

# Poet of Communications

Owen Dudley Edwards

The branch of Wodehouse's work which compels the attention of the historian more than any other, is his treatment of the communications media. Whatever criticism can be made of his choice of themes of which he had little experience and less contemporary knowledge, it must be acknowledged that he surveyed the media men, women and fashions with a perpetual eye to their nature and changes, their strengths and their phoniness. He also remained as vigorous in his power of parody and satire as he had ever been; and his increasing sophistication lent additional bite to his analyses with the advancing years. Naturally the problem of his place as a historical witness increases with the improvement in his writing. We can go to old Blumenfeld in *The Inimitable Jeeves* for a naturalistic presentation of the New York theatre manager of 1920, specifically because it is almost a line-by-line portrait of Erlanger.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, what is to be said of his much more professional and much more savage *Barmy in Wonderland*, written thirty years later? Certainly Wodehouse, in attacking the exploitation and commercialism of the theatre, was drawing on a lifetime's knowledge, and some of the material presented might have more to do with 1938 than 1948. One could not have the confident reliance on detail with which one turns to the road show passages in *Jill the Reckless*. But as an insight on tendencies, attitudes, practices, responses, in the world of the New York theatre in his lifetime, it deserves the higher accolade we give to the artist whose eye sees deeper into an epoch than a mere reporter can hope to do. Fiction can be a tool for the historian whence he obtains detail not available to him from more sober sources; it may tell him things about the past he cannot obtain from formal documents or even newspaper and magazine sources. But fiction can also supply the perceptions of genius which make sense of an era and its products in a way that the recorder and interpreter of facts can not. It is seldom that these two qualities confront us in one writer. James Joyce is a fine case where they can be found. And on the communications media, so is Wodehouse.

Wodehouse's concern with stereotypes and his success in satirising them has done him some harm in that his parodies are mistaken for efforts to depict reality. He did show a capacity for letting his favourite stereotypes remain a subject for satire long after the reality had van-

<sup>1</sup>*Inimitable Jeeves*, P, 93-97. *World of Jeeves*, 91-94, and see also 394-95, probably wish-fulfilment. On Erlanger, see Wodehouse and Guy Bolton, *Bring on the Girls* (1954).

ished. Usborne makes a useful catalogue of the weaknesses in *The Mating Season* in this respect (*Wodehouse at Work*, 164-65). Yet the same book includes a splendid attack on one stereotype—the music-hall stage Irishman—by a votary of another—the Abbey Theatre Irishman. In the process Wodehouse applies his satire to criticism of the type into which the present essay at times tends to fall:

‘Who wrote this?’ asked Gussie, as he turned the final page, and when I told him that Catsmeat was the author he said he might have guessed it. Throughout his perusal, he had been snorting at intervals, and he snorted again, a good bit louder, as if he were amalgamating about six snorts into one snort.

‘The thing is absolute drivel. It has no dramatic coherence. It lacks motivation and significant form. Who are these two men supposed to be?’

‘I told you. A couple of Irishmen named Pat and Mike.’

‘Well, perhaps you can explain what their social position is, for it is frankly beyond me. Pat, for instance, appears to move in the very highest circles, for he describes himself as dining at Buckingham Palace, and yet his wife takes in lodgers.’

‘I see what you mean. Odd.’

‘Inexplicable. Is it credible that a man of his class would be invited to dinner at Buckingham Palace, especially as he is apparently completely without social *savoir-faire*? At this dinner-party to which he alludes he relates how the Queen asked him if he would like some mulligatawny and he, thinking that there was nothing else coming, had six helpings, with the result that, to quote his words, he spent the rest of the evening sitting in a corner full of soup. And in describing the incident he prefaces his remarks at several points with the expressions “Begorrah” and “faith and begob”. Irishmen don’t talk like that. Have you ever read Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*? Well, get hold of it and study it, and if you can show me a single character in it who says “Faith and begob”, I’ll give you a shilling. Irishmen are poets. They talk about their souls and mist and so on. They say things like “An evening like this, it makes me wish I was back in County Clare, watchin’ the cows in the tall grass”.’

He turned the pages frowningly, his nose wrinkled as if it had detected some unpleasant smell. It brought back to me the old days at Malvern House, Bramley-on-Sea, when I used to take my English essay to be blue-pencilled by the Rev. Aubrey Upjohn (*Mating Season*, P, 87-89).

