

An Eden With No Snake in It:
Pure Comedy and Chaste Camp in the English Novel

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

In this dissertation I use an old and unfashionable form of literary criticism, close reading, to offer a new and unfashionable account of the literary subgenre called camp. Drawing on the work of, among many others, Susan Sontag, Rita Felski, and Peter Lamarque, I argue that P.G. Wodehouse, E.F. Benson, and Angela Thirkell wrote a type of pure comedy I call chaste camp. Chaste camp is a strange beast. On the one hand it is a sort of children's literature written for and about adults; on the other hand it rises to a level of literary merit that children's books, even the best of them, cannot hope to reach.

Since 1964, the year in which Sontag's famous essay "Notes on 'Camp' " was first published, literary camp has been defined as exclusively queer, and therefore unchaste and entirely grown-up, and in the process the purity of its comedy—and most of its comedy, as well—has been ignored. I trace these two unfortunate developments to the rise of critique, a method of literary criticism defined by its cynicism about literature's relationship to the world outside of art. A novel, play, or poem that is not interrogating the status quo is, according to practitioners of critique, doomed to sustain it.

Reading Wodehouse, Benson, and Thirkell closely, rather than subjecting them to critique, shows that chaste camp offers a superior, artificial and therefore very durable alternative to the status quo—as most good literature does. To insist that literature adjust itself to the ever-changing aims of critique, and fit itself into the real world, is to demand that it be something unliterary. The wonderful paradox of pure comedy, of which chaste camp is perhaps the preeminent type,

is that its artificiality makes it timeless. It is in the world, but emphatically not of the world.

These, then, are my conclusions—that Wodehouse, Benson, Thirkell, and Evelyn Waugh wrote camp; that camp is a type of comedy; that there is a kind of camp that has gone unnamed, whose name is chaste camp; that chaste camp is a kind of pure comedy; finally, that close reading in combination with the judicious use of literary scholarship reveals these and other truths that critique, in its slavish devotion to novelty and fashion, keeps hidden.

Dedication

To Debra, who made it possible.

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Introduction

The great task of the literary critic is I think to celebrate literature as literature, to say why it is unique and good and therefore worth reading. Literature is not an occasion for criticism. Criticism is an occasion for better equipping the reader to appreciate good literature. Appreciation, as I understand it, is enjoyment plus a certain kind of attentiveness, a way of observing *how* the writer achieves the best, rarest, and most remarkable of his literary effects.

My method, therefore, is celebratory. I am conducting what Glen Cavaliero calls a “celebratory investigation” into my subject: camp, the “playful, anti-serious” subgenre of comic literature (Cavaliero ix; *Sontag Reader* 116). The “whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious,” for camp is “the sensibility of failed seriousness” (*Sontag Reader* 115). This fact has been lost in the academic study of camp. I mean to find it again, to reclaim camp for comedy.

I will do this by showing that P.G. Wodehouse’s novels, along with some of those of E.F. Benson and Angela Thirkell, belong to a type of pure comedy I call *chaste camp*. This is a kind of camp that until now has gone unnamed. I will also make the case that Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* is a badly distorted reflection of chaste camp. My chapter on Waugh is comparative; it allows me to shine a slightly different light on my subject, by comparing Waugh’s version of camp to that of Wodehouse, Benson, and Thirkell. It is surprising that *Brideshead Revisited* should be camp, but not chaste. Waugh’s adoration of Wodehouse suggests that he, too, would write chaste camp. The catch is, Waugh did not know that he was writing campily. He wrote seriously—

Brideshead Revisited is “his first major effort not to be funny, to be other than a comic novelist”—and his seriousness failed so spectacularly as to become the sort of unintentional comedy that Sontag calls “naïve, or pure, Camp” (Wykes 168; *Sontag Reader* 112). This is a “seriousness that fails” (*Sontag Reader* 112). *Failed seriousness* perfectly describes critique, the sort of criticism that fills English departments today as does muck a swamp. To the extent that critique requires of its writers and readers what Rita Felski calls “a pervasive cynicism and negativity,” as well as the sort of puffed-upness that ignores or disparages the sheer pleasure of reading a good story well told, critique fails (*Limits* 12). It fails by shrinking literature to “*againstness*” and ignoring all “other salient desires, motives, agendas that drive acts of reading” (*Limits* 17).

To emphasize “*the ‘de’ prefix,*” meaning the power of literature “*to demystify, destabilize, denaturalize*) at the expense of the “*re” prefix: its ability to recontextualize, reconfigure, or recharge perception*”, is to “*shortchange the significance of art*” (*Limits* 17). Works of art

do not only subvert but also convert; they do not only inform but also transform—a transformation that is not just a matter of intellectual readjustment but one of affective realignment as well (a shift of mood, a sharpened sensation, an unexpected surge of affinity or disorientation). (*Limits* 17)

The laughter that comes from unaffected pleasure is the best of all unexpected surges of affinity. It is the perfect blend of thought and feeling, the great expression of agreement and affection. Pure laughter is a purely literary response, and so it is the great enemy of critique. Critique demands that

literature leave the literary realm and enter real life, that drab, dismal place. If it is not “ ‘interrogating’ the status quo,” it is “doomed to sustain it” (*Limits* 17).

Well, camp does not interrogate—it entertains and amuses from the safety of its various heavenly places. It offers a superior, artificial and therefore very durable alternative to the status quo, by simply ignoring it. To insist that literature adjust itself to the ever-changing aims of critique is to demand that it be something unliterary. The wonderful paradox of pure comedy, of which camp is a type, is that its artificiality makes it timeless. It is in the world, but not of the world.

Critics who question the value of critique seem surprised and disappointed that “literary criticism alone is not sufficient to effect change” political and social, that “literature [and] its criticism cannot explain our oppression or provide the keys to our liberation” (Best and Marcus 3). But literature, especially comedy, especially pure comedy, *does* liberate us. Evelyn Waugh, praising P.G. Wodehouse in a BBC broadcast of 1961, says as much. Wodehouse’s “idyllic world,” said Waugh, “can never stale. He will continue to release future generations from captivity that may be more irksome than our own. He has made a world for us to live in and delight in” (*Essays, Articles, and Reviews* 561).

Unlike Waugh I will speak not in terms of literary worlds, much less the strange things David Herman calls “storyworlds,” but rather purely literary effects (Herman 16). How do Wodehouse, Benson, and Thirkell use traditional literary tools of plot, character, dialogue, and narration to achieve pure comedy and chaste camp? How exactly do they put comedy first, without sacrificing literary quality? This is an extremely difficult thing to do. Wodehouse I think executes it

best of all, with Benson not far behind him, and Thirkell a close third. Waugh's attempts fail badly; he is so distant a fourth as to be just a speck on the horizon.

For instance: Wodehouse once said he "would rather have written *Oklahoma!* than *Hamlet*" (*Over Seventy* 169). It is extraordinary to find in a writer of immense talent so pure a devotion to pure comedy, which is the sort of comedy that promotes the reader's pleasure and laughter rather than the writer's glory. While reading Wodehouse, even when he is at his most literarily brilliant, one never feels excluded. Wodehouse's stories and novels are inviting and accommodating; they draw one in, and make one feel welcome. And in a very happy paradox, it is their modesty that allows them to be at once so funny and so inviting, and therefore so durable in their appeal.

My method is modest, too. I will be content to stay on the surface of what I am reading, if only because that is where the comedy is. Comedy, at least of the laugh-making variety—this is the kind that Wodehouse, Benson, and Thirkell specialize in—is right in front of the reader; to reach it does not require heavy equipment and an excavation crew. Why make the reader work for his laughter? That is the opposite of pleasurable comedy.

Though I will stay on the surface, showing how the soufflé is made without taking a spade to it, I will not do the sort of surface reading Best and Marcus like best. I agree that it is silly to turn "to literature for models of how to overcome constraint, or for a right way to live under capital, or to register the difference between our critical freedom and the limits placed on others," but I will not be a neutral observer of the wonders of literature (Best and Marcus 19). If I am

uninterested “in how to register the ways that constraints structure existence as much as breaking free of them does,” it is only because chaste camp and pure comedy offer the sort of freedom that literature is supposed to lack (Best and Marcus 19). This is a modest freedom, but wonderful. It is the freedom of laughter for laughter’s sake, of pleasure that is good in itself.

In his *New Yorker* essay on Waugh’s BBC address, Brad Leithauser puts it pretty well:

Waugh wasn’t promising what so many blurbists promise for other novelists: life-changing visions, staggering epiphanies, insights to free you from the nightmare of your existence. Waugh’s artful “irksome” goes to the nub. Wodehouse is an anodyne to annoyances. He’s a tonic for those suffering from bearable but burdensome loads of boredom, from jadedness of outlook and dinginess of soul. (Leithauser)

The critiquer is less modest than the least modest blurber. Critique is an engine of arrogance, of overreaching. Critique demands the impossible of literature, and when literature fails to meet its standard, it condemns it. Critique insists that criticism do this same hopeless thing, but pretends it succeeds.

My version of surface reading is much less fancy than Felski’s, and unlike Best and Marcus’s, it is non-noncommittal. Though the literature I am interested in is of the tonic sort, it is still worth celebrating. Critiquers may “dismiss surface reading as obvious, but find themselves unable to sustain the slow pace, receptiveness, and fixed attention it requires,” at least they render some sort of judgment where judgment is due (Best and Marcus 19). Like “many readers,” whoever *they* are, I “find that to refuse to celebrate or condemn their objects of

study is, in practice, both difficult and discomfiting” (Best and Marcus 19). If critique condemns—and boy, does it ever—at least it takes a stand. It says, in effect, literature matters only because it fails, or because it succeeds in being something it is not, an instrument of social or political change, or some form of againstness.

The question facing critics today I think is not so much: what is our object of study? It is: what is our object of concern? The critic’s job is not only to tell us something we do not know already, but to remind us why we care to know it in the first place. We are being told something about something; if we do not care about the second something, we will not care about the first one, either.

Critique has done its best to turn the study of literature into the study of anything and everything but literature. Fine. To fight such extremism with another form of extremism, to insist as Felski does that instead of “the inevitable question: ‘But what about power?’ ” it is “time to start asking different questions: ‘But what about love?’ Or: ‘Where is your theory of attachment?’ ” is I think to take the wrong tack (*Limits* 17).

Rather than make a very impressive attempt to say why literature matters, or to say, as Felski does, what the uses of literature are, why not choose the modest road, and allow literature to prove its own worth? We read a funny book, and laugh. Laughter is a way of saying: “This is valuable in itself.” It is an instant acknowledgement of value, “a response *to* something,” in the words of Roger Scruton, “which also involves a judgment *of* that thing” (*Culture Counts* 30). The

“habit of laughing at things is not detachable from the habit of judging things to be worthy of laughter” (*Culture Counts* 7).

No argument about the value of literature, however brilliant, is half as effective as standing back and letting a funny book make someone laugh. The critic’s job then becomes explaining how the reader’s laughter, which is the principal effect of a funny book, is achieved, without spoiling the joke.

To think of literature as an object of study rather than an object of concern is to see criticism as promoting understanding at the expense of appreciation. And so the best art becomes the art most difficult to understand, because that is the art that allows the literary critic to strut his stuff, to show off his critical acumen. Criticism becomes an exercise in interpretation. Rather than starting from the common ground of shared laughter or pleasure, and gently showing how that effect is achieved, the critic instead begins from a place of privilege, a great height from which he talks down to his reader, standing far below.

There is nothing new in the problem of interpretation, or rather the problems it causes. In 1966, two years after “Notes on ‘Camp’ ” was first published, Sontag published an essay called “Against Interpretation,” in which she argued that criticism ought to “serve the work of art, not usurp its place” (*Sontag Reader* 102). This is the sort of modest approach that is still lacking in criticism, fifty years after Sontag defended it so ably. Critics are still delving into novels, poems, and plays, mining them for what they call *content*, breaking through the surface, which is just an impediment to their discovery of the ore within, and the subsequent extraction of whatever they decide is there.

Surface reading “dissolves considerations of content into those of form,” or supplies “a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art,” and thereby “reveal[s] the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it” (*Sontag Reader* 103). Interpretation “takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there,” but

What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more.

Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.

The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*. (*Sontag Reader* 104)

This is what I will be doing: saying that *what* Wodehouse, Benson, Thirkell, and Waugh wrote is camp, and showing *how* it is camp.

Art is not a delivery system for content. To say as much is to say that art is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, with no intrinsic value. The task of criticism is not to crack open the novel, play, or poem like a nut, to get at the meat inside. What is on the surface is not a sort of shell, a way of protecting what is inside, a thing meant to be removed and discarded. But this, for the critiquer, is the work of criticism—and it is always work, and never play. It is a joyless, humorless, charmless, inhumane and all but inhuman job, that could hardly be less literary.

But if art is one of those “activities that we engage in for their own sake,” one of the activities that “are sufficient in themselves,” then criticism is not work but “[p]lay” (*Culture Counts* 46). And if work is play, whose “association with childhood reminds us of the essential innocence and exhilaration that attends such ‘disinterested’ activities,” then, Scruton reminds us, “the worker is fulfilled in his work, regardless of what results from it—then work ceases to be drudgery, and becomes instead ‘the restoration of man to himself.’ Those last words are Marx’s, and contain the core of his theory of ‘unalienated labour’—a theory which derives from Kant, via Schiller and Hegel” (*Modern Culture* 36).

Critique, like the thing Sontag calls interpretation, alienates criticism from literature. But what, exactly, is their relationship? How does the alienated labor of criticism become the sort of pleasurable work, good in itself, that amounts to play? Must criticism be a “‘literary performance,’” as Sontag calls it (*Camp Grounds* 174)?

Well, if we join Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen in seeing literature as an institution or practice, something that is “defined by a set of *constitutive rules*, which not only regulate the practice but also create the possibility for identifying the objects or actions they regulate,” then our “atomistic” approach to literature, our attempt to understand and describe “the properties and relationships of the individual text (to authors, readers and other texts),” is replaced by an “institutional” approach, “which concentrates on describing the conventions that define the...values which a literary work possesses” (Olsen 196).

In other words, the critic is no longer outside of literature, looking in. Instead, he is a vital part of the practice or institution of literature. If the “literary work is an institutional fact,” it is “also an intentional fact,” and the conventions of an institution “necessarily contain references to the practitioners whose behaviour they regulate and whose role they define” (Olsen 197). The literary work is therefore “logically tied to the author/reader relationship and can only be understood as a transaction between these two institutional roles. The identity of the work is logically dependent on its role in the practice, and this identity therefore necessarily involves reference to authorial intention and reader-response” (Olsen 197).

In other words, the critic “is simply a reader who has more experience and heightened perceptiveness than ‘the common reader’ ” (Lamarque 135). But “if there were no common readers there would be no literary critics and ultimately no literary work,” for “the institution of literature demands a community of readers with a shared interest in the values that literature can afford” (Lamarque 136).

Rather than alienate himself from literature and the common reader, the critic ought to see himself as the vital link between the two. His job is not to define a work of literature in an atomistic way, through its textual features, its relationship to the outside world, or anything else that is “identifiable without reference to the conventions of the literary practice” (Olsen 197). No, the critic’s task is to appreciate literature in such a way that the common reader better appreciates it, too. For the “features of a literary work that define it as a literary work can be recognized only in appreciation of a work. This means that the

proper object of discussion” for the critic “is the act of appreciation itself: the conventions and concepts that define the mode of apprehension necessary to...appreciate a literary work” (Olsen 197).

I appreciate the novels of Wodehouse, Benson, and Thirkell by showing how they achieve their perfect, glorious lightness without being mere fluff. The extraordinary thing about these writers is not just the purity of their comedy, the chasteness of their camp, but its durability. As Waugh put it, “[e]xcept for political claptrap few forms of writing are as ephemeral as comedy” (*Essays, Articles, and Reviews* 561). And so comedy that lasts is an extraordinary thing, particularly if it is pure comedy, untethered to a time or place made familiar to us by history.

As Cavaliero reminds us, great comic writers “from Sterne to John Cowper Powys have made comedy out of the veridical pretensions of the literary mode they at the same time master and embrace” (Cavaliero 4). There is something one-of-a-kind about great literary comedy, that critics have not properly appreciated: an aesthetic property “which does not involve reference to independently identifiable textual features,” but is instead the result of the strange alchemy by which literature becomes pure comedy, and yet remains literary (Olsen 198). In my own modest way, without weaving any intellectual or theoretical web, I am attempting to say *that* this is the case, and *how* it is the case.

1. Camp and the Canon

The canon of secular Western literature died young. Born in “the last quarter of the twentieth century,” its death knells could be heard as early as 1994 (*Canon and Creativity* 1). That was the year Harold Bloom published a five hundred and sixty-page *bestseller*, believe it or not, called *The Western Canon*, whose first and last chapters are entitled, respectively, “An Elegy for the Canon” and “An Elegaic Conclusion.”

