (There is the song 'Robin Adair'; and there is, more to the point, the victim in Conan Doyle's 'The Empty House', the Hon. Ronald Adair, son of the obviously Irish Earl of Maynooth,⁵ precisely the source whence Doyle's disciple Wodehouse, writing six years later, might be expected to draw the name.) The critical line is given, characteristically, as part of the explanation for Adair's failure to defeat Mike in their duel:

The Irish blood in him, which for the ordinary events of life made him merely energetic and dashing, now rendered him reckless. (*World of Psmith* 112-13.)

The very interesting point about Adair is that Wodehouse has captured a critical feature of the Irish emigrant—fanatical loyalty to the institution which replaces his lost point of origin.

To Adair, Sedleigh was almost a religion. Both his parents were dead; his guardian, with whom he spent the holidays, was a man with neuralgia at one end of him and gout at the other; and the only really pleasant times Adair had had, as far back as he could remember, he owed to Sedleigh. The place had grown on him, absorbed him.

... His devotion to Sedleigh was purely unselfish. He did not want fame. All he worked for was that the school should grow and grow, keener and better at games and more prosperous year by year, till it should take its rank among *the* schools, and to be an Old Sedleighian should be a badge passing its owner everywhere (29-30).

Wodehouse had, of course, encountered New York Irish policemen by the time he wrote this. He may also have encountered Irish New York Democratic party loyalists.

Scotsmen in Wodehouse are primarily objects of slightly mocking reverence, in their capacity as high priests of golf. One story, 'Farewell to Legs', has an almost stage Scots golfer, Angus McTavish, as its hero; on the other hand it undoubtedly compensates for mild jokes about Scots dourness for its almost savage attack on the professional funny man with his anti-Scots bar-room humour, Legs Mortimer. The story ends with Mortimer ducking his head under the smelly water of a pond,

⁴*Love Among the Chickens*, J, 71-72, 87-88, 94. *Utridge* (published 1924), J, 200, and ch. 8, *passim*. My views are a little tendentious here, given that Utridge is still talking about Home Rule in the 1921 edition, which gives him an additional claim to uniqueness.

⁵Does anyone need to be told that 1903 was the year of rejoicing when the Reichenbach gave up its dead? 'The Empty House' is of course the first story of the *Return*.

where the rest of him is immersed, to avoid the attentions of a nest of hornets into which the heroine has just chased him. One seldom gets quite this note of physical sadism in Wodehouse, and it does seem to arise from a gentle man's anger against the cruelty of asinine laughs raised at others' expense. He has no hesitation in keeping the pace warm by his own use of the Scottish theme, but he keeps it firmly in his hero's favour. ('If he had not been holding on to the girl, Angus McTavish would have reeled—Scotch-reeled, as no doubt Legs Mortimer would have described it'.) (*Lord Emsworth and Others* J, 161-62.)

The case of Lord Emsworth's head gardener, Angus McAllister, is somewhat more complex. He is a tyrant, and he wins a little of our hostility for his efforts to bully Lord Emsworth; though here he is eclipsed by those real menaces to his lordship's peace of mind, the Ladies Constance, Julia, Hermione, Dora, Charlotte, and Lady Alcester. And it is his racial origins that add much to McAllister's tyranny :

Concerning Glasgow, that great commercial and manufacturing city in the county of Lanarkshire in Scotland, must has been written. So lyrically does the Encyclopaedia Britannica deal with the place that it covers twenty-seven pages before it can tear itself away and go on to Glass, Glastonbury, Glatz and Glauber. The only aspect of it, however, which immediately concerns the present historian is the fact that the citizens it breeds are apt to be grim, dour, persevering, tenacious men; men with red whiskers who know what they want and mean to get it. Such a one was Angus McAllister . . .

. . . Lord Emsworth, wincing, surveyed the man unpleasantly through his pince-nez. Though not often given to theological speculation, he was wondering why Providence, if obliged to make head-gardeners, had found it necessary to make them so Scotch. (*Blandings Castle* J, 140-41, 142.)

But while in this story, 'Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend', Angus is an adversary figure, in its counterpart, 'The Custody of the Pumpkin', he is the hero. He is the one person who is presented as the victim of a really unjust action by Lord Emsworth. After the gardener has been dismissed for refusing to jetison his cousin to whom the Hon. Freddie has become affianced, Beach replies to Lord Emsworth's query as to his address :

'He is in London, residing at number eleven Buxton Crescent'.