And when the depression of Catsmeat and Gussie turned the show into a bust, the appearance of Esmond Haddock leads to another reflection of Bertie’s which may be an admission of the limits of the music-hall sketch to the seeker for realism:

He seemed to bring into that sombre hall a note of joy and hope. After all, you felt, there was still happiness in the world. Life, you

told yourself, was not all men in green beards saying 'Faith' and 'Begorrah' (*ibid.*, 195).

If one were to make a list of Wodehouse's works primarily or secondarily concerned with aspects of the communications media and comments thereon, including specific satires on popular fictions, it would have to include the following: the Thomas Hughes essay from *Tales of St Austin's*, *The Swoop* (1909), the Psmith part of *Mike, Psmith, Journalist*, various stories about literary Bohemia in *The Man Upstairs*, *Something Fresh*, *A Damsel in Distress*, *The Coming of Bill* (1920), *Love Among the Chickens*, *Bill the Conqueror*, *Jill the Reckless*, *The Girl on the Boat*, several golf stories but particularly 'The Clicking of Cuthbert', *Leave it to Psmith*, most of the New York Jeeves stories and 'The Metropolitan Touch', 'The Inferiority Complex of Old Sippy', 'Jeeves and the Song of Songs', 'Episode of the Dog McIntosh', 'The Spot of Art', 'The Love that Purifies', *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*, 'Jeeves Makes an Omelette' and all the stories, whether Jeeves or otherwise, involving Rosie M. Banks, all the stories in *Ukridge* because of Corky and his world, *Sam the Sudden*,<sup>2</sup> *The Small Bachelor*, almost all of the Mulliner stories, *Summer Lighting* and *Heavy Weather*, *Big Money* (for the secret service parody), *If I Were You*<sup>3</sup> (being a direct satire on a school of popular romance), 'Lord Emsworth Acts for the Best', 'The Go-Getter', 'Mr Potter Takes a Rest Cure' and of course the 'Mulliners in Hollywood' sequence from *Blandings Castle*, *The Luck of the Bodkins*, *Laughing Gas*, *Summer Moonshine*, *Uncle Dynamite*, *Barmy in Wonderland*, *Cocktail Time*, all the non-fiction volumes, *Bachelors Anonymous*, *The Girl in Blue*—and in making this conservative estimate, as Ukridge would term it, I am ignoring books where communications people appear but where no great light is thrown on their work and professional life-styles, such as *Pearls*, *Girls* and *Monty Bodkin*.

Clearly, almost all I can do here is tell you to get down to it, keep an eye on the date of magazine and book publication, check anything by Wodehouse in his non-fiction works about the stories you investigate or their backgrounds, and you will end up knowing a very great deal about the history of communications in the twentieth century. In addition, I simply offer guidelines from glances at two cycles, the Ukridge and the Mulliner.

*Love Among the Chickens* deserves more than a passing glance as a case-study of a struggling Edwardian author. The first edition adds some useful, if tediously mock-facetious, information on his working conditions under normal (as opposed to Ukridge) circumstances. We find a pretty presentation of youthful vanity, auctorial efforts to grapple with reality and personal inexperience, ambition ('Another uninterrupted half hour, and I have no doubt that I should have com-

<sup>2</sup>The Tilbury connection, lampooning a press and publishing lord, on whom see also *Bill the Conqueror* and *Heavy Weather*.

<sup>3</sup>Perhaps more satiric of theatrical plots than novels, despite the vast number of the latter with such a theme. It was clearly originally intended as a play and could easily be adapted for the theatre.

pleted the framework of a novel which would have placed me in that select band of authors who have no christian names. Another half hour, and posterity would have known me as "Garnet".) (*Love Among the Chickens*, J, 61) and confrontation with a reader. Admittedly, in the last category, Wodehouse was to write—allegedly as non-fiction—the classical anecdote many years later in 'My Gentle Readers':

'This is a great moment for me,' she said. 'I can't tell you how proud I am. I think I have read everything you have ever written. . . . We all love your books. My eldest son reads nothing else. He is in America now.'

This sounded suspicious.

'Joliet?' I said. 'Or Sing-Sing?'

'He is at the Embassy in Washington.'

...

'And he reads my books.'

'Every one of them. And so do my grandsons. The table in their room is piled with them. And when I go home to-night,' she added, 'and tell them that I have actually been sitting at dinner next to Edgar Wallace, I don't know what they will say.'<sup>4</sup>

An interesting characteristic of *Love Among the Chickens* is the survival of Victorian distinctions, especially in the earlier version. Garnet tells us his *The Outsider* is 'Satirical. All about Society—of which I know less than I know about chicken-farming'. The term was vanishing by the time the book was reissued, although the concept, much broadened, lingered on to the 'establishment' of later times. It will be remembered that Wilde had much to say of 'Society' including Lady Bracknell's famous adjuration to her nephew not to speak slightly of it in that only people who couldn't get into it did that.