Who killed the canon? No Professor Moriarty did it in; just a cadre of ordinary professors who found Bloom’s criterion of “[a]esthetic value,” which Bloom pretty snobbishly claims can “be recognized and experienced, but...cannot be conveyed to those who are incapable of grasping its sensations and perceptions,” unacceptably snobbish (*Western Canon* 1). Indeed, the entire idea of a canon was deemed too fancy-pants to live, and had to be done away with for the good of the profession.

The canon is dead. Long live the canon! Nowadays many more books—not just different books—have come to be considered...not canonical, for “canon” has become a dirty word, but worthy of study in colleges and universities. Yet that is exactly what the canon is: “the choice of books in our teaching institutions” (*Western Canon* 15). Rather than aesthetic value, advocacy “in behalf of victimized groups” now dictates “which texts are to be studied”; this “widespread politicization of literary studies” is “at the heart of the unsettling of the canon”—the old canon, that it might be replaced by a new version (*Pleasures of Reading* ii; *Pleasure and Change* 3).

In itself the canon, old or new, does not interest me. What I find fascinating, though, is the strange fact that neither canon includes pure comedy. That is, fiction that was written principally or purely to amuse and entertain its readers, to bring them what the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* calls “unaffected pleasure” (Austen 36). By means of this sort of fiction the “liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language” (Austen 37).

Take, for instance, P.G. Wodehouse’s *Code of the Woosters*. Its popularity and the purity of its comedy seem to have counted against it with both sets of canon makers, despite its being widely—I am tempted to say universally—recognized as one of the finest novels written by the great English comic novelists.

This is odd, particularly because Wodehouse’s greatness is not confined to comedy. He is not simply funnier than other novelists, though he is certainly that. Wodehouse is simply a great novelist. In the 1930s Hilaire Belloc proclaimed him to be “the best writer of our time: the best living writer of English,” “the head of our profession,” and said, “[h]is object is comedy in the most modern sense of that word: that is, his object is to present the laughable, and he does this with such mastery and skill that he nearly always approaches, and often reaches, perfection” (*Weekend Wodehouse* 3 & 6). In 1960, one of his American publishers put an eightieth-birthday salute in the *New York Times*; it proclaimed him “‘an inimitable international institution and master humorist,” and was signed by eighty distinguished writers (Kiernan 96). In 1973 Auberon Waugh called Wodehouse “the most influential novelist of our age,” and Auberon’s father

Evelyn, along with his friend and fellow curmudgeon Belloc and a host of other writers such as Compton Mackenzie, Henry Levin, and Susan Hill, said much the same (*Homage to P.G. Wodehouse* 144).

Yet even the greatest novels of this great novelist are not taught. The Wodehouse name is a stranger to the Brit. Lit. syllabus, as are the names of many other great English writers of pure or pureish comedy, E.F. Benson and Angela Thirkell among them.

Why is this? Why have makers of what I will be calling English Edens been excluded from the canons old and new? Is it their popularity, or the pleasure they cause, in combination with the pleasure's innocent nature? Is it their putting literariness in the service of comedy, rather than comedy in the service of literariness? I tend to think it is all of these things, though pleasure is my first concern.

Despite laughter's being an index to value—at “the heart of all true amusement lies a judgment,” writes Roger Scruton, “and it is this judgment that permits us to laugh”—despite literary value's, aesthetic or political, lying at the heart of the canon question, literary pleasure so acute and irresistible it expresses itself in pleasurable laughter has never been a criterion of canonicity (*Culture Counts* 45).

To write, as Wodehouse did—and Benson and Thirkell, too, in their various ways—a sort of children's literature for adults, and to do so with such skill that it attains literary greatness, is a unique and extraordinary accomplishment. I

mean to shine a light on this accomplishment, to conduct into it what Glen Cavaliero calls “a celebratory investigation” (Cavaliero ix).

My approach will be a practical one, and one that is as far as I know unique among contemporary literary critics. In his book *The Alchemy of Comedy* Cavaliero writes that “in order to discover what comedy is,” any type of comedy, “the surest method is to determine what it does. [C]omedy is not a quantifiable object, nor is it merely a literary category: it is...most readily understood by observing processes rather than by establishing rules” (Cavaliero ix).

But we know what the comic novels of Wodehouse, Benson, and Thirkell do; they give pleasure and provoke pleasurable laughter. The question I mean to answer is, how do they do this and still attain literary greatness, or high literary quality?

1.1 The Canon Then and Now (but Mostly Then)

Before I discuss the canon, comedy, and literary value in greater depth and detail, and move on from there to talk about Wodehouse, Benson, and Thirkell, with a bit of Waugh thrown in, let me pause to ask and answer an obvious question.

The academic study of literature is a fairly recent thing, dating as it does from the 1950s. And the canon, as I have said, is more recent still, having attained only in the last quarter of the twentieth century “general currency in academic circles as a designation for the corpus of secular literary works

implicitly or explicitly endorsed by established cultural authority as worthy of preservation through reading and study” (*Canon and Creativity* 1).

What, then, was the canon’s predecessor?

The mother of the canon is a plainer, less churchly term: *tradition*. T.S. Eliot’s most famous essay, and one of his more famous works of prose, is called “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” The book Cleanth Brooks wrote on metaphysical and modernist poetry is called *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* and *The Great Tradition* is the name of F.R. Leavis’s controversial study of “the great English novelists,” who are somehow just four: “Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad” (Leavis 1).

Despite the polemical use to which Leavis puts it, *tradition* is, or seems to be, a less contentious term than *canon*, if only because it does not call to mind quite so clearly a gang of tweedy, pipe-smoking M.H. Abrams clones stalking through the world’s libraries, red-stamping a few books APPROVED and the rest REJECTED. But if this is the image conjured by *the* canon, it is not just unappealing—it is flawed. The “notion of a literary canon,” writes Alter, does suggest “some rough analogy to a council of church fathers or rabbinical sages deciding what goes in and what stays out on the basis of doctrinal or ideological principle,” but this is wrong, or not quite right, on two counts (*Canon and Creativity* 2).

First, it was the grammarians of the Hellenistic era who inaugurated the now-familiar use of the word canon, called any work worthy of being their students’ required reading “*kanonikos*, ‘one who comes up to the standard’ ”

(*Canon and Creativity 2*). Then the Church swooped in and “made canon its virtually exclusive property” till the academy wrested it back again in “the late twentieth century” (*Canon and Creativity 2*).

Second, “the secular canon through the ages,” which has gone by the name of tradition, “has been a quirky and various thing, its borders and perceived centers shifting according to changing taste and intellectual fashion at least as much as on ideological grounds” (*Canon and Creativity 2*). This brief but authoritative summary of the canon’s history will come in handy shortly, when I address the question of the canon’s historical causes.

Common to the notions of *tradition* and canon is the idea that a number of important works of literature written across the centuries have done much to shape and define literary value. The question then is: on what basis does a novel, play, poem, or essay become canonical? In *The Western Canon* Bloom rejects with his typical bombast the contention that the canon is fundamentally a product of ideology and a means of ideological coercion. He argues instead that works of literature claw their way into the canon with the glow of their strange originality undimmed, without any weakening of their power to show us the world in new and startling ways.

But is Bloom right? At this point it may be helpful to follow the lead of the philosopher Peter Lamarque, and distinguish between the aesthetic reasons for the canon and its historical causes. In practice, *historical* tends to mean *ideological*, though it occasionally means *institutional*, too. Bloom’s interest in defending the aesthetic value of literature, “the autonomy of the aesthetic,”

against the “politicized curriculum,” or anything else that “reduces the aesthetic to ideology, or at best to metaphysics,” led him to write *The Western Canon*, whose “great virtue is that it vigorously rejects the notion that the canon...is chiefly a mechanism of ideological coercion” (*Western Canon* 17; *Canon and Creativity* 3). If it is not what Bloom and Alter say it is not, what is it?

So what is—or was—the canon, and how can the debate about it best be understood? Before its death, the canon was, roughly, those works of literature acknowledged by the critical pantheon to be the greatest of the greatest writers in the Western tradition: Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Montaigne, Moliere, Milton, Goethe, Wordsworth, Austen, Whitman, Dickinson, Dickens, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Kafka, Borges, *et many al*. The ghost of the canon, or the canon reborn, is capacious enough to include within it Anglophone writers such as Toni Morrison, Kazuo Ishiguro, Anne Bradstreet, Zadie Smith, Derek Walcott, *et who knows how many al*.

Though canons, writes Kermode in his book *Forms of Attention*, “negate the distinction between knowledge and opinion,” and “are instruments of survival built to be time-proof,” they “are of course deconstructible; if people think there should not be such things, they may very well find the means to destroy them” (*Forms of Attention* 78). Canons may indeed be built to pass the test of time, which test I will talk about a bit later on, but it is remarkable how brief a life the canon had in its original, or Bloomian, form, as the greatest works of “the great writers in what can be called the Western tradition” (*Western Canon* 15). It was deconstructed in no time.

Now, *the canon* sounds as though it ought to be a coinage of Dr. Johnson's or Matthew Arnold's. But it turns out to have been the creation of academics, Bloom and his former teacher M.H. Abrams among them, in the 1970s. Not until "the last quarter of the twentieth century," Alter tells us, did "the term *canon*, which previously had been restricted to the body of Sacred Scripture approved by ecclesiastical authority," attain "general currency in academic circles as a designation for the corpus of secular literary works implicitly or explicitly endorsed by established cultural authority as worthy of preservation through reading and study" (*Canon and Creativity* 1).

Most of the enormities visited upon us by the '70s are now, happily, dust. Bloom thinks the canon ought to have survived. As I have said, he begins his book *The Western Canon* with a strident and melodramatic "Elegy for the Canon." But of course the canon has survived, if not in the form or forms that Bloom would have liked. It has survived—speaking purely historically, or materially—not in the *Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, edited by "an all-star cast" that included Bloom, but in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, which Sean Shesgreen calls "the canonizer" (Shesgreen 306).

The anthology has "managed to canonize itself as the Bible of English literature" (Shesgreen 296). Just "a few years after its debut" the *Anthology* "had become the dominant anthology of English literature," and "[f]orty-four years later, in 2006, the *New York Times Book Review* dubbed M.H. Abrams, its general editor from 1959 to 2006, the holder of 'one of the most powerful posts in the world of letters,' " and called his "anthology 'the *sine qua non* of college

textbooks, setting the agenda for the study of English literature in this country and beyond” (Shesgreen 294).

The anthology saved W.W. Norton & Company from bankruptcy and catapulted Abrams to fame and wealth. In the 1960s he was dubbed “ ‘the richest humanist in America’ ” (Shesgreen 302). Abrams never publicly divulged “the Brobdingnagian sums he and his fellow editors earned from the anthology,” but he had a great deal to say about “the innovations he introduced” to make the anthology an “instant” and enduring “success” (Shesgreen 294).

The *Norton Anthology* combines “the authority of an Académie Française combined with that of an *Index librorum prohibitorum*,” and has maintained its supremacy in several ingenious ways, not least of them its pilfering from the table of contents of the *Longman* anthology, its latest rival (Shesgreen 294). Abrams also “re-conceived the anthology’s audience, orienting it away from the student buying it and toward the faculty adopting it” (Shesgreen 302). This was done by giving “full coverage to major figures,” thereby “drawing in faculty teaching masterpiece courses” without stinting the “representative minor figures” that are taught in “broad survey courses” (Shesgreen 302).

Worried that a two-volume anthology would suffer the moribund fates of Harcourt Brace’s *Major British Writers* and *The College Survey of English Literature*, Abrams planned a one-volume edition of the anthology called the “Major Authors Edition.” This edition was printed, famously, on Bible paper. Thin, transparent, and flimsy, Bible paper allowed Norton to cram an additional 600 pages into the one-volume *Anthology*, sixty percent more than each 1100-page

volume of the *Survey*. Yet the *Anthology* “weighs 25 percent less, 2.6 pounds against 3.35 pounds for the *College Survey* (according to the salad scale in my cafeteria)” (Shesgreen 297).

Pleasing faculty also meant “new texts scrupulously edited from original documents,” some “freshly discovered and edited by subspecialists. In an amazing coup, the second edition (1968) offered, for the first time, William Wordsworth’s great early poem, ‘The Ruined Cottage,’ prepared by Jonathan Wordsworth, the poet’s great-great-great-nephew” (Shesgreen 303).

Perfunctory “Suggestions for Further Reading” gave way to “up-to-the-minute, annotated reading lists, freeing professors from compulsory bibliographic drudgery. It also produced footnotes, marginal glosses, and ‘ferociously annotated selections’ that liberated professors to do the more glamorous and flashy work of interpretation” (Shesgreen 303).

Rather than neglecting students, or patronizing them, Abrams treated them as aspiring scholars. He insisted on the inclusion of sophisticated historical introductions, biographical narratives, and innovative special topics, all produced with painstaking care with an eye to the professors reading over their students’ shoulders. This care, expressed in tone, style, and content, is apparent when the *NAEL* is juxtaposed with the *College Survey*. The latter’s preface, directed at students, opens with a sentence that mixes a condescending tone with bizarre imagery:

‘Black marks on a white ground—that is all these words would be to a savage who might glance at them for a moment and then away. To you,

the present reader, they are something more.' By contrast, the *NAEL* opens with a sentence that reads, in the mouths of students or professors, as smoothly today as it did in 1962: 'The medieval period in English literature extends for more than 800 years, from Caedmon's Hymn at the end of the 7th century to Everyman at the end of the 15th.' " (Shesgreen 303)

Finally, Abrams chose his subject editors with great care. A "proud stylist himself, he selected scholars who could write lively English prose, 'top-flight' men from distinguished private universities" (Shesgreen 303). These elite "were leavened with commoners representing the anthology's target audience at flagship state universities, where one adoption could mean an order of 3,000 copies" (Shesgreen 303).

It is a testament to the ferocity of opposition to the canon, and the creaky conservatism of its proponents, that not even an anthology as successful as the *Anthology* could preserve it intact, body and spirit, for more than a few decades. The savage debate about the canon can be simplified, or perhaps oversimplified, by dividing the debaters into two camps. Needless to say, the canons of those in these two camps divide pretty neatly along pre- and post-explosion lines.

In the first camp, which I will call the contemporary camp, belong the critics who say that the true cause of the canon is less a cause than a reason, an aesthetic justification. The canon, they say, is the product of great aesthetic merit in literature and great aesthetic judgment in criticism. To the second, or postmodern, camp belong those scholars and critics who argue that the canon is principally the result of historical causes. Also in this camp are those who take the canon to be a historical artifact, often a pernicious one—"a coercive structure

of ideological power,” for instance, “a wicked myth, designed to justify the oppression of minorities—a political propaganda weapon now revealed as such and, as the word goes, ‘demystified’ ” (Ungureanu 88; *Pleasure & Change* 15).

After contending with representative members of these two camps—Harold Bloom and Frank Kermode from the modern camp, and John Guillory and Barbara Herrnstein-Smith from the postmodern—I will offer Peter Lamarque’s account of the canon, and of the nature and value of literature. Lamarque gives me a conceptual framework in which to place the four chapters that follow.

1.2 Aesthetics and the Canon; or, What About Beauty?

In *The Western Canon*, Bloom writes that *the canon* “[o]riginally meant the choice of books in our teaching institutions,” and now—Bloom is writing, as I have said, in the mid-90s, as the culture wars are ramping up—the canon ought to be “view[ed] as the relation of an individual reader and writer to what has been preserved out of what has been written,” for the canon is “identical with the Art of Memory, not with the religious” or, God forbid, the academic “sense of canon” (*Western Canon* 15 & 17). Bloom has, it seems, already conceded defeat. His canon is gone.

Despite losing the war for the canon, or perhaps because of losing it, Bloom fiercely champions “the autonomy of the aesthetic” in literature and literary criticism (*Western Canon* 10). The “best defense” of this aesthetic autonomy, he writes, is the canon, his canon, or rather “the experience of reading *King Lear*” or

any other canonical work (*Western Canon* 10). But what is the best defense of the canon? The canon itself? Its aesthetic autonomy, in a baldly circular argument? Bloom does not say. This is perhaps because it is by case studies, not a systematic, overarching, philosophical argument, that Bloom seeks to defend the canon, or rather its memory, or rather the art of memory, from the “academic lemmings” who are bearing it with them “off the cliffs” (*Western Canon* 15).

If we see the canon as no more than a compendium of classic books, we will be sorely disappointed, Bloom writes, for the canon has of late been bloated by countless “bad books” (*Western Canon* 15). And so Bloom abandons the canon to “the rabblement”—its “right-wing defenders...who wish to preserve it for its supposed (and nonexistent) moral values,” and “the academic-journalistic network I have dubbed the School of Resentment, who wish to overthrow the canon in order to advance their supposed (and nonexistent) programs for social change” (*Western Canon* 3 & 4).