'Buxton Crescent? Never heard of it'.

'It is, I fancy, your lordship, a boarding-house or some such establishment off the Cromwell Road. McAllister was accustomed to make it his headquarters whenever he visited the Metropolis on account of its handiness for Kensington Gardens. He liked', said Beach with respectful reproach, for Angus had been a friend of his for nine years, 'to be near the flowers, your lordship' (20).

And when McAllister subsequently saves Emsworth from arrest, his

in unanimity leads Wodehouse to call him 'this splendid Glaswegian', all the more splendid because he finally decides to return not in response to the promise of a doubled salary but after the final plea :

'McAllister . . . Angus . . .', said Lord Emsworth in a low voice, 'come back ! The pumpkin needs you' (35).

Welshmen appear seldom, and are given to religious revivals. Even Ukridge's hard-boiled friend Corky was moved by his experiences at Llundainno :

There is something about a Welsh voice when raised in song that no other voice seems to possess—a creepy, heart-searching quality that gets right into a man's inner consciousness and stirs it up with a pole. (*Ukridge* J, 213.)

The account of the revival is brief and ably done; the theme is one with which historians should be familiar, but this humble source by its descriptive power adds its own witness. On a more crudely comic but still accurate level, the nature and impact of Billy Sunday (extremely thinly disguised as 'Jimmy Mundy') are synthesised when Jeeves uses him to resolve the crisis in 'The Aunt and the Sluggard'.⁶ More recently, a Welshman as unexpected revivalist convert did some entertaining work in *Do Butlers Burgle Banks?* (90-94, 100), but undoubtedly Llewellyn ('Basher') Evans owed a heavy modelling fee to Battling Billson, on whom the Llundainno revival had a similar catastrophic effect.

Where Irishmen, Scotsmen and Welshmen become rather less amusing is when their names are employed to disguise seedy Jewish crooks. This apparently was initially set in motion by certain Jewish money-lenders who sought to disguise their origins in recognition of their Christian clients' prejudices and assumptions. And the wit of Christendom responded with a series of extraordinary tedious variations on the theme in which Wodehouse, to his discredit, joined. Ukridge, in 'The Long Arm of Looney Coote', picks up a crooked partner named Isaac O'Brien; in 'The Exit of Battling Billson', revealed as Izzy Previn, he lisp and waves his hands in the worst traditions of stock Edwardian magazine caricatures at the expense of the Jews. (*Ukridge* J, 220-22, 229, 231.) There might have been some excuse for this—after all, crooks come from everywhere—were it not for the cheap and hackneyed manner in which Previn is presented. Previn was not Wodehouse's creation : the Previns had done duty for every penny-a-liner who wished to aggrandise himself by arousing hostility to persons who lacked the dubious advantages of his own presumably Aryan origins. There is another piece of shop-soiled standard equipment in *Leave it to Psmith*, when the replies to Psmith's advertisement include loan offers from three alleged Scots, all of which he has to discard before reaching the

⁶*My Man Jeeves* (published 1919), Newnes, ch. 9. *Carry On, Jeeves*, J, ch. 5. *World of Jeeves*, 113, 146-47 (ch. 10).

guarded inanities of the Hon. Freddie Threepwood. (*World of Psmith*, 446-47.) Wodehouse, normally far above the magazines whence he learned his craft, at his worst has nothing of the smooth venom apparent in many of his fellow-writers' comments on 'Hebrews'. But by his own standards, it is deplorable.