But the real meat is in the *Ukridge* short stories (the ones published later have little to add, apart from a very engaging account of audience reaction to the first talkies in 'The Come-Back of Battling Billson'). The seedy, Bohemian world of Corky and his friends (always excepting George Tupper in the F.O.) is both socially and realistically removed from Garnet's *Who's Who* entry and genteel if amusing romance. Corky is a freelance journalist whose occupations include: Ukridge's biographer (*Ukridge*, J, 9-10, *et passim*); a magazine short story writer taking 'all mankind for my province', specifically in this instance 'a girl called Liz, who worked in a fried-fish shop in the Ratcliff Highway' (*ibid.*, 104); a correspondent for the paper *Society* (!) covering the dance of the Pen and Ink Club (*ibid.*, 138-39, 145); a writer of 'brightly informative articles' occasionally appearing 'in the weekly papers' and in this instance necessitating a visit to the exhibits in the British Museum as opposed to the Reading Room (*ibid.*, 158); a hopeful stringer of election feature material for *Interesting Bits* (*ibid.*,

<sup>4</sup>In *Louder and Funnier*. My text is from *Week-End Wodehouse*, 40-45. See also *The Girl on the Boat*, J, 257-58: 'I seem at this point to see the reader—a great brute of a fellow with beetling eyebrows and a jaw like the ram of a battleship'.

190); a temporary special correspondent for a newspaper to cover the revivalist crusade of Evan Jones (*ibid.*, 211); and an editorial assistant or possibly ghost-writer to the relict of the late Sir Rupert Lakenheath, K.C.M.G., C.B., M.V.O., for the preparation of his memoirs for publication (*ibid.*, 233). The financial preoccupations of this world, including the pawning of cigarette cases, the rationing of beer, the retention of evening dress and many other details mount up to an invaluable total. The best presentation of the larger circle beyond Ukridge and Corky is in 'Ukridge's Accident Syndicate' (*ibid.*, Ch. 2) where once again Wodehouse most effectively makes the point of the primacy of money for advancement in the theatre and the dishonesty and treachery of the means used to acquire it. And there is an admirable exhibition of the hostility between Grub Street and the snobs and drones of the literary world in 'Ukridge Sees Her Through' :

It was a refined tenor voice that had addressed me, and it was a refined tenor-looking man whom I saw. He was young and fattish, with a Jovian coiffure and pince-nez attached to a black cord.

'Pardon me,' said this young man, 'but are you a member of the Pen and Ink Club?'

...

'No, thank Heaven!' I replied.

And when the young man fawns on him, having learned he is 'Press', which makes him at once a figure to be conciliated professionally while remaining a man to be excluded personally :

'In confidence, I do all the work. I am the club's secretary. My name, by the way, is Charlton Prout. You may know it?'

He eyed me wistfully, and I felt that something ought to be done about him. He was much too sleek, and he had no right to do his hair like that.

'Of course,' I said, 'I have read all your books.'

'Really?'

'"A Shriek in the Night". "Who Killed Jasper Bossom?"—all of them.'

He stiffened austerely.

'You must be confusing me with some other—ah—writer,' he said. 'My work is on somewhat different lines. The reviewers usually describe the sort of thing I do as Pastels in Prose. My best-liked book, I believe, is *Grey Myrtles*. Dunstable's brought it out last year. It was exceedingly well reviewed. And I do a good deal of critical work for the better class of review.' He paused. 'If you think it would interest your readers,' he said, with a deprecating wave of the hand, 'I will send you a photograph. Possibly your editor would like to use it.'

'I bet he would.'

'A photograph somehow seems to—as it were—set off an article of this kind.'

'That,' I replied, cordially, 'is what it doesn't do nothing else but' (*ibid.*, 144-45, 146-47).