Bloom’s criterion for canonicity is not just a Kantian “sublimity”—“Kant,” he writes in his introduction to the book *Geoffrey Chaucer*, “inaugurates aesthetics” and “teaches that the Sublime” is “subjective and individual, private rather than social”—but “strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange” (*Western Canon* 2; *Chaucer* xi; *Western Canon* 3). Walter Pater defined Romanticism as adding strangeness to beauty; Bloom adopts this definition for “all canonical writing” (*Western Canon* 3). What Dante, Joyce, and Beckett have in common is “their

uncanniness, their ability to make you feel strange at home” (*Western Canon* 3). Shakespeare, “the largest writer we will ever know,” does the opposite—he makes us feel at home in the strangest of places (*Western Canon* 4).

It is, says Bloom, a terrible error to reduce Shakespeare to “ ‘the social energies’ of the English Renaissance”, as he is reduced by the “ ‘cultural materialist’ (Neo-Marxist),” the “ ‘New Historicist’ (Foucault),” and the “ ‘Feminist,’ ” who apparently merits no parenthetical description (*Western Canon* 4). In effect this reduction is a double ejection; to reduce Shakespeare to the level of Thomas Middleton and John Webster is to eject him from the canon, and also to eject the canon from its lofty place in literary study. In Bloom’s view, criticism ought to be evaluative—its purpose is to distinguish between works of the greatest “aesthetic merit” and works that are merely literature (*Western Canon* 4).

Kermode also sees, or thinks he does, an indissoluble link between canonicity and aesthetics, aesthetic pleasure in particular. Judgments of aesthetic value, not “collusion with the discourses of power,” underlie the formation of the canon, Kermode writes in *Pleasure and Change* (*Pleasure and Change* 31). More precisely, the “conjunction of happiness and dismay” is “the distinctive character of the pleasure derived from reading a canonical text” (*Pleasure and Change* 8). This conjunction is “the ‘philosophical’ character of canonical literature,” though it hardly seems philosophical at all, much less aesthetic (*Pleasure and Change* 8).

What does it mean to call literary works objects of aesthetic attention and appraisal? For Bloom, it seems to mean claiming that there is a distinct

phenomenology associated with reading literature. For Kermode, it means naturalizing the pleasures of literature. With the help of Roland Barthes and Sigmund Freud, Kermode identifies these pleasures with *jouissance*, Barthes' term for sexuality, as well as transgression, and of course happiness and dismay. Bloom and Kermode's aesthetic treatments of the canon have in them much to admire, if only because literary critics tend to lose their tongues when the subject of aesthetic pleasure comes up.

The community of critics suffers from what John Guillory, one of its more distinguished members, calls "a pervasive embarrassment with the subject of pleasure," and so it has "neutralized [pleasure] as the merely contingent effect of reception" (*Pleasure and Change* 66).

But Bloom and Kermode fail to address a serious difficulty: their own reduction of a literary work's aesthetic qualities to its textual qualities (this of course is essentialism), or to the qualities of a certain phenomenology of readerly response. In his book *Philosophy of Literature*, Peter Lamarque argues against the nobly-intentioned but unsystematic reductiveness that Bloom and Kermode engage in so eloquently and brilliantly. Lamarque contends that "[o]nly if literary works can be shown to be objects of a distinctive kind of aesthetic appraisal, and to promote and reward such appraisal, will it be possible to set apart the literary sphere as a subject worthy of its own treatment within aesthetics" (*Philosophy of Literature* 25). I will discuss literature and its aesthetic value later on in this introduction.

The aesthetic accounts of the canon offered by Bloom and Kermode are quite at odds with Guillory's, which is generally historical and specifically institutional. Guillory of course belongs to the postmodern camp. In his book *Cultural Capital*, published in 1995, he argues that "evaluative judgments" such as those that Bloom and Kermode rely on in their defenses of the canon "are the necessary but not sufficient conditions for the process of canon formation," for "it is only by understanding the social function and institutional protocols of the school that we will understand how works are preserved, reproduced, and disseminated over successive generations and centuries" (*Cultural Capital* 139).

In an essay written as a response to Kermode's 2001 Tanner Lectures at Berkeley, which were published in 2004 as the book *Pleasure and Change*, Guillory observes "how difficult it is to generalize any principle from the experience of aesthetic pleasure that would ground a principle of evaluation or canonicity. We are simply a long way from being able to do this" (*Pleasure and Change* 74). Are we? To see why Guillory might say this, it may be helpful to glance at the death of the canon, and its ghost.

There is not an open admissions policy to the ghostly canon, but standards of admission are not what they once were. This is for good, as I said, and ill. Aesthetic value is no longer a criterion of canonicity—not obviously, anyway. The age of "the autonomy of the aesthetic" is over (*Western Canon* 10). Bloom's fiercest opponents, the members of the so-called "School of Resentment," would gleefully agree (*Western Canon* 527). But why has this happened, and what does it mean for the study of literature as literature?

The “flight from the aesthetic,” which Bloom laments at such wearying length, seems to have begun in the 1970s and 80s, the heyday of literary theory (*Western Canon* 17). But its birth occurred even earlier, “in the social and political convulsions of the 1960s” (Eagleton 88). To the extent that literary theorists permitted literature to retain any value, its value tended to be instrumental rather than intrinsic. Appeals to aesthetic quality were said by theorists like Terry Eagleton to be thinly disguised appeals to ideology. Appropriately enough, Eagleton’s book on the subject was called *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Its argument accorded with Pierre Bourdieu’s in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*.

In 1981, Fredric Jameson published *The Political Unconscious*, in which he belittled the “weak” and “ideologically complicit readers” who “attend to the surface of the text” rather than audaciously rewriting it “in terms of master codes,” thereby “disclosing its status as ideology” (Best & Marcus 5). Aesthetic pleasure derives from a weak surface reading, Jameson argues; symptomatic reading, or reading for depth, finds the ugly ideology that is hidden beneath the mask of literary beauty.

Symptomatic reading soon became *de rigueur* among literary theorists, “perhaps because it presented professional literary criticism as a strenuous and heroic endeavor, one more akin to activism and labor than to leisure, and therefore fully deserving of remuneration” (Best and Marcus 6). Within a decade Jameson’s brand of criticism had spread like a slow-moving virus to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose book *Epistemology of the Closet* “crystallized the

emergent field of queer theory,” and Toni Morrison, who wrote *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* in an effort to “set forth an agenda for studying the structuring role of race in American literature” (*Best and Marcus* 6). Sedgwick and Morrison “showed that one could read a text’s silences, gaps, style, tone, and imagery as symptoms of the queerness or race absent only apparently from its pages” (*Best and Marcus* 6).

This sort of reasoning, if it can be called reasoning, displays a very backward idea of what might be called *thereness* in literature. What is not there is there, and what is there might as well not be. How literature can and should be read, according to the wielders of critique, matters more than what it says and how it says it. It turns out that literature’s elaborate pretense of moral, social, and aesthetic values, as well as the values of truth and personal identity, serves only to repress ideologies opposed to those that sustain the dominant social and cultural order. Exposing these false values—false, meaning founded in neither reason nor nature—opens the way for a challenge to the socially and culturally powerful. Once again in history of literary criticism, the moral mission gives birth to the theoretical stance.

This is just what happens, or seems to, in *Contingencies of Value*, Barbara Herrnstein-Smith’s very famous book. She writes that the canon is just what Bloom insists it is not: a product of pernicious ideologies, which she calls “establishment ideologies” (Herrnstein-Smith 51). The canon preserves not the greatest literature but the literature that accords with the most powerful ideologies, socially and culturally. Those with “cultural power” created the canon

in order to “reflect” their ideology and “reinforce” their power (Herrnstein-Smith 51). These powerful few claim that the canon has “universal transcendent value,” but this is either a mistake—if the claimants, the canon-makers, are somehow unaware of the canon’s true nature—or an outright lie (Herrnstein-Smith 53).

Herrnstein-Smith calls the canon not “an empirical measurement” but one “contingent” upon “the personal economy—the needs, interests, and resources”—of its makers, the culturally powerful (Dolan 31). There is no autonomy of aesthetic value: “all value is radically contingent, being neither an inherent property of objects nor an arbitrary projection of subjects, but, rather, the products of the dynamics of an economic system” (Herrnstein-Smith 30).

And so a play by Shakespeare is valuable or valueless depending on the “personal economy” in which it is evaluated (Herrnstein-Smith 53). Someone who has not read *Hamlet* or *Othello* will not find either play valuable, and this “might properly be taken as qualifying the claims of transcendent universal value made for such works” (Herrnstein-Smith 53). The “fact that other verbal artifacts (not necessarily ‘works of literature’ or even ‘texts’) and other objects and events (not necessarily ‘works of art’ or even artifacts) have performed and do perform for [people of other cultures] the various functions that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare perform for us...cannot be grasped or acknowledged by the custodians of the Western canon” (Herrnstein-Smith 53).

These custodians, unnamed or unnamable “cultural authorities,” have “determined the canon’s selection and then mystified its terms,” writes Jill Dolan in her book *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, “so that this reified body of work

seems to have always been in place. The invisibility of both its constructors and the origins of its construction render the canon peculiarly (but purposefully) remote from question or attack” (Dolan 31). I note in passing how odd it is to speak of the invisibility of the canon’s constructors; their names are quite well known, and I will name, or name again, the most influential of them and discuss his influence on the canon shortly.

The larger issue with Dolan’s account of the canon’s stubborn remoteness from question or attack, which echoes Herrnstein-Smith’s, is that it has been questioned and attacked relentlessly, from all sides. Nor is this one of the canon’s accidental effects. Indeed, the canon “helped expose the ways in which cultures achieve internal coherence through a politics of exclusion,” but this exposure “laid the grounds for a critical cultural reconsideration of excluded works and writers” (*Canon and Creativity* 1-2). The “evident gain of such reconsideration has been an enlarged sense of our literary heritage, which now seems somewhat more diverse and multifaceted than it did a couple of generations back, when central works of criticism flaunted such confident titles as *The Great Tradition* and *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*” (*Canon and Creativity* 2).

According to Alter, the canon has done the opposite of what Dolan says it has. Still, she has a point. The “flip side of this polemic revelation has been polemic exaggeration” (*Canon and Creativity* 2). Herrnstein-Smith and Dolan are reacting against this exaggeration, perhaps because they quite rightfully resent being excluded from the fashioning of the canon.

A more pressing concern, at least for me in this introduction, is Herrnstein-Smith's brand of radical social relativism, which Dolan endorses. The most obvious objection to it is this: if what Herrnstein-Smith says is true, then it is at best true only in her culture, and at worst only in her personal economy.

Let me say a few words about the incoherence of radical social relativism, which in the words of Joseph Raz in his book *The Practice of Value* "not only makes the value or rightness of action depend on social factors, it makes all evaluative standards socially relative: they are valid only where they are practised, or they are subject to some other social condition" (*Practice of Value* 132).

Mere local preference, or valuing based only on one person's personal economy, is not valuing at all. There is "no activity—not even desiring—that you can do any way that you like," writes Christine Korsgaard in her essay at the end of Raz's book (*Practice of Value* 69). Instead, "[v]aluing has its rules: it is something you do in virtue of a thing's properties, it is to that extent communicable to others, *it trumps mere local preference*, and so on. We may grant that this just moves a whole set of problems over to the activity of valuing and what its determinate limitations and demands might be. But at least it moves it over to something that unquestionably does exist—namely, the human activity of valuing—or...conferring values" (*Practice of Value* 69). Values, most values, are contingent but objective.

But contingent on what? Raz, a value pluralist, argues that most values depend on social practices. This does not "entail a relativistic restriction in the

scope of their application,” however (*Practice of Value* 3). Raz argues that “once a value comes into being, it bears on everything, without restriction” (*Practice of Value* 22). If values operate in this way, “as non-relativistic standards for assessment, why contend that they are dependent on social practices? What fundamentally motivates this central claim?” (*Practice of Value* 3). The danger of abstraction. Values “represent combinations of specific value properties,” and “if we abstract completely from contingent historical and cultural conditions, there is no reason to favour one way of combining those properties over others that are equally possible” (*Practice of Value* 3-4).

Evaluation tends to be cultural, and not just cultural but rooted in genre. In judging a film to be (say) a good romantic comedy, we will be guided by our understanding of the genre to which the film belongs, which fixes the combinations of evaluative properties that are looked for in a successful instance of the genre. But genres are themselves products of quite specific and contingent historical and social conditions, and this gives a clear sense to the suggestion that cultural values depend on social practices. In the absence of the appropriate social conditions there would simply not be anything that is good in the way that is distinctive of romantic comedies or neoclassical architecture. The special ways in which concrete evaluative properties are mixed or combined in these cases could not guide assessment if there were not a social practice that established such combinations as worthy of pursuit and appreciation. Once a cultural value has come into existence it can be sustained, revived, and applied independently of particular social practices; but the right kinds of social practices are necessary

for making evaluation in terms of specific cultural values possible in the first place.

To say that a bill of lading, for instance, is as worthy of pursuit and appreciation as a Shakespeare play is to compare two genres of drastically unequal cultural value. This is a misunderstanding not just of value, but of the social practice of valuing literature. We do not value individually, each according to his own personal economy, and in the genre of literature, as well as the social practice that has created it, our valuing of one play over another does not depend on its collusion with discourses of power. The practice is not ruled by ideology. As Alter makes clear, the history of English literature has proven Herrnstein-Smith wrong in her belief that the canon's creators treat it as a vain man treats a mirror. They do not hold it up to their faces so as to admire themselves, for the literary works that reflect and might thereby reinforce their social and cultural ideologies have not had a better chance at canonicity than works challenging those ideologies.

In this connection Lamarque mentions the case of Willie van Peer. In his article "Canon Formation: Ideology or Aesthetic Quality?," van Peer compares two versions of the Romeo and Juliet story, Shakespeare's and a version written in 1562 by Arthur Brooke, *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet*. Brooke's work is "anti-erotic and anti-utopian in style and spirit," didactic and moralistic, "demanding absolute adaptation of the individual to the prevailing social conditions, however arbitrary these may be, without critique, without reflection" (van Peer 104). Shakespeare's play, by considerable contrast, "shows us a

utopian outlook on sexual relations between men and women, without [the] stifling constraints of a rigid social order” (van Peer 104). If Herrnstein-Smith were right, not Shakespeare’s play but Brooke’s would be canonized, despite the relative impoverishment of its language, structure, and expressiveness. It is as timeless as it is vicious, the lesson that the powerless ought to submit unquestioningly to the powers that be.

In answer to van Peer’s—and Bloom’s—objection that the canon is filled with works of superbly undiluted oddity and irreducible power, works that cannot convincingly be made to serve any ideology, Herrnstein-Smith argues that these canonical works of literature only *seem* to “ ‘question’ secular vanities,” to “ ‘remind’ their readers of more elevated values and virtues, and oblige them to ‘confront’...hard truths and harsh realities” (Herrnstein-Smith 51). The canon “would not be found to please long and well if [it] were seen *radically* to undercut establishment interests or *effectively* to subvert the ideologies that support” it (Herrnstein-Smith 51).

But what guarantee is there that the gatekeepers of any new, expanded or radically reconfigured canon do not simply replace one pernicious ideology with another? If what counts as a canon-worthy work of literature depends only and entirely on the class and gender of the critics who canonize, then there can be no objective grounds for literary value. And if this is true, then what does it matter whether the keepers of the canon are, in the words of Toril Moi, “male bourgeois critics” lauding T.S. Eliot, or the pride of “Anglo-American feminist criticism,” who prefer Toni Morrison (Moi 78)? We might as well kill the canon. And, as I have

said, it has been killed, though its ghost lingers in every syllabus that features Shakespeare rather than the Elizabethan newspaper *A Perfect Diurnall*, or *Middlemarch* but not the penny dreadful *Black Bess, or, The Knight of the Road*. And its body, zombified, lives on in the form of the *Norton Anthology*.

The problem of objective literary value leads me at last to the real subject of this chapter: not the canon as such but the nature and value of literature, and the function of literary criticism. It also leads me to what I believe to be an expansive, or at least not a uselessly reductive, understanding of the relation between literature and aesthetic pleasure, and aesthetics in general. Both the modern, pro-canon camp and the postmodern opposition fail, I think, to address persuasively the question of literature's value. This is because of that crippling quirk of the critical tradition that I have already mentioned: an obsession with moral worth as the ultimate index of literature's cultural legitimacy. This bias has derailed theoretical reflection on literature, channeling thought away from some salient features of literature that, for all their salience, have received scant attention.

At or very near the heart of the literary enterprise is, as Plato saw, the aim to please. That literature pleases, that it even gives joy, was a commonplace, a truism shared by widely different cultures in different historical periods, and attested to by critics until the early years of the nineteenth century. The experience of pleasure once was considered a characteristic feature of the reading of literature. The "end of writing is to instruct," writes Samuel Johnson,

“the end of poetry,” by which he means all imaginative writing, “is to instruct by pleasing” (*Major Works* 424).

That is what has been missing from literary criticism for some time: the demonstrably valuable but non-instrumental experience of pleasure. The challenge of explaining the distinctive pleasure of literature—not as a psychological bonus to the reader, but as something that inheres in the very experience of literature—is entirely avoided in favor of yet another cluster of accounts of literature’s moral, social, and political value.