The portraits of movie moguls in the Hollywood Mulliner stories, on the other hand, seem legitimate, although one wonders why almost all of them have to have conspicuously Jewish names. Warner Brothers could be as unpleasant as Sam Goldwyn and Louis B. Mayer. But in any case the only Jewish thing about them is their names: Jacob Z. Schnellenhamer, Isadore Levitsky, Isadore Fishbein, Ben Zizzbaum, Sam Glutz—and in the case of the most important and most unscrupulous of them, a purist would argue that to be Jewish it should be Shnellenhamer. It is clear that Wodehouse is out to lampoon these men, and that with more ferocity than one normally associates with him, but it is their profession and not their race which targets the attack. Again, several of his stories feature the hilariously sale-hungry Cohen Bros., but apart from their intransigent insistence on sticking the customer with everything in sight, they are harmless and rather likeable:

All the Cohens seemed glad to see him when he arrived at the shop. They clustered about him in a body, as if guessing by instinct that here came one of those big orders. . . . At the end of five minutes, Osbert was mildly surprised to find himself in possession of a smoking-cap, three boxes of poker-chips, some polo sticks, a fishing-rod, a concertina, a ukelele, and a bowl of goldfish.

He clicked his tongue in annoyance. These men seemed to him to have got quite a wrong angle on the situation. They seemed to think that he proposed to make his travels one long round of pleasure. As clearly as he was able, he tried to tell them that in the few broken years that remained to him before a shark or jungle-fever put an end to his sorrows he would have little heart for polo, for poker, or for playing the concertina while watching the gambols of goldfish. They might just as well offer him, he said querulously, a cocked hat or just a sewing-machine.

Instant activity prevailed among the brothers.

'Fetch the gentleman his sewing-machine, Isadore'.

'And, while your getting him the cocked hat, Lou', said Irving, 'ask the customer in the shoe department if he'll be kind enough to step this way. You're in luck', he assured Osbert, 'if you're going travelling in foreign parts, he's the very man to advise you. You've heard of Mr Braddock?' (*World of Mulliner* 185-86.)

It was not the Cohen Bros.'s fault that Osbert Mulliner should have been so dismayed by this news, Bashford Braddock being there to buy spiked shoes to trample on him.

Wodehouse shied away from this sort of thing later in life, notably after his German experiences in World War II had made him a target

for any twopenny patriot wishing to attach anti-Semitism to the miserably thin case against him. In *The Luck of the Bodkins* his very nasty movie mogul, Ivor Llewellyn, is normally referred to as 'Ikey', leaving the suspicion—given the context of Isaac O'Brien alias Previn, and Psmith's pseudo-Scottish correspondents—that he was a Jew trading under a Welsh name. He became a much more sympathetic figure in his reappearances in *Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin* and *Bachelors Anonymous*. He ceased to be addressed as 'Ikey' and his Welshness receives celebration in reminiscence of a Welsh 'school marm' (American exile was telling on Wodehouse, but a Hollywood mogul would have found it told on him too)⁷. Emlyn Williams was a better source at which to seek stereotypes than Edwardian racist 'humour', but one wishes that Wodehouse had found a more honourable way of disposing of the mild anti-Semitism of his literary past.

Blacks in Wodehouse are never far from black-face shows, but he makes a useful contribution in his recording standard comment on them. Here, as elsewhere, it is *Summer Moonshine* which gives us the grim example. Sam Bulpitt, America's Number One process-server, has a vigorous conversational style :

'Nice day'.

'You told me that', Joe reminded him.

'Kind of warm, though. I been hurrying'.

'Oh, yes?'

'Yes, sir. And I'm all in a lather. Sweating like a nigger at election', said the little man, with poetic imagery.

Joe privately considered that he was stressing the physical more than was in the least necessary, but he did not say so. He did not say anything, hoping that silence would discourage. (*Summer Moonshine* P, 100, ch. 11.)

And again, in case we've forgotten it :

'Going to have a swim', said Tubby.

A less-observant man than Adrian would have seen at a glance that he needed one. In spite of the warmth of the afternoon, he had evidently been moving swiftly from point to point, and his condition was highly soluble. In Mr Bulpitt's powerful, if slightly nauseating, phrase, he was sweating like a nigger at election. (162, ch. 18.)

He had told it like it was. At the time of writing—1937—the denial of the franchise to American Blacks received little public emphasis; yet its enforcement by means of lynching was thus proverbially acknowledged in the common speech. People knew what was happening, and the sole purpose of that knowledge was to supply them with cynical similes. The deliberate repetition of the term, and the whole angry context of the book, suggest that for once in a way Wodehouse really

⁷*Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin*, P, 58-59 (ch. 5), 69 (ch. 6), *Bachelors Anonymous*, J, 76.

wanted to say something of the harshest American realities. (His dark mood throughout *Summer Moonshine* went to the length that he leaves his hero still in despair at the end, although the reader knows that happy endings, of a kind, are awaiting him just after the story closes.)