The literary class war is much less evident in the Mulliner stories, which Séan Mac Réamoinn has described as Wodehouse's 'quartets'. For one thing, the fiction that almost all the chief protagonists are related to the narrator gives them a common upper-middle class preoccupation. There is none of the social range of the early Blandings work, nor the mock-epic intricacies of the later Jeeves. The Ukridge milieu, as we have noted, is clear enough. The golf stories, as the game demands, cuts from middle to upper class in the financial sense. The Mulliner relatives have varying financial fortunes, but in theory much is open to them. In practice, they show a powerful interest in communications. Passing over such manifestations of this as in George Mulliner's enthusiasm for crossword-puzzles and Roget ('The Truth about George', *World of Mulliner*, Ch. 1), the list runs as follows: Lancelot Mulliner (*vers libre* poet converted to silent film star) ('Came the Dawn' *ibid.*, Ch. 5), Clarence Mulliner (professional photographer) ('The Romance of a Bulb-Squeezer', *ibid.*, Ch. 8), James Rodman (detective-novelist saved by a dog-hairsbreadth from becoming slushy romance novelist) ('Honeysuckle Cottage', *ibid.*, Ch. 9), Ignatius Mulliner (portrait painter) ('The Man who gave up Smoking', *ibid.*, Ch. 11), Cedric Mulliner (literary activity unknown, almost certainly snob, probably resulting from inability to fire his secretary) ('The Story of Cedric', *ibid.*, Ch. 12), Charlotte Mulliner (poetess of Vignettes in Verse, unpaid) ('Unpleasantness at Bludleigh Court', *ibid.*, Ch. 14), Lady Wickham (novelist)<sup>5</sup>, second Lancelot Mulliner (Bohemian artist)<sup>6</sup>, Sacheverell Mulliner (at his best on Proust, the Russian Ballet, Japanese prints, and the Influence of James Joyce on the younger Bloomsbury novelists but ignorant on mangold-wurzels) ('The Voice from the Past', *ibid.*, 23), Egbert Mulliner (reporter on *The Weekly Booklover*) ('The Best Seller', *ibid.*, Ch. 25), Cyril Mulliner (interior decorator passionately devoted to detective stories) ('Strychnine in the Soup', *ibid.*, Ch. 26), Montrose Mulliner (assistant-director, employed by Perfecto-Zizzbaum Motion Picture Corporation of Hollywood) ('Monkey Business', *ibid.*, Ch. 28), Wilmot Mulliner (nodder, then executive in ditto and finally business manager to its star, Hortensia Burwash, Empress of Molten Passion) ('The Nodder' and 'The Juice of an Orange', *ibid.*, Chs. 29-30), Bulstrode Mulliner (involuntary script-writer in ditto) ('The Castaways', *ibid.*, Ch. 32), Mordred Mulliner (poet, initially stark, rhymeless and concerned with corpses and boiled cabbage and subsequently romantic and incendiary) ('The Fiery Wooing of Mordred', *ibid.*, Ch. 35), Brancepeth Mulliner (portrait-painter later motion-picture Disneyesque animal artist) ('Buried Treasure', *ibid.*, Ch. 36)—we do not need to look at the final, disappointing items which appeared after World War II. In addition litera-

<sup>5</sup>'Something Squishy', 'The Awful Gladness of the Mater' and 'The Passing of Ambrose', *ibid.*, Chs. 16-18.

<sup>6</sup>'The Story of Webster' and 'Cats will be Cats', *ibid.*, Chs. 20-21.

ture impinges on one or two others of them: Archibald Mulliner (possibly classifiable in his own right as a communicator given his prowess at imitating a hen laying an egg) was much belaboured by his Aurelia's aunt's belief in the Baconian theory ('The Reverend Wooing of Archibald, *ibid.*, Ch. 10), and Agnes Flack the golfer courted the writer John Gooch and the artist Frederick Pilcher, the story being presented through Gooch's eyes ('Those in Peril on the Tee', *ibid.*, Ch. 15). (This last was clearly an Oldest Member story that got away, and in fact the Oldest Member does tell several Agnes Flack stories later:<sup>7</sup> the unflattering view of the lady taken by Gooch and Pilcher is very much at variance with Mr Mulliner's plaudits for the physical, though not always the mental, charms of his relatives.)

Wodehouse is very much concerned with conflict in these stories, but it is more a conflict between various art-forms, or between artist and public, or between artist and hostile world, than anything like literary class war. We can occasionally see indications of Wodehouse sharing some of Corky's anger at moneyed literary pretentiousness, and the Hollywood stories are largely the moguls versus the rest, but it is the corrupting power of money rather than its actual possession which angers him. He tends to keep the score fairly straight otherwise. Art criticism gets a nasty stab, literally as well as metaphorically, when under withdrawal symptoms from tobacco Ignatius Mulliner first invites the critic Cyprian Rossiter to view his work and then tries to settle accounts with him:

'Ye-e-s,' said Cyprian. 'Myes. Ha! H'm. Hrrmph! The thing has rhythm, undoubted rhythm, and, to an extent, certain inevitable curves. And yet can one conscientiously say that one altogether likes it? One fears one cannot.'