How to describe this experience? In a little essay of Virginia Woolf’s called “Reading,” from her book *The Common Reader*, she tries to convey the content and importance of immersing oneself in imaginative literature—in this case, Elizabethan travel writing, which is not commonly thought to be very imaginative, or very literary. Nevertheless, “the very flow and fall of the sentences,” she writes,

lulls us asleep, or carries us along as upon the back of a large smooth-paced cart horse, through green pastures. It is the pleasantest atmosphere on a hot summer's day. They talk of their commodities and there you see them; more clearly and separately in bulk, color, and variety than the goods brought by steamer and piled upon docks; they talk of fruit; the red and yellow globes hang unpicked on virgin trees; so with the lands they sight; the morning mist is only just now lifting and not a flower has been plucked. The grass has long whitened tracks upon it for the first time. With the towns too discovered for the first time it is the same thing. And so, as you read on across the broad pages with as many slips and somnolences as you like, the illusion rises and holds you of banks slipping by on either side, of glades opening out, of white towers revealed, of gilt domes and ivory minarets. It is, indeed, an atmosphere, not only soft and fine, but rich, too, with more than one can grasp at any single reading. So that, if at last I shut the book, it was only that my mind was sated, not the treasure exhausted. Moreover, what with reading and ceasing to read, taking a few steps this way and then pausing to look at the view, that

same view has lost its colors, and the yellow page was almost too dim to decipher. (Woolf 21–2)

This experience is one of great pleasure, both sensual and aesthetic. Woolf stops reading only when it gets too dark, having forgotten herself in her book. Such pleasure does not just *happen*. It demands of the reader great perception; perception of the particularities and minute nuances that the work presents through its use of language, structure, characters, (if there are any), and plot (if there is one). Reading is an act. You can succeed at it, or fail. To succeed you need to exercise your own abilities. And for the act of reading imaginative literature, the abilities a reader needs most are imagination, discrimination, and sensibility. It is the exercise of these abilities that constitutes the enjoyment of a work of literature. Woolf's enjoyment is defined by her perception of what it says and how it says it.

For my purposes, it is crucial to understand that what a literary work says cannot profitably be separated from *how* it says it. Peter Lamarque calls this the opacity of literature. Opacity and transparency “are not intrinsic qualities” of a literary work, writes Lamarque (*Opacity* 11). We “can read (or interpret) a narrative transparently or opaquely relative to the interest we bring to it and the kind of attention we give to its linguistic form” (*Opacity* 11-12). If “[w]e read for opacity,” it is because we judge the content of what we are reading to be “constituted by it” in such a way as to resist paraphrase (*Opacity* 12). Who reads for opacity? Woolf and her ilk; those who read for understanding as well as aesthetic and sensual pleasure, those whose interest in literature preserves the

union of literary content and literary form, the inextricability of the theme from the words that bring it to life without confining or otherwise stifling it.

Reading for opacity is, Lamarque writes, the foundation of the practice of literature. By thinking of literature as a Wittgensteinian practice, an activity governed by rules whose application is the true test of conformity to the practice, we free it from the prison, if it is a prison, of essentialism or atomism. We need no longer seek in each literary work “common intrinsic qualities” put there intentionally by the author to be found by the reader (*Opacity* 106). Instead we can turn our attention to “roles: author-roles, work-roles and reader roles, subject to rules but realisable in different forms,” or genres, which are not limited by the possession of any qualities whatever (*Opacity* 106). Chess provides an apt analogy. To play chess is to play a role in chess according to its rules. Suppose the pawns on a chessboard are solid gold, beautifully carved, while the queen is plywood carved poorly. But value as chess pieces depends only on the role they play in the game.

The trouble with thinking of literature as a practice is that that practices can change drastically, and at any time. One day the world’s chess players may decide that pawns ought to be queens. To translate this decision into action they have only to change the rules of chess, for it is those rules and those rules only that keep any one piece from being another. There is no essential difference between any two pieces in chess, not even a difference in appearance. If you can remember how you have moved or not moved each of your pieces, there is

no reason why they should not all look exactly alike. But is there a similar similarity between an essay by Montaigne and a *Times* article about trilobites?

It seems to me that Lamarque is quite wrong to elevate the author's literary intention, what he calls a " 'Gricean' intention" to produce a literary work, to the deciding position in any debate about what is and what is not literature (*Philosophy of Literature* 63-4). The author of the article on trilobites may intend it to be literature, and its readers may call it just that, but without at least some of those characteristics that make Montaigne's essay literature, it is hard to see how the article can rise to that level. To insist that literature is first, last, and always a practice is to deprive it of those characteristics that help to make it itself. If the literary work offers content "with depth, inviting reflection," then that depth cannot be merely a product of the author's intention—it must actually *be there*, awaiting the reader (*Philosophy of Literature* 63).

But Lamarque's account of literature as a practice has its virtues. One is its comparative freedom from rules. According to Lamarque, the practice of literature is considerably less bound by rules than is chess. If there is no understanding a rule without putting it into practice, then what is interesting is the practice, not the formulation of its rules. And so we "need not be overly concerned about the apparent lack of explicitly formulated rules in the practice of literature," for the rules, "such as they are, are made apparent in the activities that ground the practice, and the agreements endorsed by practitioners" whose shared assumptions " 'regulate' their 'activities' in responding to, talking about, evaluating, interpreting and 'appreciating' literary works" (*Opacity* 115).

What constitutes the practice of literature, “if not narrowly conceived game-like rules?” (*Opacity* 116). What does it mean to read for opacity, to exhibit a literary interest in a literary work? Reading it closely and broadly, or, in other words, “assigning significance to its parts and drawing out general value judgments about the whole,” or, in other words, taking note of the “success of localized detail in, or strategies of, the work,” and taking pleasure in it, too, so that he might appreciate it, apprehend it, and make “a summative assessment” of it (*Philosophy of Literature* 257).

Here is an example of the practice, offered by a practitioner. It is a reading of a passage in *Remembrance of Things Past*, by Marcel Proust. In the “Combray” section of *Swann’s Way*, the novel’s first and most famous part, there is an exoteric but extraordinary figure of speech that elegantly joins the interest Proust’s *alter ego* Marcel takes in the beauty of nature, the beauty of an artwork, and the “truthfulness” which nature allows him to glimpse in that work of art. These are but a few of the novel’s themes, though they are quite important ones. The figure of speech, slightly transformed, inaugurates Marcel’s disillusionment with the natural world of Combray, which cannot offer him the beauty which he, a Parisian, a traveler, seeks within it (Proust 155).

On many afternoons, while walking along the Méséglise Way, Marcel must take shelter from a burst of rain in the porch of Saint-André-des-Champs, where he can see a pedestaled saint, in every way like “the countrywomen of the region” (Proust 155). “This resemblance,” he tells us, “was often authenticated by some girl from the fields, who, like us, had come to take cover, and whose

presence...seemed intended to allow us, by confronting it with nature, to judge the truthfulness of the work of art" (Proust 155). Here we find a kind of natural, free-standing simile, one produced not by Marcel's associative mind (though perhaps by Proust's) but by the people of this piece of French countryside, the medieval sculptor and the nineteenth-century field hand. Marcel can easily judge the accuracy of the sculptor's work hundreds of years after its completion and even as a holidaymaker in Combray.

The figure of the "peasant girl" soon reappears to him, though no longer as a simile. She has become a kind of metonym, a proxy for the entirety of the countryside, a container or repository of its beauty: "It seemed to me that the beauty of the trees was also hers and that the soul of those horizons, of the village of Roussainville...would be given to me by her kiss," and this feeling or apprehension leads Marcel to call the girl "a necessary and natural product of this particular soil" (Proust 159 & 160). "But," he adds, "to wander through the woods of Roussainville without a peasant girl to hold in my arms was to see these woods and yet know nothing of their hidden treasure, their profound beauty" (Proust 160).

Sadly, then, the natural beauty of Combray and its environs cannot be grasped if the figure of it, the peasant girl, isn't. And grasped quite literally. This marks Marcel's aesthetic failure (and perhaps the sculptor's success); he, a foreigner in Combray, seeks his peasant girl "in vain" (Proust 161). "I would," says Marcel, "never find that countrywoman" on the Méséglise Way or anywhere else in Combray, and "if she had been there, would I have dared talk to her?"

(Proust 161). This disappointment disabuses Marcel of the belief that his desire for beauty can be satisfied by nature: such a desire “no longer had any attachment to nature, to reality, which from then on lost all its charm and significance and was no more than a conventional framework for my life, as is, for the fiction of a novel, the railway carriage on the seat of which a traveler reads it in order to kill time” (Proust 161). He is alone, unnatural, transitory—the beauty he seeks he must find in art. And not only in art already made, but in the making of art. The great puzzle of the novel is how Marcel can make art of his life as it begins to end, when it is mere memories that cannot be reliably recalled.

In the practice of literature it is important to keep in balance close and broad reading, or attention to the minutiae of a literary work and its broadest themes; appreciation of it; apprehension of it; judgment of its value. Even for practitioners of literature, specifically players of the criticism game, this is not easy to do. If we do not say exactly how literature is a suitable object of aesthetic attention and appraisal, aesthetic pleasure is liable to get lost in the activities that ground the practice of literature. In my reading of Proust, I failed entirely to address the matter of pleasure, even the sensual sort.

With a few exceptions, most notably Bloom and Kermode, literary critics remain skeptical about the place of aesthetic pleasure in criticism. Guillory, as I have said, admits to a “pervasive embarrassment with the subject of pleasure” in the critical community, “and the ease with which pleasure has been neutralized as a merely contingent effect of reception” (*Pleasure and Change* 66). Nor do

those philosophers who write about literature pay much attention to “specifically *literary*, much less *aesthetic*, features” (*Opacity* 171).

If “literary critics are skeptical and philosophers only marginally interested,” what room is there for an aesthetics of literature (*Opacity* 171)? What, exactly, might it mean to treat literary works as “appropriate objects of aesthetic attention and aesthetic appraisal” (*Opacity* 171)? Some idea of aesthetic pleasure is involved, but not Kermode’s reductive one. Kermode and Bloom both reduce the pleasure of literature to a phenomenology of reading, an “empirical datum with which the enquiry starts” rather than “a destination reached” after starting from “a suitably qualified conception of *appreciation*” (*Opacity* 172). If “it can be shown that there is a distinct mode of appreciating literature *as literature* or *as art*, then the first crucial step will have been taken to establish that an aesthetics of literature is possible and worthwhile” (*Opacity* 172).

What, then, are the fundamental aspects of literary aesthetics? Not the reduction of aesthetic pleasure to enjoyment of fine writing, surely. No, not belletrism. Instead, “the consonance of means to end” (*Opacity* 176). A critic’s aesthetic appreciation of a passage in a novel, play, or poem lies in his perception of the aesthetic function of a rhetorical feature—for instance, Wordsworth’s repetitious use of the words *all* and *and* in “Tintern Abbey.” To recognize the consonance between this formal feature of the poem and its further poetic purpose “of expressing ‘nature’s multitudinousness’ and the ‘ecstatic

oneness' of man and universe" is to see that aesthetic appreciation requires a marriage of a literary work's rhetorical and thematic levels.

A second aspect of distinctively literary aesthetics is the reader's search for "symmetries and unity and connectedness," ways of unifying a work "structurally and thematically" (*Opacity* 179). These are not " 'given' in the text"—they are " 'emergent' feature[s] imaginatively reconstructed by the reader seeking" from it "a distinctive kind of appreciation" (*Opacity* 179). Understanding a poem's meaning is not enough. Aesthetically appreciating, say, Edmund Spenser's poem *Epithalamion* means taking the appropriate interest in the concentric circles that give it its " 'elegant symmetry and intricate harmony,' " as well as locating it in the tradition of epithalamia and the larger context of poetic art (*Opacity* 179).

The third and final fundamental aspect of literary aesthetics is its attention to the opaque world of a literary work. There is no world apart from the description of it—no view of it through any eyes but that which its creator, the author, opens to it. A work of literature is radically " 'perspectival,' " and everything in it exists " 'under a description' " (*Opacity* 181). There is no other view of, say, the Jellyby family than that which Charles Dickens, or rather his narrator, gives us in *Bleak House*. The world in which they exist is a world of function, not fact. We do not read Dickens' description of the Jellybys, that awful family who break everything that can be broken, and spoil everything that can be spoiled, and ask, "But what are they really like?" Instead we ask, "What is their function?"

To experience a work of literature is to see how it *works*, how the function of each of its parts contributes to the function of the whole. This is where its interest lies: in a *value experience*, not a purely intellectual grasping at propositional content. Only the reader who is initiated into what Lamarque calls the practice of literature will see how the textual features of a literary work are necessary, but not sufficient; what is literary about literature is, finally, its aesthetic features. A text that cannot be read for opacity, for its “internal connectedness, thematic unity, complexity of structure and a generalised vision giving significance to the particularities of the subject will not reward literary attention and will be open to, at best, limited aesthetic appreciation” (*Opacity* 182).

Where, then, does the pleasure lie in appreciating literature for its aesthetic features? How and why do we respond emotionally, not just cognitively, to literature? Lamarque suggests that thought theory, in combination with an emphasis on the opacity of literature, provides the beginnings of an answer to these questions. Thought theory “seeks to resolve the paradox,” or apparent paradox, that “arises from a tension between two intuitions: first, that people do sometimes respond to fiction,” and literature more generally, “with genuine emotions like fear and pity, but, second, that such emotions presuppose beliefs that just don’t seem to be present in the standard contexts of responding to fiction” and other forms of literature (*Opacity* 141). We do not fear Othello, but we are perfectly right to respond with fear, among other emotions, to the representation of him. Why is this?

It is, I suggest, precisely because we do not form beliefs about Othello, not on the aesthetic level. There is no Othello to form beliefs about. If there is no Othello beyond the representation of Othello at the textual level, nor a Desdemona, either, then we cannot be frightened by Othello's murder of Desdemona. We do not believe it to be happening. What *is* happening is our experience of *Othello* as a literary work. This occurs on two levels at once, the textual and the aesthetic.

To form beliefs about Othello would limit us to just one perspective on him, the true or truth-directed perspective. But a work of literature, especially one as great as *Othello*, is interested not in truth but in *function*. Even if there were only one perspective on Othello, that perspective would not lead us in our literary response to *Othello* to form beliefs. It would lead us instead to entertain thoughts, to make believe, to feel emotions on the textual level, and to judge the aesthetic value of these thoughts, make-believe beliefs, and emotions on the aesthetic level.

We fear Othello as he murders Desdemona because our literary response to *Othello*'s textual level allows us to see him from Desdemona's perspective, which is fear and horror and grief and love. But we do not feel fear and horror and grief and love alone. We feel Othello's triumph and righteous rage, too, and know they will not last. Our pleasure comes at the aesthetic level, for we see how we have been guided to this point in the play and anticipate where we will be taken from here. By emphasizing thoughts, not beliefs, and "perspective-imbued thoughts in particular," by appreciating the difference between the textual and

aesthetic functions of a work of literature, we can make a place for aesthetic pleasure, and aesthetics in general, in literary criticism (*Opacity* 166). This will help us to see the value of literature as literature, whether there is a canon or not.

Claiming that literature can only be appreciated in certain, distinctive ways is to associate it with a certain, distinctive kind of value. How different this is from *understanding*; it is all too possible to understand something without valuing it. Literature cannot be cut off from value. To attend to literature as literature is already to have an expectation of value, an assumption that there is pleasure to be had in paying it literary attention.

Any good account of literary value will be sure to say what makes literature distinctive among discourses. Those who deny literary value, or relativize it, are likely to deny the distinctiveness of literature altogether. If all texts are undifferentiated and all values instrumental, literature per se has no value. Theories that assign to literature defining attributes will find in or around those attributes criteria for literary value. If meaning is what matters in a novel, play, or poem, then there will be great value in *complexity* of meaning.

The meanings of some works are buried in their depths; they yield their meanings reluctantly; they must be drilled for, in the manner of an oilman. The critics who have the necessary drilling equipment, the critical equivalents of derricks, racking boards, vibrating hoses, shale shakers, etc., will value the oil field sort of work, and pay little attention to other, less drillable ones. This is why the New Critics preferred poetry to narrative, and the poetry of Donne or T. S. Eliot to that of Shelley or Rupert Brooke. Because F. R. Leavis gave prominence

to moral truth as a literary end, he postulated a Great Tradition in which George Eliot and Henry James tower over those puny midgets Laurence Sterne and Thomas Hardy.

But if literary value and the pleasures of literature are married without the possibility of divorce, must a higher value will be placed on pleasing works than troubling or tragic ones? How can tragedy, often thought to be the *ne plus ultra* of literary genre, yield pleasurable experience? Well, literary pleasure is not strictly sensuous. The literary works that thrive on laughter are often deemed to be less worthy of appreciation than those of a more reflective or even darker tone. That this is a badly mistaken view, a fuzzy-sightedness tantamount to blindness, will, I think, become clear in the following chapters.