But in *Summer Moonshine* American realities can only occupy a detail. In *Psmith, Journalist* they come into their own. Blacks figure briefly in it. 'Nigger' and 'coon' are terms of abuse with which white gangsters assail one another. A real Black appears during the siege of the tenements, put up to meet Psmith's assault in the light of the superstition that 'Youse can't hoit a coon by soakin' him on de coco'.

'*Solvitur ambulando*', said Psmith softly, turning the stick round in his fingers. 'Comrade Windsor!'

'Hullo!'

'Is it possible to hurt a coloured gentleman by hitting him on the head with a stick?'

'If you hit him hard enough'.

'I knew there was some way out of the difficulty', said Psmith with satisfaction.

And in a moment the musical-comedy role of the Black appears characteristically:

Sure enough, the next moment a woolly head popped through the opening, and a pair of rolling eyes gleamed up at the old Etonian.

'Why, Sam!', said Psmith cordially, 'this is well met. I remember you. Yes, indeed, I do. Wasn't you the feller with the open umbrella: that I met one rainy morning on the Av-en-ue? What, are you coming up? Sam, I hate to do it, but —'

A yell rang out.

'What was that?' asked Billy Windsor over his shoulder.

'Your statement, Comrade Windsor, has been tested and proved correct'. (*World of Psmith* 350.)

The description of Sam is painfully close to the conventions of the day, Psmith is certainly far less rude to him than is Sherlock Holmes to Steve Dixie in 'The Three Gables'; indeed, given that Sam proposes to murder him, his manner is positively civil. It was, after all, a gangster ally, Long Otto, whom Psmith asked in the middle of a gangland confrontation to sing 'Baby's Sock is Now a Blue-bag' (*Ibid*, 374). Sam may be considered to have gotten off lightly. What is rather more chilling is the fact that *Psmith, Journalist* was selling in the 1940s and 1950s in A. and C. Black's reissue with a dust jacket depicting the scene: monocled, smiling, fashionably dressed, Psmith bringing his cane down over the head of a Black projecting out of a trap-door. That the publishers should have seen this as a selling counter says little for them, and less for their customers, if their estimate of British attitudes was a sound one. Whether there was justice in the assumption that a

Wodehouse reader would be racially prejudiced is another matter; apparently it was thought that they would be.

It would be interesting to discover whether the jacket design was used in American editions. Much of the demeaning portraiture of Blacks in Wodehouse has this American relevance: it is American white bourgeois attitudes that are being reflected, whether Wodehouse shares them or not. A Black lift-attendant is made the recipient of Bertie's ghastly purple socks when Jeeves disposes of them, knowing that his solution of the Bassington-Bassington crisis gives him the power to do so: and the Black thanks Bertie in stage Black speech.⁸ (This does not appear to be satire at the expense of the dialect writers: in fact Americans and Angus McAllister are given the dialect treatment, but in both instances the context usually makes it necessary.) But back in England there is more of a suggestion of equal relations. Bertie, in *Thank You, Jeeves*, proposes to have a professional consultation with a Black banjo player (who clearly is Black and not black-face: Jeeves refers to the troupe as 'Negroes' where Bertie says 'nigger minstrels'). More startlingly, Jeeves for strategic reasons in the same novel informs the captain of J. Washburn Stoker's yacht that one of the Blacks is 'a personal friend of mine'.⁹ The phrase is interesting. It is agreeable to reflect that Jeeves, by then Wodehouse's acknowledged master creation, is portrayed as deeming it perfectly natural that he should have a Black as a personal friend. The strategic point could have been achieved by simply saying 'an acquaintance'. (Stoker's captain, presumably an American, might have thought it odd that a white servant would have described a Black as his personal friend, but would doubtless have been ready to put the eccentricity down to Jeeves's being a Limey.) One does not wish to build too much on Jeeves's passing remark, but taken in context with Bulpitt's simile on the nigger at election, there is a note of protest against Black-White inequality in Wodehouse.