'No?' said Ignatius.

'No,' said Cyprian. He toyed with his left whisker. He seemed to be massaging it for purposes of his own. 'One quite inevitably senses at a glance that the patine lacks vitality.'

'Yes?' said Ignatius.

'Yes,' said Cyprian. He toyed with the whisker again. It was too early to judge whether he was improving it at all. He shut his eyes, opened them, half closed them once more, drew back his head, fiddled with his fingers, and expelled his breath with a hissing sound, as if he were grooming a horse. 'Beyond a question one senses in the patine a lack of vitality. And vitality must never be sacrificed. The artist should use his palette as an orchestra. He should put on his colours as a great conductor uses his instruments. There must be significant form. The colour must have a flatness, a gravity, shall I say an aroma? The figure must be placed on the canvas in a manner not only harmonious but awake. Only so can a picture quite too exquisitely live. And, as regards the patine. . . .'

He broke off. He had more to say about the patine, but he had heard immediately behind him an odd, stealthy, shuffling sound not

<sup>7</sup>All the Flack stories are now in the *Golf Omnibus*.

unlike that made by a leopard of the jungle when stalking its prey. Spinning round, he saw Ignatius Mulliner advancing upon him. The artist's lips were curled back over his teeth in a hideous set smile. His eyes glittered. And poised in his right hand he held a Damascus dagger, which, Cyprian noticed, was richly inlaid.

An art-critic who makes a habit going round the studios of Chelsea and speaking his mind to men who are finishing their Academy pictures gets in the way of thinking swiftly . . . (*World of Mulliner*, 157-58).

Does Wodehouse date? Is he dated at the point of writing? It was a point which won much of Orwell's attention. Certainly, Cyprian owed a little to the anti-aesthete cartoons of George Du Maurier in *Punch* of the 1880s.<sup>8</sup> Yet the material here has a lot to say of fashions of art-criticism of the 1920s. And one has a sneaking suspicion one has encountered the style somewhere *very* recently.

Yet in Egbert Mulliner Wodehouse drew a very sympathetic portrait of the harrassed book-magazine interviewer :

For six months, week in and week out, Egbert Mulliner had been listening to female novelists talking about Art and their Ideals. He had seen them in cosy corners in their boudoirs, had watched them being kind to dogs and happiest when among their flowers. And one morning the proprietor of *The Booklover*, finding the young man sitting at his desk with little flecks of foam about his mouth and muttering over and over again in a dull, toneless voice the words, 'Aurelia McGoggin, she draws her inspiration from the scent of white lilies!' had taken him straight off to a specialist (*ibid.*, 384).

When Egbert discovers that his beloved is a female novelist and, worse, she proves a totally unexpected success, brass-rags are ultimately severed, but Professionalism laughs at private tragedies :

He fancied that for an instant her eyes had lit up at the sight of him, but he preserved the formal detachment of a stranger.

'Good afternoon, Miss Pembury,' he said, 'I represent *The Weekly Booklover*. I understand that my editor has been in communication with you and that you have kindly consented to tell us a few things which may interest our readers regarding your art and aims.'

She bit her lip.

'Will you take a seat, Mr — ?'

'Mulliner,' said Egbert.

'Mr Mulliner,' said Evangeline. 'Do sit down. Yes, I shall be glad to tell you anything you wish.'

Egbert sat down.

'Are you fond of dogs, Miss Pembury?' he asked.

'I adore them,' said Evangeline.

'I should like, a little later, if I may,' said Egbert, 'to secure a

<sup>8</sup>Actually mentioned in the preceding story, *ibid.*, 135.



snapshot of you being kind to a dog. Our readers appreciate these human touches, you understand.'

'Oh, quite,' said Evangeline. 'I will send out for a dog. I love dogs—and flowers.'

'You are happiest among your flowers, no doubt?' [She lives in a Sloane Street flat.]

'On the whole, yes.'

'You sometimes think they are the souls of little children who have died in their innocence?'

'Frequently.'

'And now,' said Egbert, licking the tip of his pencil, 'perhaps you would tell me something about your ideals. How are the ideals?'

Evangeline hesitated.

'Oh, they're fine,' she said.

'The novel,' said Egbert, 'has been described as among this age's greatest instruments for uplift. How do you check up on *that*?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Of course, there are novels and novels.'

'Oh, yes.'