The expectations readers bring to a novel, and the rewards they leave it with, are unique; a poem, play, or essay will of course be quite different. This does not mean that in virtue of inviting literary attention these four kinds of literature have nothing in common. What matters here is not the distinctions among literary genres, but those between different kinds of reading practices and kinds of interest in them.

To take a literary interest is to follow certain unique, distinctive conventions. I set such store by Lamarque's philosophical take on literary value and aesthetic pleasure because it is a persuasive articulation of the singularity of those things. We cannot reduce the appreciation of literature, to which literary criticism gives formal expression, to what counts in other practices as understanding or interpretation. Literary education is an initiation into its own

practice, to use Lamarque's favorite word, and those who have skills in the practice learn how to make the appropriate discriminations and how to enhance the experience of value conventionally sought. Acquiring a critical vocabulary is neither sufficient nor even necessary for appreciation; the use of critical concepts is at best a means to, not proof of, appreciation.

Those who know literature and have a feel for it derive a special kind of pleasure from reading and re-reading it, from glimpsing in it, then seeing more clearly the aesthetic qualities that get overlooked by those whose interests lie in its linguistic or morally edifying properties. To take pleasure in the coherence and connectedness of themes, subjects, and images in a literary work, or in the humorousness with which absurd, trivial subjects and themes are pursued with erudite gravity, is to take pleasure in literature for its own sake, not for its instrumental or utilitarian value.

1.3 The Tinsel on the Tree: Can Camp Be Canonical?

Camp, as I have said, is "playful, anti-serious"—it is "the sensibility of failed seriousness," whose "whole point...is to dethrone the serious" (*Sontag Reader* 116). In short, camp is a perfect example of a literary genre that is valuable in itself; it is literature, that very serious thing, made to serve pure comedy. The motto of the camp novelist might as well be *laughter for laughter's sake*, as the motto of the nineteenth-century bohemian was *art for art's sake*.

No wonder camp did not make it into the canon that was. None of its makers and champions paid it the slightest attention. Only Bloom had anything to say about Wodehouse and Benson; in his book *Edwardian and Georgian Fiction*, he calls them writers of “minor...literature,” and makes very clear his hesitation to descend to their “lower depths” (*Edwardian* 140-41).

What stones Bloom does drop into those depths, float wide of the mark. Perhaps his worst miss is the claim that “Wodehouse’s figures”—he means *characters*—“are capable only of aggression” (*Edwardian* 141). This is a truly bizarre description of Psmith and his fellow Drones, of whom the best known is Bertie Wooster. (Bertie will reappear in Chapter 2, playing a far greater role.) Bloom’s contention that “after the Great War Psmith splits into two: his effortless social superiority becomes an attribute of Bertie Wooster, his guile and know-how become characteristics of the inimitable Jeeves” is pithy, clever, superficial, and factually inaccurate (*Edwardian* 141).

But when Bloom means to damn with faint praise, by saying that the lighter books of the Edwardian world “are readable in a tinselly way,” he beautifully describes Wodehouse, Benson, and another writer of chaste camp, Angela Thirkell (*Edwardian* 141). Chaste camp is the tinsel on the tree.

Robert Kiernan, in his book *Frivolity Unbound: Six Masters of the Camp Novel*, writes that camp cannot be defined in any satisfying way “apart from such whimsies of metaphor;” it “depends crucially upon a style of appreciation as well as upon the structure of incongruities that informs all comedy” (Kiernan 65).

The trouble is, camp is no longer allowed to be comedy. It has been stripped of its incongruities. In the canon that is, camp has become synonymous with a humorless, militant brand of queerness. Moe Meyer, in an anthology he edited called *Politics and Poetics of Camp*, defines camp as the “strategies and tactics of queer parody” (Meyer 9). And after offering this rather vague definition—wouldn’t camp be the parody itself, the result of those strategies and tactics?—Meyer, in a burst of hyperbole, accuses Sontag of having “killed off the binding referent of Camp—the Homosexual” (Meyer 7). Sontag, were she alive today, would doubtless be surprised to learn that she had managed to commit mass murder in the Fall ’64 issue of the *Partisan Review*. But Meyer has cast Sontag in the role of Pontius Pilate, in his *Passion of the Homosexual*.

Meyer is a critiquer. To reclaim camp for comedy is to strike a blow for criticism, and against critique. Critique makes of literature a means to an end—the end apparently being an endless stream of confusing ugly jargon and failed political crusades—but criticism, if done properly, if practiced as Sontag says it ought to be, shows literature for what it is: an end in itself. Pure comedy of the literary sort is a form of game that grown-ups are invited to play, and thereby return to a state of childish, though not mindless, pleasure.

Now it is time to shine a slightly brighter light on the brand of camp I am writing about. Chaste camp is not merely a species of pure comedy; it is a children’s literature for adults. Its heroes, all of them English, are—I now christen them—*schoolboys for life* or *head boys*, and they live in *English Edens*. Now, I am a great admirer of Lewis’s Narnia books, but this children’s literature is of a

literary quality that surpasses anything that Lewis put out. The paradises that Wodehouse's heroes flit through like so many butterflies are more perfect than Narnia, as places and as literary objects. There is no Aslan, but something better still: a Jeeves, a Queen Lucia, a "Bunny" Bunting. Bunny is less a Head Boy, and more an aunt of the Wodehouse variety. And so Thirkell, to give a little sneak preview of Chapter Five, represents an end of chaste camp, a dropping off.

How is it possible to write in such a way as to out-childlike a master of children's literature, and to out-literature him, too, and be very funny in the bargain? I mean to show the greatness of its greatest writers and the heavenly places they have made for their characters to live in, forever. For character is where camp begins and ends. Camp "taste responds to 'instant character,' " writes Sontag, "and, conversely, what it is not stirred by is the sense of the development of character" (*Sontag Reader* 114).

In the novels of Wodehouse, Benson, and Thirkell, "[c]haracter is...a state of continual incandescence—a person being one, very intense thing" (*Sontag Reader* 114). There is nothing more intense than a child playing pretend, and believing that he is not pretending at all, or not caring if he is pretending or not. To believe in play, truly and deeply, to take it so seriously as to mistake it for real life—that is what distinguishes chaste camp's two types of heroes, its schoolboys for life and head babies. What makes the story or novel they appear in truly great, is that they are funny and charming without being any less absurd, or any less literary a character.

2. Fifth-Formers Forever: P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie and Jeeves

In *Frivolity Unbound* our friend Kiernan calls Wodehouse a master of the camp novel. Which Wodehouse is. But Kiernan is vague about Wodehouse's brand of camp, and so it is my task in this chapter to see if I cannot be clearer.

In his literary biography of Wodehouse, Benny Green finds in his earliest published stories, all of them school stories, the expected "commitment to the schoolboy sensibility" (Green 28). Entirely unexpected, or expected only by Wodehouse himself, is his "remain[ing] forever steadfast" in his commitment to the schoolboy sensibility, with *forever* meaning "for the rest of his four decades-long career as a professional writer" (Green 28).

The heroes of Wodehouse's stories and novels, chief among them Bertie, or Bertram Wilberforce, Wooster, "may have been at large in the world of great affairs, but they...would always remain fifth-formers," meaning English boys of about the age of sixteen who have not yet been consumed by the drudgery of studying for A-levels (Green 28). It was a great part of Wodehouse's genius to disguise "his fifth-formers as responsible citizens and [let] them loose among grown men and women" (Green 28).

Wodehouse's fifth-formers have been trained to be responsible citizens, which training they wear like a mask, so as to disguise their persistent irresponsibility. In this way, they embody camp perfectly; camp, which Sontag

enthrones as one of “the three great creative sensibilities,” is “the sensibility of failed seriousness” (*Sontag Reader* 115). Camp

involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.... The traditional means for going beyond straight seriousness—irony, satire—seem feeble today, inadequate to the culturally oversaturated medium in which contemporary sensibility is schooled. camp introduces a new standard: artifice as an ideal, theatricality.... camp proposes a comic vision of the world. But not a bitter or polemical comedy. If tragedy is an experience of hyperinvolvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment. (*Sontag Reader* 116)

Schoolboy for life, as I have said, is my name for one of the two characters at the heart of Wodehouse’s brand of chaste camp. Chaste camp, which Wodehouse perfected, and which E.F. Benson attempted with nearly as much success, is, as I have also said, a sort of children’s literature for adults. It is a sophisticated, appealing, unsentimental brand of farce whose heroes are those best at playing pretend without sticking on side. I do not quite agree, by the way, that camp, with its great love of exaggeration, is a type of farce, that most exaggerated and absurd form of literary comedy. But the association is not without merit; for one thing, it returns literary camp to its roots in what, borrowing the subtitle of Oscar Wilde’s *Importance of Being Earnest*, is trivial comedy for serious people. And that is to the good.

But about sticking on side. The heroes of a novel of chaste camp play pretend not with an eye to self-aggrandizement, but rather in a “spirit of adventure,” chivalry, or pure fun (*Hot Water* 260). They pretend to be new-fanciers, famous Canadian poets, famous psychiatrists, private detectives, and

personal secretaries, as well as clippers of parrots' claws, parrot owners, and parrots themselves. In the process, they have a ball, and when a sticky moment arrives, they find an elegant way—or stumble into one, or have one delivered to them, as a sort of gift—to get unstuck.

Real, literal children in chaste camp are either absent or mercifully suppressed. When in Wodehouse's very early novel *Mike at Wrykyn* Gladys Maud Evangeline, aged three, gives voice to certain babyish thoughts that would have been smiled on in a book by A.A. Milne, her brother Bob's response is that of every right-thinking Wodehouse man, young or old: a groan, followed by an “ ‘Oh, put a green baize cloth over that kid, somebody’ ” (*Mike at Wrykyn* 7).

Wodehouse's Berties, Galahads, and Uncle Freds, while schoolboys in spirit, wear the mask of adulthood. Rupert Psmith, the one-time Etonian whom we first meet at Wrykyn, remains exactly the same character from the school story “Lost Lambs,” published in 1908, to the Blandings tale *Leave it to Psmith*, serialized in 1923, and had Wodehouse not replaced him with a better model, Bertie Wooster, he would have kept on being Psmith, as Bertie kept on as Bertie, as Uncle Fred went on Uncle Fredding, as Galahad never stepped off the stage, until Wodehouse's death on Valentine's Day, 1975.

Wodehouse himself was, in the opinion of J.B. Priestley, “really a schoolboy”—“no ordinary schoolboy but a brilliant super-deluxe schoolboy,” the sort of schoolboy who saw everything through his own gloriously clouded eyes (Priestley 108). Clearer vision would only have distorted the purity of his “schoolboy's world” (Priestley 109). This world, as Shakespeare once wrote of

England, is a “little world” inhabited by a “happy breed of men” (*Richard II* 2.1.45). It is an “other Eden, a demi-paradise” the hijinks of whose Eves never result in the expulsion of its Adams (*Richard II* 2.1.42)

What distinguishes Wodehouse from Kiernan’s other camp novelists, with the possible exception of Ronald Firbank, is that he made no contract with reality, or if he did, he soon broke it. Priestley, in his wonderful book *English Humour*, defines humor as “ ‘thinking in fun while feeling in earnest,’ ” and by this definition Wodehouse is no humorist (Priestley 108). He does nothing in earnest except be funny in writing. And this approach to comedy—that of the farceur—accords nicely, not that it needs to, with the descriptions of camp offered by Christopher Isherwood’s character Dr. Charles Kennedy, in *The World in the Evening*: “ ‘expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance’ ” and “ ‘not making fun of, but making fun out of’ ” (Isherwood 110).

Wodehouse’s funniness is indeed in the service of fun, pure fun of the literary sort, that is nevertheless sophisticated in plot, dialogue, and narration. This sort of fun is very difficult to pull off. Its success—and in Wodehouse it succeeds wildly—depends largely on his schoolboys for life and head boys. They are, taken together, its foundation stones.

Alas, this exceedingly durable comic duo is not often recognized as belonging even peripherally to camp. Nor is camp admitted any longer to be a type of comedy. Anything that is campy, but childish and chaste, as well as—gasp!—appealing, entertaining, and laugh-making, has been ignored or forgotten and otherwise given the unwelcome guest treatment by the Uriels who now stand

brandishing their flaming swords at the gates of camp, refusing admission to anyone other than “the Homosexual” (Meyer 7). I suppose even the homosexual is out of luck, until he attains that elusive H. Camp, insists Uriel-in-chief Moe Meyer, is not only “a solely queer discourse,” but a “suppressed and denied oppositional critique embodied in the signifying practices that processually constitute queer identities” (Meyer 7).

It seems a shame, this inhumane obsession with shrinking camp until it is queer-sized. No, it *is* a shame. As Kiernan reminds us, “there is a broader human context in which excessive stylization of whatever kind is camp, from Garbo’s androgynous sexuality, to the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, to the Old Pretender’s workaday discourse” (Kiernan 16). Camp’s “central note is celebration, a shameless love of all that is exaggerated.... Indeed, shamelessness is of its essence, for what camp has historically afforded its audiences—its artists, too—is an alternative to the morally correct laughter of satire, parody, and all other shame-begetting forms of humor” (Kiernan 16).

Kiernan is I think quite right to see in camp a gentle, even delicate, love of excess and absurdity; a sophisticated innocence and silliness; a style or sensibility rather than doctrine or dogma. Susan Sontag calls camp a “fugitive sensibility,” and insofar as she means that it flees from the real world and takes refuge in its own various paradises, I agree (*Sontag Reader* 106). But it is not so ephemeral a thing as Sontag makes it out to be.

These sterling qualities of camp lend themselves well to literature, where subtle, sophisticated, appealing, even heavenly uses of language tend to be

prized. Let us cling, then, to a “definition of camp-as-sensibility,” if that is what renders camp “invulnerable to critique” (Meyer 8). For critique, as Meyer shows so well, is anti-literary; it is “political and critical,” with no time for the niceties of literary analysis, not when there are such brilliant banners to march under as those of “ACT UP,” “Queer Nation,” and (may their tribe, like Abou ben Adhem’s, increase!) the “Radical Faeries” (Meyer 1).

Camp is, among other things, literature, and Kiernan, like Sontag before him, is interested in it as such. He does not deny that it can also be political; he does not deprive it of any queerness it may possess. Meyer, on the other hand, insists that camp is exclusively queer; “there are not,” he writes with uncharacteristic brevity and clarity, “different kinds of camp. There is only one. And it is queer” (Meyer 5). Fabio Cleto agrees. In his book *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, Cleto declares “‘queer’ ” to be “the key to camp discourse” (Cleto 16). David Bergman’s book on camp is titled, not entirely felicitously, *Camp Grounds*, and subtitled *Style and Homosexuality*, as if those are the factors that form the basis for camping.

Bertie Wooster is not queer. Neither is he any other species of sexual creature. Romantic, yes. Sexual, emphatically not. He is a schoolboy for life, chaste and honorable. This is the source of his campiness. Wodehouse’s Jeeves and Wooster stories are splendidly-written and brilliantly-plotted tales of nominal grown-ups being perfect children—and getting away with it.

That is, the most schoolboyish of Wodehouse’s characters are his most favored and best loved, partly because they take their schoolboyishness as both

a matter of course and a solemn duty. If Uncle Fred, when in London, invariably steps “ ‘high, wide, and plentiful,’ ” committing “ ‘ “excesses” ’ ” that leave even his nephew Pongo Twistleton, no stranger to a festive bread fight at the Drones Club, staggered, baffled, and bewildered, what he is really doing is “ ‘spreading sweetness and light’ ” (*Uncle Fred in the Springtime* 41 & 85). Any trouble he causes, and he causes a lot, is in the service of goodness, and that in large part is what makes Wodehouse so funny, and so chastely campy. His heroes’ childishness causes a great deal of mischief, but their being children absolves them of all guilt.

This is a crucial point. Like Bertie, Uncle Fred is not nasty but nice; that is his real self. And Bertie, far more than Uncle Fred, has no interest in expressing that self publicly. Privacy is his dish. Bertie might as well be tongueless in public, but in private, meaning his own Edenic mind, to which we have access through the miracle of first-person narration, he is babbling away in the most extraordinary, exaggerated blend of literary language and allusions, contemporary slang, and neologisms of his own invention. This is the schoolboy for life, à la Wodehouse.

Before I pursue any further the subject of Wodehouse and his lifelong schoolboys, for I see I am in danger of getting carried away, I must take a wider view of camp. In her very famous essay “Notes on ‘Camp’ ” Sontag says, much as Kiernan does, that the “essence” of camp is “artifice” and “the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not” (*Sontag Reader* 279). camp, she says, comes in two flavors: “naïve and deliberate. Pure camp is

always naïve. camp which knows itself to be camp ('camping') is usually less satisfying (*Sontag Reader* 282). Deliberate camp is—though I think it isn't, really—Ronald Firbank and Max Beerbohm's rather unsatisfying brand of the stuff.