However, this is subliminal crusading indeed in comparison with the way Wodehouse went to war twenty years before. The Wodehouse who said his quiet word for Blacks in the 1930s had lived through a writing epoch where crusades had become targets of cynicism and any message had to be very cunningly camouflaged. He may have had an affinity with Frank Richards, who wrote in his third-person autobiography:

There was a pill in the jam. Frank did not forget that his young readers were growing up citizens of a great Commonwealth, which included many dusky millions. By making an Indian boy a comrade on equal terms with English schoolboys, Frank felt that he was . . . helping to rid the youthful mind of colour prejudice. And he has reason to believe that he did some good in this direction. (Charles Hamilton, *The Autobiography of Frank Richards*, 1952, 38.)

⁸'Startling Dressiness of a Lift Attendant', *The Inimitable Jeeves*, p. 100. 'Jeeves and the Chump Cyril', *World of Jeeves*, 95-96.

⁹My text here is from the extract in *Week-End Wodehouse*, 416, 430. Interested readers will find the passages at the commencement of 'Sinister Behaviour of a Yacht-Owner' and at the conclusion of 'Start Smearing, Jeeves', in the original.

Wodehouse in the 1930s would have put his own claims less strenuously. But that he could be a crusader without a mask when the era accepted such crusades was shown in *Psmith, Journalist*, early in the second decade of the century :

‘There’s a name up on the other side of that lamp-post’.

‘Let us wend in that direction. Ah, Pleasant Street? I fancy that the master-mind who chose that name must have had the rudiments of a sense of humour’.

It was indeed a repellent neighbourhood in which they had arrived. The New York slum stands in a class of its own. It is unique. The height of the houses and the narrowness of the streets seem to condense its unpleasantness. All the smells and noises, which are many and varied, are penned up in a sort of canyon, and gain in vehemence from the fact. The masses of dirty clothes hanging from the fire-escapes increase the depression. Nowhere in the city does one realise so fully the disadvantages of a lack of space. New York, being an island, has had no room to spread. It is a town of human sardines. In the poorer quarters the congestion is unbelievable. . . .

It was almost pitch dark on the stairs. They had to feel their way up. Most of the doors were shut but one on the second floor was ajar. Through the opening they had a glimpse of a number of women sitting round on boxes. The floor was covered with little heaps of linen. All the women were sewing. Mike, stumbling in the darkness, almost fell against the door. None of the women looked up at the noise. Time was evidently money in Pleasant Street.

On the fourth floor there was an open door. The room was empty. It was a good representative Pleasant Street back room. The architect in this case had given rein to a passion for originality. He had constructed the room without a window of any sort whatsoever. There was a square opening in the door. Through this, it was to be presumed, the entire stock of air used by the occupants was supposed to come. (*World of Psmith*, 284-85.)

As we noted in the case of the Bulpitt simile, repetition may suggest urgency. This passage, and the plot it introduced, originally appeared in the American (though not the British) edition of *The Prince and Betty*, which otherwise was merely a realistic treatment of a Ruritanian theme. It may have been that Wodehouse allowed Psmith, rather than Mike, to be the vehicle for his own responses :

It was not Psmith’s habit, when he felt deeply on any subject, to exhibit his feelings; and this matter of the tenements had hit him harder than any one who did not know him intimately would have imagined. . . . Psmith was one of those people who are content to accept most of the happenings of life in an airy spirit of tolerance. Life had been more or less of a game with him up till now. . . . But this tenement business was different. Here he had touched the realities. There was something worth fighting for (*Ibid*, 12).

Psmith, Journalist is, from the historian's point of view, an astonishing novel. It is difficult to understand why American historians have not taken it up: the explanation is probably that American historians tend to be a little aloof from foreign comments on the U.S.A. unless the author is a fashionable pundit of the Tocqueville-Bryce degree of celebrity. Wodehouse is assumed to be stage English, and hence not a source whence anyone expects to draw material on real America. Yet this novel, more than any other, tells what the American progressive era in journalism was about. It is a brilliant discussion of muckraking, and its adulteration by the techniques of the Yellow Press. It assigns a variety of motives to the muckrakers, including ambition, whimsy, anger, enthusiasm for the craft of journalism, rebellion against stodge, Western rejection of Eastern corruption, and so on. (For all that has been written about the nature, origins and consequences of Western alienation, very few historians have asked what the effects must have been of alienated Westerners in the Eastern press: but Wodehouse offers admirable suggestions in Billy Windsor, late of Wyoming.)¹⁰ It looks at the growth of gang life in New York, and in fact takes more account of its relationship to politics and its restraints on reform than academic analyses of Progressivism normally do. The portraits of gangsters are faithful to a degree: that of Bat Jarvis, for example, is a very vivid account of Monk Eastman whose name is mentioned several times to underline the vigorous frontiers the book holds with real life.¹¹ It may be doubted whether the cash nexus of muckraking has ever been summed up more succinctly:

Billy Windsor sat down, and lit his pipe.