'Are you contemplating a successor to *Parted Ways*?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Would it be indiscreet, Miss Pembury, to inquire to what extent it has progressed?'

'Oh, Egbert!' said Evangeline (*ibid.*, 393-94).

And all ends well, with Evangeline's writing-block, evident in the foregoing, disposed of by :

'Before I saw the light, I, too, used to write stearine bilge just like *Parted Ways*. When we are married, I shall say to you, if I remember the book of words correctly, "With all my worldly goods I thee endow." They will include three novels I was never able to kid a publisher into printing, and at least twenty short stories no editor would accept. I give them to you freely. You can have the first of the novels to-night, and we will sit back and watch Mainprice and Peabody sell half a million copies' (*ibid.*, 396).

Here the problem of dating is also present. The conventions for these sort of interviews and interests were established well before the First World War. The young Wodehouse would have seen his own juvenilia in the *Strand* being elbowed into the back pages by plentifully illustrated conversations with eminent writers many of whom displayed canine friends on the slightest provocation. But the degree of *kitsch* brought into the thing by the 1920s and the female novelist took the existing medium of the interview, sometimes useful, sometimes superficial, and trivialised it beyond any but Wodehousian description. Some of the finest touches in the story are perfect syntheses of the best-selling literary scene in the decade: Stultitia Bodwin's *Offal* and the newspaper discussion arranged as part of its publicity—'The Growing

Menace of the Sex Motive in Fiction: Is there to be no Limit?'; Evangeline's early public statements that her art was rhythmical rather than architectural, and her inclinations to the surrealist school—this from a boy-meets-girl-quarrels-makes-it-up novelist; her lecture to the East Dulwich Daughters of Minerva Literary and Progress Club on 'Some Tendencies of Modern Fiction'; her address to the Amalgamated Mothers of Manchester on 'The Novel: Should it Teach?' So also is the volatile response of the public in the decade which made fad and fashion its hallmark:

Up to the very moment of the Great Switch, sex had been the one safe card. Publishers' lists were congested with scarlet tales of Men Who Did and Women Who Shouldn't Have Done But Who Took a Pop At It. And now the bottom dropped out of the market without a word of warning and practically the only way readers could gratify their new-born taste for the pure and simple was by fighting for copies of *Parted Ways* (*ibid.*, 388).

(As for the literary societies, Wodehouse had already done his work on *them* by portraying the miseries of Vladimir Brusiloff at his eighty-second suburban literary reception in Britain when he simultaneously rescued himself and made possible the clicking of Cuthbert.)

Wodehouse's own movement from one side of the literary battleground to another is even more impressively encapsulated in the aesthetic and amorous Odyssey of Clarence Mulliner, the studio-photographer. Here Clarence is at first embattled against the reduction of camera-artists to attendants on hideous faces covering wealthy wallets; then, when he becomes the liberator in this struggle, he finds himself equally revolted by the artificiality of Society beauty. He ends by retiring from practice and marrying the plain daughter of the repulsive Mayor of Tooting East, whom he had initially driven out of his studio with the sharp end of a photographic tripod; but in an exceptionally ironic coda:

The wedding, which took place some six weeks later, was attended by almost everybody of any note in Society or on the Stage, and was the first occasion on which a bride and bridegroom had ever walked out of church beneath an arch of crossed tripods (*ibid.*, 115).

The ironies are multiple here. Clarence remains 'Mulliner the Liberator', and although his retirement and marriage virtually leave him having travelled full circle on photographic aesthetics, he retains his great reputation. The idea of a disillusioned Messiah who remains a Messiah in reputation had been much used in later nineteenth-century French and English literature, but in more general terms it was highly characteristic of the 1920s. Its parallel, the conservative who achieves a posthumous reputation as a radical, is a major thesis of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, in some respects the cultural theme-song of the decade. The story may also reflect Wodehouse's own

doubts about the effectiveness of crusade and reform. In American terms this would give him a kinship with Lincoln Steffens, who made a similar progress from muckraking to self-doubt.<sup>9</sup> Steffens's embrace of totalitarianism was in its way as much of an escape as Wodehouse's into farce. On this level, the story is symbolic of the mind of the decade, as so many others of the Mulliner stories are revolutionary of its mood. On the other hand, Wodehouse's continuing debt to his Victorian heritage and Edwardian apprenticeship are also evident in the execution. We should not allow ourselves to miss the degree to which the 1920s culture was in many ways a continuum from the pre-war situation. The pace grew faster; dramatic revolutions in taste often proved mere shop-window alteration; many patterns of artistry made nothing more than logical advances. Wodehouse himself, keeping the detective and thriller literature in mind as guidelines for order and movement, was naturally fixed in a somewhat conservative mould, both of these art-forms being notoriously conservative. Clarence's adventures at one point become straight pastiche of the Edwardian thriller, during which the Mayor of Tooting East reveals that a homely countenance not only hides a paternal heart but also, at the point where he kidnaps Clarence and feeds him on bread and water, a nice malicious sense of humour :