Why might it not satisfy? Firbank and Beerbohm are wry and droll, but not laugh-making; their comedy is not what Belloc would call "laughable" (*Weekend Wodehouse* 6). One may chuckle while reading *Zuleika Dobson* or *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*; one may smile in appreciation of the wit, the elegance or over-elegance of expression, the nastiness or not-very-niceness, but that is as far as one goes. The writer's desire to be humorous is too close to the surface of the page. If it were an iceberg, it would be laughably easy to avoid. You would just sail around it.

I think I ought now to distinguish more carefully between these two kinds of camp: pure and deliberate, which Sontag calls camping. Pure or "[g]enuine camp," she writes, citing as examples of the stuff "the numbers devised for the Warner Brothers musicals of the early thirties (*42nd Street*; *The Golddiggers of 1933*; ... *of 1935*; ... *of 1937*; etc.) by Busby Berkeley, does not mean to be funny. camping—say, the plays of Noel Coward—does" (*Sontag Reader* 282).

I'll deal first with camping. By naming Beerbohm and Firbank as campers, Sontag I think misidentifies the camping they are—or aren't—doing. Rather than camping, this trio made what I will call parodic camp. And if you are wondering what their camp is parodic of, here is Dennis Denisoff's answer: "nineteenth-century aestheticism" in England, with its deep appreciation of the artificial, and

of Art more specifically (Denisoff 119). Think “the philosophical views and values” of Walter Pater and Algernon Swinburne, or the Aesthetic Movement before the turn of the century—before, that is, “the pinnacle of aestheticism’s popularity” (Denisoff 120). The Aesthetic Movement did not survive the nineteenth century, but “[p]arodic literature indebted to nineteenth-century aestheticism...continued throughout the next century, most notably in the form of camp” (Denisoff 120).

The stuff produced by the Aesthetic Movement is about as unfunny as an citywide fire—not that it was meant not to be—and the extent of its unfunniness tends to lessen the comedic punch of parodic camp. The parody, by the way, is of a stylistic sort. Few “serious modern writers indulged themselves in prose so effulgently purple as did Pater,” and it was Pater in prose and Swinburne in verse that Firbank and Beerbohm set out to parody, if lovingly (Kimball). But, a bit paradoxically, the more faithful the parody, the darker the product, and the less chance there is for the comedy to gleam through.

Here is Pater writing at wearying length, and as much eloquence, about the Mona Lisa:

The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all “the ends of the world are come,” and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed!

All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome,

the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias.

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea. (*Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 70-1)

Here is Firbank's parody of the Paterian style, a mercifully brief one, in

Cardinal Pirelli:

The forsaken splendour of the vast closed cloisters seemed almost to augur the waning of a cult. Likewise the decline of Apollo, Diana, Isis, with the gradual downfall of their temples, had been heralded, in past times, by the dispersal of their priests. It looked as though Mother Church, like Venus or Diana, was making way in due turn for the beliefs that should follow: "and we shall begin again with intolerance, martyrdom and converts," the Cardinal ruminated, pausing before an ancient fresco depicting the eleven thousand virgins, or as many as there was room for. (*Five Novels* 381)

Like Pater's sentences, Firbank's are almost grotesquely overwritten; the quasi-Gothic stuffiness of forsaken splendor, the sickeningly alliteration in closed cloisters, not to mention augur and waning, and what it is that wanes: a cult, for goodness' sake. Read it and shudder, perhaps pleasurably. This is Firbank's "wonderful clowning," says Matthew Hodgart, which is another way of saying, his impressive, but not especially funny, extravagance; his camping (Hodgart).

But to call Firbank's attempts at humor clowning is telling. A clown quite obviously means to be funny; a serious person doesn't wear a red plastic nose and shoes as long as canoes. The humor is, among other places, right there on the surface, though the parody need not be. The passage above dwindles into what is obviously a joke, a rather modest, serviceable one: the fresco depicting "eleven thousand virgins, or as many as there was room for" (*Five Novels* 381). This is parodic camp—what Sontag calls camping—rather than the pure version.

Also exerting a dampening influence on the humor of the camp parodist is his affection for the crowd he is parodying. Take the case of Beerbohm. He liked Swinburne, and owed him the sort of debt all writers owe to their predecessors. In critique, Beerbohm "used camp to sustain a transhistorical community, extending sympathy backward while also poking fun at the very people from whom, he was well aware, his own writing and values developed" (Denisoff 127).

Beerbohm's essay "No. 2. The Pines" is an homage or "classic reminiscental tribute" to Swinburne "and the Aesthetic Movement in general" (Riewald 107; Denisoff 120). Beerbohm found Swinburne's poetry to be overwhelmingly, blindly exuberant, and possessed by a malignant spirit of " 'mawkish sentiment' " (Riewald 107). Still, he liked him—liked, rather than idolized.

Visiting Swinburne at No. 2. The Pines, Beerbohm has the "sense of having slipped away from the harsh light of the ordinary and contemporary into the dimness of an odd, august past" (Beerbohm 33). If he wants to resurrect the glorious oddness of Swinburne's day, so as to celebrate it while sending it up,

Beerbohm must make a conscious decision to do so. Again, this is what Sontag calls camping.

Parodic camp, like any other form of parody, requires a conscious choice; no one ever parodied unintentionally. You may walk in your sleep, but you do not trim your mustache in your sleep while softly humming “You’re the Top,” or write strongly-worded letters to the Editor in which you take vehement issue with a columnist’s view on the health-giving properties of the common walnut. The wonderfully absurd characters in *Zuleika Dobson* and *Cardinal Pirelli* choose to be artificial, to exaggerate in the Swinburnean and Paterian style, to make the point that one cannot always be what one wishes to be, openly. Sometimes artifice is one’s only recourse.

Cardinal Pirelli fails at this—at being wholly artificial, I mean. The “sacred drama and aesthetic charms of the Roman Catholic Church” is, shockingly, not enough for him; he must have love, or the prospect of it (Hodgart). His yen for choir boys—he dies chasing one through, what else?, a deserted Gothic church—distresses Pope Tertius the Second, who murmurs “ ‘Why can’t they all behave?’ ” (*Five Novels* 351). Why, that is, can’t they camp?

Parodic camp is sometimes called “queer parody.” Aesthetic excess is a way of revealing sexuality, while at the same time concealing it. But, as Jonathan Dollimore puts it, “it is misleading to say,” as Moe Meyer does, and a dreary host of others, “that camp is the gay sensibility; camp is an invasion and subversion of other sensibilities, and works via parody, pastiche, and exaggeration” (Dollimore 308). You cannot miss it; it is the iceberg you see a mile away.

Pure camp, on the other hand, is supposed to be the sort of humor you cannot sail around; if you were the Titanic, it would sink you. You simply don't see it coming. It surprises you with your own laughter, for it isn't intended to be funny. Nor, for that matter, is it intended to be camp.

Aha! So Wodehouse, along apparently with Busby Berkeley, might belong to pure camp, while deliberate camp would be the province of Firbank, Beerbohm, and Noel Coward—the regulars. A shiftier character than I would omit the “might,” and argue just that. Twirling his mustache with one hand, he would write with the other that Wodehouse was a maker of pure camp.

But Wodehouse knew exactly what sort of writer he was; you can twirl your mustaches till they come off at the roots, and you still won't succeed in making Wodehouse purely campy. It would be very odd for as prolific a writer as Wodehouse to be confused as to what sort of stuff he was turning out. He spent approximately seventy-five years of his life writing novels and stories and poems and essays and song lyrics and film scripts and Broadway shows. He knew what he was up to.

What I am insisting on, then, is the existence of a third type of camp, one that is deliberate but still naïve. The Wodehouse oeuvre is artificial, exaggerated, and heavily stylized. Any of his novels—literally any of them, and there are ninety-six—is filled with characters who are wondrously off, either because they are pretending to be someone they are not or their self-awareness is at a particularly low ebb. Or both. Usually it is both.

The naiveté in chaste camp, which is what I am calling this third type of camp, belongs not to Wodehouse but to his heroes, of whom the greatest and most durable are Bertie and Jeeves. They are too naïve to see themselves for what they are: perfect children. They imagine themselves as great thinkers or chivalrous knights in the mold of the Chevalier de Bayard. And in a way they are. But they do not solve the problems of humanity, or rescue whatever damsels happen to be in distress. They solve little problems for little people, or try to do this and fail, and stumble into problems of their own. It never occurs to them that the mask might not fit, or might be slipping.

2.1 Chaste, Not Pure: How Camp Works in Wodehouse

Sontag says that “pure examples of camp are...dead serious” (*Sontag Reader* 282). Wodehouse was never dead serious—pardon the cliché; it’s Sontag’s—not even when he was stuck in a Nazi internment camp in Poland. Which, incidentally, is the closest he ever came to pure camp.

But Sontag is on to something with that “dead serious” crack. She has at least got the scent, and if she is straining at the leash in the wrong direction, at least she is straining. Seriousness is where Wodehouse proves himself, as a writer of camp that is chaste but not pure.

Of course Wodehouse was serious. He was, to be glib for a moment, serious about being funny, which is the only way to succeed in actually doing it.

And the purity of his comedy shows us, if we are interested in comedic technique, something very useful about what it takes to write chaste camp.

Chaste camp is every bit as artificial and exaggerated as its pure and parodic cousins, but—and this is a crucial difference—its characters do not consciously adopt artifice and exaggeration. Why would they? What do children, infants toddling around the nursery, have to conceal? There is no aberrant sexuality, no social inferiority. Like the characters of high farce, those of chaste camp cannot see how absurd they are. A child is not self-reflective—or if he is, he's wasting his time, for he hasn't much self to reflect on.

This is crucially important to the success or failure of the comedy. As Wodehouse's comedic idol W.S. Gilbert put it:

It is absolutely essential to the success of this piece that it should be played with the most perfect earnestness and gravity throughout. There should be no exaggeration in costume, makeup or demeanour; and the characters, one and all, should appear to believe, throughout, in the perfect sincerity of their words and actions. Directly the actors show that they are conscious of the absurdity of their utterances the piece begins to drag. (Booth 330)

In a story or novel of chaste camp, the hero's innocence is real innocence disguised, but unconsciously, as grown-upness. And camp, as Sontag tells us, "rests on innocence" (*Sontag Reader* 283). Quite innocently, Bertie Wooster wears the grown-up's disguise, without ever putting it on. There is no maturity, sexual or otherwise, to reveal or conceal. Bertie is unaware that he is a child in an adult world, which is largely why he is so funny, and so chastely campy.

The trouble with Sontag's idea of pure camp, is that she seems to confuse real and affected naiveté. One need not be naïve, to affect it with total success. True comedy is a serious thing; if one means to make it, one must present it as if it is not comedy at all. Wodehouse offers up each of his comedies as if it were a series of horrors at worst and at best grave difficulties, a near-tragedy that somehow has a happy ending—usually by virtue of the intervention of that baby ex machina, Reginald Jeeves, or another clever and resourceful child in grown-up's clothing.

In "naïve, or pure, camp," writes Sontag, "the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails. Of course, not all seriousness that fails can be redeemed as camp. Only that which has the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve" (*Sontag Reader* 283). But there is no failure here, if Sontag is speaking of the makers of pure camp; their seriousness is essential to the comedy. A novel of chaste camp need not be "completely naïve" (*Sontag Reader* 283). It probably needs naïfs as characters, but no naiveté is required of its author.

The comedy of chaste camp is, fittingly, chaste comedy, whose humorous effects are the fruits of the complex internal relations of its characters, dialogue, plot developments, setting, and narrative voice. Vis-à-vis the chaste comedy of Wodehouse, Anthony Quinton has something valuable to say: "What lies behind the habitual underevaluation of Wodehouse is a general prejudice against what it is in no way tendentious to describe as pure comedy: drama or fiction, that is to say, whose dominant intention and effect is to entertain" (Quinton 323).

To write pleurably about pleasure, idleness, and innocence—to write chaste comedy, in other words, be it chaste camp or not—is incredibly difficult. Wodehouse’s triumph is one of pleasure, and it is pleasure that literary critics find it so difficult to write about. One thinks of Auden’s don in *The Orators*, who confessed he “ ‘was not quite happy about pleasure’ ” (*Collected Poems* 305). Like the canker in the fragrant rose, the typical academic article on Wodehouse—“Queer Domesticity in Bertie and Jeeves,” for instance, which appears in the anthology *Middlebrow Wodehouse*—tends to spot the beauty of his name rather than amplifying it. But again, maybe you don’t “analyse such sunlit perfection, you just bask in its warmth and splendour. Like Jeeves, Wodehouse stands alone, and analysis is useless” (Fry xviii). Cyril Connolly agrees. The “entertainer,” he writes, sounding rather like an echo in the Alps, “suffers from no criticism whatsoever. No one has told P.G. Wodehouse which is his best book, or his worst, what are his faults and how he should improve them” (Connolly 122).

Arrayed against Fry and Connolly is that one-woman battalion, Q.D. Leavis. She rates the works of Wodehouse below even “literary fiction,” which “the uncritical” foolishly mistake for literature (Leavis 37). In her view, Wodehouse is unworthy of analysis. He is read purely for enjoyment by those poor idiots who have “only their own taste and judgment to guide them” (Leavis 39).

Not only can Wodehouse not be read “for profit,” all those books he sells paradoxically contribute to the “disintegration of the reading public” (Leavis 75).

Abundant and cheap editions of Wodehouse novels serve to wean common readers off the admirable Victorian triple-decker, when it is Victorian triple-deckers that the common reader ought to be reading. The three-volume Victorian novel must be given its due, and not slighted. Like Miss Prism before her, Leavis knows “what Fiction means”—somewhat confusingly, it means Literature and nothing less (Wilde 28).

But even Quinton slights pure comedy. The “greatest comic achievements of literature,” he writes, “have all been in the impure forms. In claiming Wodehouse for literature I am not trying to rate him as equal to Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Chekov, and Shaw, let alone to rank him above them” (Quinton 324). Indeed, only the darker versions of comedy—Jonathan Swift’s “Modest Proposal,” for instance, or Waugh’s *Vile Bodies*—remain suitable subjects of scholarship and criticism. Satire is fine. Chaste comedy is to be avoided at all costs.

Critique and other forms of anti-literary literary criticism must bear a great deal of the responsibility for this “pervasive cynicism and negativity,” to quote Felski again, that continues to have such “disheartening effects” on those cheerful little moons that orbit the ever hotter sun of scholarship (*Limits of Critique* 12). By no means the least disheartening of these effects is that the pleasure of reading, particularly the pleasure of reading pleasurable books, has become a contemptible thing. As Robert Alter puts it in his book *Pleasures of Reading*, “the language of criticism now often reflects an emotional alienation from the imaginative life of the text under discussion, often seems in its bristling

conceptuality empty of an experiential ground in reading” (*Pleasures of Reading* 14).

Alter laments the “disquieting tendency” of “much current criticism...to pitch critical discussion at one or two removes of abstraction from what actually addresses a reader in a text” (*Pleasures of Reading* 14). The obsession with abstract categories and sub-categories and sub-sub-categories and so on, and the cold or at least chilly ways of talking about them—one sub-school of literary interpretation, says Felski, emphasizes too much “the radical alterity or undecidability of texts”—is quite alien to the experience of reading pure comedy (*Limits of Critique* 29). When it comes to talking intelligently about pleasurable books, the less distance there is between book and reader, the better.

Distance, with all its attendant frigidity, is one of humor’s worst enemies. Truly funny books are meant to be laughed at, and a distant laugh is barely a laugh at all. Pleasure is not a emotion that can be felt distantly. Books like Wodehouse’s suffer badly from being talked about at anything like a remove, because their humor depends on very particular things, things that often cannot be seen from a distance, let alone laughed at. That is why the rise of surface reading is so encouraging, though I doubt somehow that it will cause Wodehouse to begin popping up on syllabi.

Before I begin with *Joy in the Morning*—I will use it as a sort of touchstone for my reading of Wodehouse—I ought I think to say a bit more about camp’s supposed queerness. The tendency in academe has been to define and systematize camp, to make of it a category and an ideology, to play gatekeeper,

by saying what counts as camp and what does not. The party line is this: camp must be queer, it must be mature, it must be self-aware. The tendency, in short, has been to deny even the existence of chaste camp.

Hodgart shows us that this view of camp dates at least to 1969. Camp, he states, stating baldly, is “a part of the homosexual subculture of modern society” (Hodgart).¹ This shows what a difference four years can make, 35,040 little hours. How far we have come from the primitive era of Homo Sontagus, in which it was permissible to say: “it’s not true that camp taste is homosexual taste” (*Sontag Reader* 290).

There is an affinity, of course, between queerness and parodic camp. Sontag admits as much. Since it first appeared in print in 1909, in J. Redding Ware’s book *Passing English of the Victorian Era*, the word “camp” has had, among its several connotations, a queer one. It is used, writes Ware, “chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character,” and I will give you one guess as to the sort of fellow in whom “exaggerated emphasis” amounts to knavery (Ware 75). What swims into the mind is an image of Oscar Wilde, with his velvet coat and floppy hair.