'What we need most', he said thoughtfully, 'is some big topic. That's the only way to get a paper going. Look at *Everybody's Magazine*. They didn't amount to a row of beans till Lawson started his "Frenzied Finance" articles. Directly they began, the whole country was squealing for copies *Everybody's* put up their price from ten to fifteen cents, and now they lead the field'. (*World of Psmith*, 294.)

In addition, the novel has the advantage that it manages to place the crusade in a milieu whence it is normally rather unnaturally extracted by the business of writing history. The good historian sets his scene in chapter one; but he then in his pursuit of his special topic forgets about the milieu, save where it very demonstrably impinges on the topic. The novel, if it does its work properly, maintains the milieu and charts the numerous and almost invisible ways in which it affects the events with which the main object of analysis is concerned. Historians have worried about advertisers' restraints on muckrakers. Wodehouse, curiously tougher, notes restraints of another kind:

¹⁰Richard Hofstadter's provocative *The Age of Reform* would have been better integrated had he listened to Wodehouse, here. As it is, the Populist and Progressive sections are too little related to one another.

¹¹See Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York*.

‘ . . . our carriers can’t go out without being beaten up by gangs of toughs. Pat Harrigan’s in the hospital now. Just been looking in on him. Pat’s a feller who likes to fight. Rather fight he would than see a ball-game. But this was too much for him. Know what happened? Why, see here, just like this it was. Pat goes out with his cart. Passing through a low-down street on his way up-town he’s held up by a bunch of toughs. He shows fight. Half a dozen of them attend to him, while the rest gets clean away with every copy of the paper there was in the cart. When the cop comes along, there’s Pat in pieces on the ground and nobody in sight but a Dago chewing gum. Cop asks the Dago what’s been doing, and the Dago says he’s only just come round the corner and ha’n’t seen nothing of anybody . . .’ (*Ibid*, 333).

Simultaneously, the book gives an almost eerie revelation of the power and extent of extra-legal organisation, including some very straightforward remarks on the ‘aristocracy of the gangs’ who penetrate very exclusive circles indeed. It is mordant in the extreme on the police hostility to rocking the boat. It is necessarily abrupt in its political references: the plot will only allow for one corrupt politician, and must short-circuit the ultimate social crisis by having a rather thin happy ending for the Pleasant Street tenement-dwellers. But it is arguable that Wodehouse was making his point in the very thinness of his finale. He never disguises it that Pleasant Street is but one of many horrors in New York. He leaves it to the intelligent reader to ask himself whether the crooked Stewart Waring will not rack-rent the inhabitants once the tenements have been improved. And by deliberately contriving to have Psmith wave an invisible wand at the conclusion he does something of the same service that Euripides did with his own gods from the machine: to remind the audience that in reality there would be no god, that Psmith would not exist to cast his mantle of invulnerability around his friends, that Billy Windsor would be left to destruction at the hands of either the gangsters or the police, that *Cosy Moments* would be firmly squelched or forced to abandon muck-raking in defeat, that even if it did succeed in the case of Pleasant Street it left Himalayas upon Alps of slums with proprietors all the more firmly entrenched because of the lessons they would learn from Waring’s downfall. The last point obtains, Psmith or no Psmith. The rest follows naturally. If the god began by making realism palatable, he ended by throwing it at the readers given that, as they closed the book, the milieu and the events were still with them, but without the god to make everything right in the end.¹²

¹²The parent-novel of the Progressive era, Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward 2000-1887; or, if Socialism Comes, owes the strength of its hold on the public to such a quality. It would be very interesting to know if Wodehouse had read it. The probabilities are that at least he encountered it.*