At half-past seven precisely the door opened again and the Mayor reappeared, followed by a butler bearing on a silver salver a glass of water and a small slice of bread. Pride urged Clarence to reject the refreshment, but hunger overcame pride. He swallowed the bread which the butler offered him in small bits in a spoon, and drank the water.

'At what hour would the gentleman desire breakfast, sir?' asked the butler.

'Now,' said Clarence, for his appetite, always healthy, seemed to have been sharpened by the trials which he had undergone.

'Let us say nine o'clock,' suggested the Mayor. 'Put aside another slice of that bread, Meadows. And no doubt Mr Mulliner would enjoy a glass of this excellent water' (*World of Mulliner*, 111).

Naturally, Wodehouse's lampoons on detective and thriller fiction are omnipresent in these stories. 'The Smile that Wins', not formally concerned with communications, is a consistent series of deflations of the detective story, with Adrian Mulliner's hideous smile (employed by him as a specific for dyspepsia) eliciting extraordinary confessions and revelations at every turn. The conclusion is suitably fitting for Wodehouse, who once suggested that the ideal murderers in a detective story would be so diabolically clever that they would never enter its text at all, and would be the publishers who only appear on the title-page :

The service was conducted by the Very Reverend the Dean of Bittlesham. . . .

All through the ceremony [Adrian] had been grave, as befitted a

<sup>9</sup>His *Autobiography* illustrates this perfectly.

man at the most serious point of his career. But now, fizzing as if with some spiritual yeast, he clasped her in his arms and over her shoulder his face broke into a quick smile.

He found himself looking into the eyes of the Dean of Bittlesham. A moment later he felt a tap on his arm.

'Might I have a word with you in private, Mr Mulliner?' said the Dean in a low voice (*World of Mulliner*, 295).

In parentheses it may be remarked that aristocratic indigence is a frequent theme in Wodehouse—*Big Money*, *Something Fishy*, *Summer Moonshine*, *Uneasy Money*, *Spring Fever*. In 'The Smile That Wins' this is taken a stage further:

'I venture to assert that, if you took a pin and jabbed it down anywhere in the pages of *Debrett's Peerage*, you would find it piercing the name of someone who was going about the place with a conscience as tender as a sunburned neck' (*ibid.*, 281).

No doubt we shall have to await the confirmation of the social scientists on this thesis, but meanwhile it is worth bearing in mind. The story is farcical, but the theme is as old as Trollope in its present form.<sup>10</sup> Wodehouse's own smile may contrast with Trollope's Olympian anger, but 'The Smile That Wins' portrays *hauteur* and corruption in the same union, however hilariously.

One of the finest revelations of the make-up of the communications people is the similes which their professions lead the various Mulliners and their associates to make. 'Those in Peril on the Tee' gives us John Gooch, confronted by a rival suitor and the legacy of his own artistic achievement:

Now John Gooch, though, of course, they had exchanged a word from time to time, was in no sense an intimate of Sidney McMurdo. It was consequently a surprise to him when one night, as he sat polishing up the rough draft of a detective story—for his was the talent that found expression largely in blood, shots in the night, and millionaires who are found murdered in locked rooms with no possible means of access except a window forty feet above the ground—the vast bulk of McMurdo lumbered across his threshold and deposited itself into a chair.

The chair creaked. Gooch stared. McMurdo groaned.

'Are you ill?' said John Gooch.

'Ha!' said Sidney McMurdo.

He had been sitting with his face buried in his hands, but now he looked up; and there was a red glare in his eyes which sent a thrill of horror through John Gooch. The visitor reminded him of the Human Gorilla in his novel, *The Mystery of the Severed Ear*.

'For two pins,' said Sidney McMurdo, displaying a more mercenary spirit than the Human Gorilla, who had required no cash pay-

<sup>10</sup>Not only *The Way We Live Now* but onward from *The Three Clerks*.

ment for his crimes, 'I would tear you into shreds' (*World of Mulliner*, 212-13).