But this affinity has been seized by Meyer, whose clique includes Bergman, Fabio Cleto, and many others, and beefed up until it is a necessity, a prerequisite, a *sine qua non*. And anyone who disagrees becomes a homophobe.

¹ In the typical-of-its-kind anthology of essays called *Sontag and the Camp Aesthetic: Advancing New Perspectives*, nearly every contributor takes for granted that camp—they are mostly discussing what Hodgart would call low camp—is necessarily homosexual.

I find Meyer's argument bizarrely limiting—and at times simply bizarre. Accepting it as true apparently means jettisoning “objectivist methodologies,” or “empiricist route[s] to knowledge that ‘posit a real world which is independent of consciousness and theory, and which is accessible through sense-experience’ ” (Meyer 8). It seems to me that no definition of camp, or any other fairly obscure literary genre or subgenre, should require us to decide whether we think the world exists.

To be fair to Meyer, Sontag joins him in the effort to define or at least to delimit camp. She calls camp, wrongly I think, “a way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon” (*Sontag Reader* 277). Now, I have read my share of writers of what I call chaste camp—mostly Wodehouse, E.F. Benson, and Angela Thirkell—and I think none saw the world as a phenomenon, aesthetic or otherwise.

The writer of parodic camp—Beerbohm, say, or Firbank—was far too frivolous, nervous, and I suppose queer to see the world as anything but a monstrosity to hide from, to hide from, by means of elegant, sometimes grotesque artifice and wit. Aestheticism to them was no solution to the problem of the world's phenomenal odiousness—its persistent, disgusting homophobia, in particular. They did not abandon the aesthetic entirely, but they made parodic use of it, gently mocking but paying homage, too, to those solemn, sensitive souls—Pater and Swinburne foremost among them—who did see the world as an aesthetic phenomenon, or seemed to, very convincingly.

But a writer like Wodehouse is different. He *does* abandon aestheticism—or rather, he never took it up. His version of camp is neither a parody of Pater, Swinburne, and Co., nor a parodic homage. If chaste camp is less narrowly bound than its parodic cousin, it is no less artificial or exaggerated. In chaste camp, artifice hardly seems necessary; there is nothing to hide. Sexuality is not at issue, for like Eden before the fall, there is no sexuality, just a “quite astonishing celibacy,” a large cast of young, dopey Adams and Eves in love, with various marriages as the result (*Essays, Articles, and Reviews* 561).

And yet the characters in a novel of chaste camp are flagrantly artificial and invariably exaggerated. That they see themselves as perfectly ordinary, that their behavior seems to them quite natural and unworthy of consideration, helps to show how the seriousness of chaste camp, *pace* Sontag, is a seriousness that succeeds, rather than fails.

In a Vaudeville comedy routine, such as those with which Wodehouse was quite familiar from his Broadway days, the straight man is essential to the humor. Two comedians would be one too many; but are two straight men one comedian too few? In chaste camp, the answer is no. Every character in a novel of chaste camp is a straight man; there are no comedians. The reader sees the comedy for what it is, and laughs, but everyone in the novel, the narrator included, is straight-faced. Novels of chaste camp are, to coin a phrase, written straight. The comedy is not accentuated; it is understated, instead, or treated as though it were not just serious, but momentous, and worthy of lofty description. This of course only heightens its comedic effect on the receptive reader.

Wodehouse's genius lay partly in his awareness of how seriously he could write about funny things. To write funnily about funny things (as does, say, Peter De Vries, a writer Wodehouse was " 'not frightfully keen on' ") is to gild the lily, and lily-gilding is forbidden to the writer of a novel of chaste camp, though it may well be an essential tool of that novel's characters ("Art of Fiction LX" 163).

One might object to all this by saying that all comedy operates in such a way; comic literature, and camp in particular, can hardly be a special case. But the success or failure of a novel of chaste camp depends overwhelmingly on the comic contrast between its absurd, artificial plot and characters, on the one hand, and the grand, solemn narration and dialogue, on the other.

As I say, Wodehouse perfected the striking of this particular balance. He struck it like a gong. The comedy of chaste camp, as the Wodehouse oeuvre teaches us, requires that the fairly trivial and increasingly implausible difficulties of silly but usually endearing people be chronicled faithfully—written straight, in other words, solemnly and even eruditely, artificially and quite exaggeratedly, without the slightest acknowledgement, much less judgment, of their triviality or absurdity—by the historian, as Wodehouse's narrators like to call themselves. Camp is not just absurdity taken seriously, but absurdity exaggerated into solemnity and literary beauty, which only enhances its value as comedy.

The crux of the novel of chaste camp is not the contrast between the grandiose narration and the improbable, piffling events of the plot, but the narrator's refusal to acknowledge that contrast, or even hint at his awareness of it. Camp is inherently comedic, but depends for its comedic effect on the

unwavering solemnity and erudition of its narrator. It is the grave erudition, an aesthetic or faux aesthetic overlay of a particular type—what type, I will say in a moment—that distinguishes chaste camp from farce. And I will return to the subject of farce, to say why I think Wodehouse is more chastely campy than he is farcical.

This is what Kiernan means, I gather, when he says that comic incongruities are not enough, to make a novel campy. To be “appreciable specifically as camp those incongruities must be held in awareness by a style of mind that cherishes them with either real or affected naiveté. camp humor is in this respect insistently frivolous” (Kiernan 16). Kiernan is the other critic—together we make two—who finds Wodehouse to be a writer of camp. But he ignores Sontag’s distinction between camping and pure camp, and he has nothing to say about chaste camp, because he does not think it exists.

Still, Kiernan and Sontag take basically the same position, without articulating it as well as they might have done. Naiveté—Sontag’s memorable phrase, you will remember, is “the seriousness that fails”—is a crucial element in what she calls pure camp (*Sontag Reader* 112). But being naïve is a necessary, rather than a sufficient, condition for the writing of camp. Frivolity is necessary, too, but it cannot be frivolity as frivolity. It must be frivolity as solemnity. This is what I am calling chaste camp the seriousness that succeeds.

Certainly Kiernan is right to say that camp is not encumbered by the moral seriousness of, say, satire. (This is not the seriousness that Sontag is talking about, of course.) Between *Joy in the Morning* and, say, Swift’s “Modest

Proposal” or Amis’s *Lucky Jim*, there is a great gulf fixed. Camp is not quite amoral; morality simply does not enter into it. Neither does comedy, when it is played as comedy. There is no room for abstraction or generalization in the practice of camp, no space in which to take a knowing distance. camp is very small things played very large, to comic effect. “ ‘A small beer with a head on it,’ ” in Benson’s memorable phrase (Kiernan 17).

Chaste camp is not beer, but Charles Schulz’s root beer; it is that special kind of camp whose main characters always remain, in their hearts and souls, children, fifth-formers who only appear to be responsible citizens. If properly executed, this adds a welcome layer of charm, but never treacle, to camp comedy.

And so it is time for *Joy in the Morning*, a quite small root beer with a wonderfully large head on it. Its narrator is Bertie Wooster, though in Bertie’s narration his valet Jeeves talks, too. That is, Bertie is often quoting Jeeves, or believes he is quoting him. In fact the mots, or those fragments of them that manage to lodge in Bertie’s cheesecloth memory, originate with Shakespeare, Tennyson, Wordsworth, and other eminences of English literature. This gloriously muddled allusiveness is a characteristic comic device of Wodehouse’s, one that I will soon discuss in greater detail.

Joy in the Morning begins with an assurance that it will end happily for all concerned, and, as is typical of its narrator, Bertie Wooster, the danger of an unhappy ending is comically exaggerated:

After the thing was all over, when peril had ceased to loom and happy endings had been distributed in heaping handfuls and we were driving home with our hats on the side of our heads, having shaken the dust of Steeple Bumbleigh from our tyres, I confessed to Jeeves that there had been moments during the recent proceedings when Bertram Wooster, though no weakling, had come very near to despair. (*Joy in the Morning* 1)

Besides piquing our interest, as to the size of the fix from which Jeeves, Bertie's "omniscient valet," will extricate his master and his friends, this brief passage gives us a wonderful little picture, a portrait on a postage stamp, of Bertie, our narrator ("Art of Fiction LX" 158).

He is assuredly a weakling, despite his words to the contrary—but a noble weakling, with an unconquerable, delusional, belief in his own strength. He thinks himself a worthy heir of those valiant fourteenth-century Woosters who "did dashed well at the battle of Crécy" (*Thank You, Jeeves* 10). There is no proof of this; all the evidence is against it, but heredity is so powerful a force, thinks Bertie, it simply cannot fail, despite all the evidence that, at least in his case, it has done just that, and spectacularly.

As Bertie is always reminding the readers of his histories, he is "a preux chevalier," a worthy heir to Pierre Terrail, the Chevalier de Bayard—though one of his literary antecedents is surely Don Quixote (*Code of the Woosters* 212). What "one wants on all occasions to do" is "the *preux* thing" (*Joy in the Morning* 37). When the stakes are as small as they are in Bertie's life, nobility lends itself irresistibly to comedy, but without becoming a mockery of itself.

Bertie's Quixote-ish code of chivalry—"the code of the Woosters," he calls it—obliges him to come to the aid of his friends, always (*Code of the Woosters*

224). “ ‘Never let a pal down,’ ” is his credo, and by enacting it he makes his friends’ predicaments considerably worse, and much funnier than they were at first (*Code of the Woosters* 224). The help that Bertie’s friends really need is that of Jeeves. And they do finally get it, without fail, once Bertie has made a more perfect mess of things than anyone thought possible, even for one of his boundless gifts.

Despite all his puffery, which after all is quite empty—in this respect he is the diametric opposite of Drusilla Clack, Wilkie Collins’ hypocritically modest and thoroughly villainous narrator in *The Moonstone*—Bertie is entirely sympathetic, for his words and actions are those of a well-meaning child, who is out of his depth even in the shallow end of the pool.

The buffoon is a well-known comic type, first identified in the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, and much later discussed at length by Quinton in his excellent essay, “Wodehouse and the Tradition of Comedy,” which I mentioned a few pages ago. Bertie’s buffoonery is all too real; but he is not the usual idiot, who ought to do better but thankfully does not. Bertie simply does not know himself, or see himself very clearly. He is a child, who believes himself to be quite grown up. What is purest artifice in him—his sense of social superiority, his strength and resourcefulness—he takes for nature. This is pure Wodehouse, and chaste camp at its finest.

It is quite in keeping with Bertie’s blindness to himself, to his enduring fifth-formness, that as a narrator, and in dialogue, too, his language is absurdly florid, crammed with ludicrous exaggerations—and yet he believes himself to be doing

strict reportage. If Bertie is talking, peril will loom where no peril is possible, and the verge of despair will be teetered on, despite the presence of Jeeves, the great preserver of his master's oblivious, empty-headed joy.

Bertie's narration, as I have been hinting, is chaste camp at its best. He exaggerates, he aggrandizes, events—he calls them “proceedings”—of little absolute value, and he does this with a perfectly straight face, for to him, they are vastly consequential things (*Joy in the Morning* 1). The scale of Bertie's life is wonderfully skewed. If you had to classify the adult he thinks he is, you would call him a Nut or Knut, an Edwardian clubman for whom time is leisure, and life is pleasure. He is often a victim of circumstance, though, as a fly is victimized by the swatter; he just buzzes along obliviously, until the fateful *Whap!*

Here is Wodehouse on the knut, in his preface to *Joy in the Morning*: “The Edwardian knut was never an angry young man. He would get a little cross, perhaps, if his man Meadows sent him out some morning with odd spats on, but his normal outlook on life was sunny” (*Joy in the Morning* xv). This is Bertie all over. Not that Jeeves ever sends him out with odd spats on. But he lives in a kind of inner Eden, which his outer Eden cannot quite match; its various snakes are always taking him by surprise, and only Jeeves can defang them, or crush their heads beneath his heel. For Bertie's inner Eden is quite snakeless. It is the Eden of the nursery.

I will return to this point in a moment. For now, let me say a bit more about the knut, who in the world of Wodehouse is called a drone, belonging as he does to the Drones Club. The Drone, as Wodehouse puts it in a *Vanity Fair* article

called “The Knuts O’ London,” “does it simply because it’s done. [He] is faithful to tradition” (*Vanity Fair*). This helps to show what I meant a few paragraphs back, by saying that erudition in chaste camp is of a very particular sort. Camp was originally an English thing, though it has of course spread.

What camp loses, when it leaves the time and place of its birth, is the reflexive if rather mangled erudition of the English schoolboy, a veteran of Eton or Harrow, then most likely Oxford, whose education is but a brief desert in the vast oasis of his natural, pleasurable ignorance.

Though the Nut was thrown into the Well of Knowledge as a boy, he emerged mostly dry, like a duck. But droplets of erudition still cling. He forever has a bit of a saw on the tip of his tongue, but just a bit. As Bertie and Jeeves leave Steeple Bumpleigh, and shake its dust off their tires, Bertie says,

“There’s an expression on the tip of my tongue which seems to me to sum the whole thing up. Or, rather, when I say an expression, I mean a saying. A wheeze. A gag. What, I believe, is called a saw. Something about Joy doing something.”

“Joy cometh in the morning, sir?”

“That’s the baby. Not one of your things, is it?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, it’s dashed good,” I said. (*Joy in the Morning* 1)

This expression comes from the Book of Psalms, chapter thirty. It is a psalm of David, in which the king of Israel thanks God for rescuing him from damnation, and says “O Lord, thou hast brought up my soul from the grave: thou hast kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit” (*Authorized King James Bible*, Psalm 30:3). This exchange between Bertie and Jeeves is a lovely little

distillation of chaste camp humor, of a very English variety. The great beauty of one of the jewels of English prose, the King James Bible, is used to aggrandize the happy result of a succession of ridiculous blunders committed by permanent children.

This would be blasphemy, or tantamount to it, if Bertie were not such an innocent. “Childlike” is Usborne’s preferred term, but I think this is not strong enough (Usborne 207). Left to himself, Bertie simply does not appreciate the difference in scale, between marriage to Florence Craye on the one hand, and eternal damnation on the other. If it registers with Jeeves, the absurd, mock-epic quality of his master’s words, he gives no indication. Laughter is neither his place, nor in his character. As head boy, he is a straight man, though one in a pair. The laughter is the reader’s, and the reader’s alone.

2.2 The Seriousness of a Schoolboy

Chaste camp, as I have been saying, depends for its comedic effect on just this sort of unwavering, sublime seriousness. Now, I ought to clarify something, because it is important. When I say that in the novel of chaste camp seriousness succeeds, I mean the seriousness of the author. But of course the seriousness of a Bertie Wooster fails, and its failure is complete. Here is Bertie describing Steeple Bumbleigh, where *Joy in the Morning* is set:

Even before the events occurred which I am about to relate, the above hamlet had come high up on my list of places to be steered sedulously

clear of. I don't know if you have ever seen one of those old maps where they mark a spot with a cross and put "Here be dragons" or "Keep ye eye skinned for hippogriffs", but I had always felt that some such kindly warning might well have been given to pedestrians and traffic with regard to this Steeple Bumbleigh. (*Joy in the Morning* 2)

Now, Bertie is entirely serious here. Therein lies the comedy, and the chaste campiness. For the dangers of Steeple Bumbleigh are these: Bertie's Aunt Agatha, her husband Percival, Lord Worplesdon (though he is more an ally of Bertie's than an enemy), Percival's daughter Florence Craye, and his son Edwin, "as pestilential a stripling as ever wore khaki shorts and went sporing or whatever it is that these Boy Scouts do" (*Joy in the Morning* 2).

Agatha is severe of manner and biting of wit. Percival is bluff, and inclined to bellow, though he is not a villain, not really—just another obstacle for Jeeves to overcome. Edwin is a constant meddler, though a well-intentioned one. Florence is extraordinarily attractive, particularly in profile, but a bully intellectual and spiritual. She is "one of those intellectual girls, steeped to the gills in serious purpose, who are unable to see a male soul without wanting to get behind it and shove," the sort of "earnest, brainy beazel [who] can't let the male soul alone" (*Joy in the Morning* 10; *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit* 34). Instead, such beazels "want to get behind" the male soul

and start shoving. Scarcely have they shaken the rice from their hair in the car driving off for the honeymoon than they pull up their socks and begin moulding the partner of joys and sorrows, and if there is one thing that gives me the pip, it is being moulded. Despite adverse criticism from many quarters—the name of my Aunt Agatha is one that springs to the lips—I like B. Wooster the way he is. Lay off him, I say. Don't try to change him, or you may lose the flavour. (*Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit* 34)

Now, this is a crucial element of Bertie's character, his liking himself the way he is, and it connects with what I was saying earlier about Bertie's inner Eden, and about his lack—yes, lack—of pomposity. He likes B. Wooster just as he is, because his outer Eden, which we might also call Bertie in the Third Person, is so rarely in conflict with his inner one, or First-Person Bertie. Such conflict always arises in Wodehouse's stories and novels, it is true, but these are Bertie at his most discombobulated. Usually he is quite combobulated, which is to say, his discombobulation is the familiar, comforting one of *I*, rather than *Bertram Wooster*.