Of course the splendour of this passage is something which Myles na gCopaleen alias Flann O'Brien brought to a fine art in Ireland, the business of cliché-fracturing.<sup>11</sup> Wodehouse, in fact, is Wilde's greatest disciple in this respect, although he pursues it to the level of atomic explosion where Wilde is ready to remain with more conventional detonation. Perhaps this supplies one of the main reasons for Wodehouse's Irish following, given its consistent theme of language-play, so constant a feature of Irish writing. There is a Chinese-box quality in Wodehouse, in which the cliché-fracturing and the parody are but smaller and larger variants of the same activity. The collision of clichés and stock situations is a refinement of this, and in the Mulliner sequence it is the dialogue introducing the detective-story-addict Cyril Mulliner which epitomises the detective-story cliché by making a dénouement dependent on a very old stock joke. This in its turn satirises the conventional rule that the solution should turn on a fact so universally known as to be overlooked, and no better instance of such a fact could be found than a music-hall chestnut:

'What is it, old man?' he asked. 'Lost a friend?'

'Worse,' said Draught Stout. 'A mystery novel. Got half-way through it on the journey down here, and left it in the train.'

'My nephew Cyril, the interior decorator,' said Mr Mulliner, 'once did the very same thing. These mental lapses are not infrequent.'

'And now,' proceeded the Draught Stout, 'I'm going to have a sleepless night, wondering who poisoned Sir Geoffrey Tuttle, Bart.'

'The Bart. was poisoned, was he?'

'You never said a truer word. Personally, I think it was the Vicar who did him in. He was known to be interested in strange poisons.'

Mr Mulliner smiled indulgently.

'It was not the Vicar,' he said, 'I happen to have read *The Murglow Manor Mystery*. The guilty man was the plumber.'

'What plumber?'

'The one who comes in chapter two to mend the shower-bath. Sir Geoffrey had wronged his aunt in the year '96, so he fastened a snake in the nozzle of the shower-bath with glue; and when Sir Geoffrey turned on the steam the hot water melted the glue. This released the snake, which dropped through one of the holes, bit the Baronet in the leg, and disappeared down the waste-pipe.'

'But that can't be right,' said the Draught Stout. 'Between chapter two and the murder there was an interval of several days.'

'The plumber forgot his snake and had to go back for it,' explained Mr Mulliner. 'I trust that this revelation will prove sedative' (*ibid.*, 397).

The story 'Strychnine in the Soup' itself wisely avoids any effort to parody the detective-story form. 'The Smile That Wins', and indeed

<sup>11</sup>See B. O'Nolan, *The Best of Myles*.

several of the Jeeves stories, have accomplished that admirably. The theft in the story is in fact wrongly solved and the hero triumphs by unjustly accusing his rival of having stolen the mystery novel *Strychnine in the Soup* from the lady whom he wishes to make his mother-in-law; he compounds those crimes by a third, blackmail by preventing her from discovering its outcome. There is much parody elsewhere, notably in the treatment of big-game hunters and explorers—often heavies in the Mulliner stories. At one point reference is made to Lady Bassett's experience of Iguanodons. Wodehouse's early venture into the history of Florence Craye appeared in the *Strand* when Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* was being serialised there, accompanied by striking drawings of the prehistoric Iguanodons.<sup>12</sup> It is seldom that he includes quite so covert a joke: there is a great charm in the thought of Lady Bassett exploring the Lost World, perhaps even in the company of Professor Challenger, who would certainly have found her a good deal less easy to dominate than his former companions.

But the haunting references to the much-stolen detective novel are classic. Cyril Mulliner's discovery that he had left his copy in the train induces despair:

At the moment when the train reached Barkley Regis station, Cyril had just got to the bit where Detective Inspector Mould looks through the half-open cellar door and, drawing in his breath with a sharp, hissing sound, recoils in horror. . . .

Cyril did not care to think of the night that lay before him. Already his brain was lashing itself from side to side like a wounded snake as it sought for some explanation of Inspector Mould's strange behaviour. Horatio Slingsby was an author who could be relied on to keep faith with his public. He was not the sort of man to fob the reader off in the next chapter with the statement that what had made Inspector Mould look horrified was the fact that he had suddenly remembered that he had forgotten all about the letter his wife had given him to post. If looking through cellar doors disturbed a Slingsby detective, it was because a dismembered corpse lay there, or at least a severed hand (*ibid.*, 405).

It may be doubted whether the mystery novel has even been subjected to a more brutal piece of naturalistic criticism.

<sup>12</sup>*Strand*, XLIV. 7, full-page plate of gambolling young Iguanadons.