You would expect Bertie to inhabit his inner Eden as does a butterfly a garden, happily flitting from peony to delicious peony (or whatever flowers it is that butterflies like best). But it is more on the order of a brook or stream of semi-consciousness. Bertie is like one of Woolf's narrators, only funny. His inner Eden is a ceaseless flow or brook-like burble of thoughts and half-thoughts, literary allusions and misquotations, reminiscences and misrememberings. It is paradise as linguistic casserole. It is the longed-for bottle at the end of a long day in the nursery. It is the babbling brook that flows through his outer Eden.

Often Bertie's inner and outer Edens neatly align. Just before he is dragged off to Steeple Bumpleigh, which he calls a "major disaster," Bertie is

completely, even exuberantly, in the pink. No inkling of the soup into which I was to be plunged came to mar my perfect *bien être*. I had slept well, shaved well and shower-bathed well, and it was with a merry cry that I greeted Jeeves as he brought in the coffee and kippers.

“Odd’s boddikins, Jeeves,” I said, “I am in rare fettle this a.m. Talk about exulting in my youth! I feel up and doing, with a heart for any fate, as Tennyson says.”

“Longfellow, sir.”

“Or, if you prefer it, Longfellow. I am in no mood to split hairs.” (*Joy in the Morning* 3)

All this could just as well be written in third person, though even here the first person holds sway. Longfellow is Tennyson; it is splitting hairs to distinguish between them. “If you prefer it”—this might be Bertie’s watchword. It preserves the distinction between Bertie’s Edens, while tacitly admitting that such a distinction exists.

But watch what happens when Bertie’s inner and outer Edens suddenly and unexpectedly diverge; which is to say, when a snake slithers into the Eden through which Bertie’s nursery burble runs like a brook. Early on in *Joy in the Morning*, the dreaded Florence Craye stumbles upon Bertie in a bookshop, of all places, where he has gone to buy a volume of Spinoza for Jeeves. Florence hears the magic name “Spinoza” and her eyes lights up “as if somebody had pressed a switch” (*Joy in the Morning* 13). Amazed, she asks Bertie if he really does read Spinoza. He ought to say no, but yields “to the fatal temptation to swank,” and says yes (*Joy in the Morning* 15). Now, swanking is what Bertie does, in both his Edens. From Jeeves it elicits a simple, head boyish correction, and things go on as usual. Longfellow, not Tennyson. But swanking in the outer Eden can have disastrous consequences.

No sooner does Bertie, “with an intellectual flick of the umbrella,” admit to being a Spinoza-fancier, saying “ ‘When I have a leisure moment, you will

generally find me curled up with Spinoza's latest,' " than Florence says "Well!"
(*Joy in the Morning* 15). Now, "Well!" is a

simple word, but as she spoke it a shudder ran through me from
brilliantined topknot to rubber shoe sole.

It was the look that accompanied the yip that caused this shudder.
It was exactly the same sort of look that Madeline Bassett had given me,
that time I went to Totleigh Towers to pinch old Bassett's cow-creamer
and she thought I had come because I loved her so much that I couldn't
stay away from her side. A frightful, tender, melting look that went through
me like a red-hot bradawl through a pat of butter and filled me with a
nameless fear. (*Joy in the Morning* 13)

As Richard Usborne puts it, when writing about a somewhat similar
passage from *Right Ho, Jeeves*, "if you say that this is Bertie the narrator,
remembering in tranquillity and with a trained literary mind events which allowed
no such mental gymnastics at the time, I am not convinced. Bertie's mind drifted
during the crisis" (Usborne 177). Quite. Bertie is escaping from his outer Eden,
from which the snake has not yet been expelled, into a snakeless inner Eden. He
is diving into the burble, or rather the brook, and swimming off. Thus the very
much fanged Craye becomes a defanged Bassett. Cue the absurdly overwrought
metaphor—"A frightful, tender, melting look that went through me like a red-hot
bradawl through a pat of butter"—and the cliché then making the rounds of
Bertie's beloved third-rate writers²—"filled me with a nameless fear" (*Joy in the
Morning* 13).

² These include Brookes Moore, author of *The Beggar's Vision*, Samuel Robert Keightley, who wrote something called *Heronford*, and my personal favorite, Baroness Emmuska Orczy Orczy, in *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard*, though Bertie would have known her better as the Scarlet Pimpernel's creator.

Usborne's passage from *Right Ho, Jeeves* is slightly different. The scene is this: the Bassett has begun to break off her engagement to Bertie, a consummation for which he has been wishing as devoutly as possible, if not more so. Madeline says "I am sorry," and her "sorry," like Florence's "Well!", whisks Bertie at once down a stream of "free association," in which he touches on the following subjects: Jeeves's famous pick-me-ups, or hangover cures; the ingredients of same; lovely flowers blossoming in the sunshine; his guardian angel; the attentiveness of same (Usborne 177).

Bertie, writes Usborne, "hops through the looking-glass and stands beside himself very often and at slight provocation" (Usborne 177). But I think it is slightly more accurate to say that when Bertie is yanked from his inner Eden, and thrust into the outer one, when he is dragged from the sanctuary that is his Westminster flat to Steeple Bumbleigh, or Tottleigh-in-the-Wold, he wastes little time in making a return trip—figuratively at first, and then rather more literally, driving home as fast as he can in his "Arab steed," or two-seater sports model, with Jeeves at his side (*Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves* 43). Bertie's code prevents him from hopping on the steed the moment he finds himself in the soup, so he lets the burble carry him off, instead.

It may still seem odd, my insistence of speaking of Bertie's two Edens, one with no snakes in it, and one with at least one, but the sort whose head Jeeves will eventually crush without having his heel so much as bruised. I am trying to pin down the chaste campiness of Bertie's voice. His character is

guilelessly, harmlessly artificial, and while his voice adds an extra layer of artificiality, it is innocent of all but the most childlike artifice. Remember Sontag's definition of camp: "artifice," yes, but "the love of the exaggerated, the 'off,' of things-being-what-they-are-not" (*Sontag Reader* 279).

Only Wodehouse's great and abiding love of things-being-what-they-are-not could produce Bertram Wilberforce Wooster, who shares that love with his creator. Bertie is neither "bored to death," nor so literary-minded that he cannot but gild the lily that is his life (*Vanity Fair*). He simply prefers the Eden that is forever snake-free. He is "a fantasist," yes, with "a magpie mind," but he has found the paradise of all paradises: his burble, his ceaseless, reflexive stream of semi-consciousness, his glorious obliviousness to the most consistently pleasant of realities (Usborne 176 & 178).

Just as chastely campy is just how "off" Bertie's inner Eden is. It is, as I have said, filled with inaccuracies, slips of the tongue, or I suppose the mind, and misquotations of writers as unlike one another as Arthur Conan Doyle, on the one hand, and Shakespeare, on the other. Bertie has a life free from worry—Jeeves ensures that this is the case, as does the inexhaustibility of the Wooster bank account—and yet he is forever retreating into what might seem to be a stunted inner life no less strange and chaotic, but far pleasanter, than Lewis Carroll's Wonderland. This is what Usborne means when he speaks of Bertie's "magpie mind" (Usborne 178). It "is only the fine, imaginative, noticing mind, like Shakespeare's and Bertie Wooster's"—Usborne is quite serious here—"that dares wander down the garden path without losing its way back" (Usborne 178).

Wodehouse had a magpie mind, too. He developed it during his schooldays at Dulwich College, while cramming for the exam that was to be his entrée into Oxford. And he never lost it. Quite wrongly, Bloom writes that Wodehouse's "schoolboy stories of the Edwardian period are...works of a precocious maturity in which Wodehouse remained stuck for the rest of his long life" (Bloom 141). Apart from the obvious improvement that Wodehouse made as a writer, from the early days of *Mike and Psmith* and his other school stories, to the days of, say, *Right Ho, Jeeves*, to say that he was stuck in perfection is a bit silly. To perfect light humor, or pure comedy, is an astonishing and admirable thing. You might as well say the angels are stuck in Heaven.

But perhaps we are selling Bertie a bit short, and Wodehouse, too. Perhaps Bertie's "if you prefer it" is as powerful a renunciation of the real world, however pleasant it is, as Bartleby's "I would prefer not to." Bertie's burble, which I am calling his inner Eden, may at first seem to be the Voice of the Nut, or as Evelyn Waugh puts it, "merely the language of his day" (*Essays, Articles, and Reviews* 561). But of course it is quite a dialect unto itself. The Nut "speaks a language of his own," and so does Bertie. Bertie's is by far the more unusual, more funny, and more lovely (*Vanity Fair*). It is a measure of Wodehouse's genius, that he disguised the latter as the former. Why he should do such a thing, I will say in a moment.

Even when Bertram is not alluding to Shakespeare and Tennyson, and badly misquoting them, the range of his speech is far wider than mere localized slang. He often stumbles into the most singular figures of speech, maxim-like

sayings, poetic turns of phrase, and near-mots. From *The Mating Season*: “In this life it is not aunts that matter but the courage which one brings to them” (*Mating Season* 10). In his role as narrator of *The Inimitable Jeeves*, Bertie imagines “Aunt ...calling Aunt like mastodons bellowing across primeval swamps” (*Inimitable Jeeves* 183). An exchange from *Right Ho, Jeeves*, also narrated by Bertie:

“I have said my say.”

“Good.”

“But permit me to add—”

“I won’t.”

“Very good,” I said coldly. “In that case, tinkerty tonk.”

And I meant it to sting. (*Right Ho, Jeeves* 201)

This is far more complex, interesting, and funny stuff than the conversation of the Nut, at least in Wodehouse’s portrayal of him in *Vanity Fair*:

Pleasant happenings “brace him awfully”: unpleasant happenings “feed” him. A friend is a “stout fellow”: an enemy a “tick.” Just at present he affects a few Americanisms, and will attach the word “some” to practically every noun he uses. (*Vanity Fair*)

By passing off his own voice as Bertie’s, and by having Bertie’s fellow Drones talk as Bertie does, only less allusively, and with fewer references to the English classics, Wodehouse induces the reader to accept the presence of the Wodehouse Voice as the voice of the Nut, or Bertie’s baseline. As Wodehouse puts it in his half-joking way, in his preface to *Joy in the Morning*,

there has been no generic term for the type of young man who figures in my stories since he used to be called a knut in the pre-first-war days.... Mine...are historical novels. Nobody objects when an author writes the sort of things that begin, "More skilled though I am at wielding the broadsword than the pen, I will set down for all to read the tale of how I, plain John Blunt, did follow my dear liege to the wars when Harry, yclept the Fifth, sat on our English throne". Then why am I not to be allowed to set down for all to read the tale of how the Hon. J. Blunt got fined five pounds by the beak at Boshier Street Police Court for disorderly conduct on Boat Race Night? Unfair discrimination is the phrase that springs to the lips. (*Joy in the Morning* xv)

A brilliant maneuver, this, for it plays down the comic singularity of Bertie's voice, as a creation of Wodehouse's. Wodehouse, in other words, is there, but not there. For he is—or rather he presents himself as being—but one of the springs from which the Wooster burble emerges. The point is, Wodehouse does not position himself as close behind Bertie as he can, winking over his shoulder at the reader, in a foolhardy attempt to play up the comedy of Bertie's voice, and thereby accentuate his own cleverness. To do this would be to undermine Bertie's power as a narrator, and so Wodehouse's power as a writer. Instead, Wodehouse plainly but subtly presents his voice as one of the very many, that contribute to Bertie's vast storehouse of odd and antiquated words, stock phrases, slang expressions from home and abroad ("just at present," writes Wodehouse, on the subject of the Nut, "he affects a few Americanisms"), clichés, and literary quotations (*Vanity Fair*).

Literature, to Bertie, is anything from *The Hound of the Baskervilles* to *Measure for Measure*. His brain has been "curdled" by romance, detective stories, movie melodramas, and boys' stories—admittedly a kind of juvenile romance, which in Wodehouse's England mainly concerned cricket, and daring

revolts or semi-revolts against Pharaoh-like Headmasters (Usborne 175). Also brain-curdling is the addition of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and their ilk into that not so heady mixture.

What is extraordinary about Bertie is “not so much the width of his reading of bilge literature” and watching of bilge movies, “as the depth to which he absorbs the stuff” (Usborne 176). But again, it is Bertie’s remarkable incapacity to distinguish between the small and the great, coupled of course with his total lack of a sense of humor, when a sense of humor is called for, that marks him as a hero of chaste camp. It would never occur to Bertie to pick through his mind, ignoring the trash in favor of the nuggets of literary gold. He draws no such fine distinctions. Nor should he. His inner Eden is perfectly, eternally *off*—as Sontag uses the word, to mean campy.

Bertie’s off-ness is what Usborne calls his “magpie mind cherished whole into adult life” (Usborne 178). The reflexive artificiality of chaste camp, the concealment where there is nothing to conceal, the veneer of learning spread over everything, is endearingly but unsentimentally childlike. It is the stuff of an Englishman’s schooldays. Real, literal schoolboys in Wodehouse are rare, and invariably irritating; they are liable to be villains witting or unwitting. A prime example is Edwin the Boy Scout. In *Joy in the Morning*, it is Edwin who burns down Wee Nooke, Bertie’s cottage, while trying to clean the kitchen chimney.

Says Edwin, when Bertie asks why he burned down his cottage,

“It was full of soot, so I shoved some gunpowder up it. And I think I may have used too much. Because there was a terrific bang and everything sort of caught fire. Cool! It didn’t half make me laugh.”

“Why didn’t you pour water on the flames?”

“I did. Only it turned out to be paraffin.” (*Joy in the Morning* 70)

Wodehouse’s true children are his adults; Bertie and Jeeves chief among them. When Bloom calls Wodehouse’s “schoolboy stories of the Edwardian period...works of a precocious maturity in which Wodehouse remained stuck for the rest of his long life,” I think he is wrong on two counts (Bloom 141). First, Wodehouse’s writing—I mean the whole kit and kaboodle: narration, plots, dialogue, and characters—improved by leaps and bounds, from the early days of *Mike and Psmith* and his other school stories, to the days of, say, *Right Ho, Jeeves*. Second, to say that Wodehouse was stuck in his precocious maturity is a bit silly, and not just because, as I have said, an angel is not stuck in Heaven. You might as well level the same charge at Cole Porter or Ogden Nash. We cannot all write symphonies and epics; nor should we. To perfect light humor is admirable. It is not a dead end; it is a great achievement.

Nor can one be stuck in perpetual youth. Never losing the schoolboy spirit is Bertie’s chief virtue, and one of Wodehouse’s great achievements. I am speaking here of Wodehouse the man, as well as Wodehouse the author. Green quotes Priestley’s admiring judgment about Wodehouse’s lifelong character: “‘There is no sign of a mature man here. Together with his talent for the absurd, this explains his success’ ” (Green 29). Priestley I think simplifies things a bit too much, but he is more right than he is wrong.

What a boy like Bertie needs, when a place like Steeple Bumbleigh tears off its whiskers and pounces, is not an adult, for an adult would not take Bertie's problems seriously. No, Bertie needs another, more resourceful child—a better baby—to come to his rescue. A faithful chum, as Psmith is to Mike Jackson.

As friendships go, Mike and Psmith's is not very convincing. In fact, it is never quite clear why each puts up with the other, except I suppose that things do happen like that at a public school. Two boys share a study, then hang together forever. This, in fact, happened to Wodehouse; he and another writer called Bill Townend shared a study at Dulwich College, and remained friends and correspondents for the rest of their lives.

Certainly Mike and Psmith paved the way for Bertie and Jeeves, though it is incorrect to say, as does Bloom, that Psmith "splits in two," one half going to make Bertie, the other making Jeeves (*Edwardian* 141). No, it is the Mike and Psmith friendship that becomes the master-servant alliance of Bertie and Jeeves. In this sort of odd couple, the alliance is contractual, and awkwardness is to be expected.

Jeeves' mind is far less of a magpie one, than Bertie's, but it operates at least as great a remove from real events as does his master's. Rather than being the usual sort of "clever servant or *servus dolosus*," a world-wise personage supplied with a wealth of practical intelligence to offset his master's book learning, Jeeves is by far the more book-learned of the pair (Quinton 325).

He has the most practical intelligence, too. Jeeves, in Bertie's words, is "a whale for the psychology of the individual" (*Right Ho, Jeeves* 18). But of what

individual? Bertie, first and foremost, but also Bertie's friends. Of good-hearted but thoroughly frivolous young people, in other words.

This is yet another testament to Wodehouse's genius, and chaste campiness, that he gives Jeeves small problems to solve, and small people to solve them for. These are not the great problems that bedevil great minds, but trivial ones, and the stakes are either money or marriage. That is, money to either the already or the soon-to-be moneyed, which often results in marriage sooner, rather than later. Not abstract stuff, in other words, but eminently practical, on the order of *baby wants his bottle*.

Among the difficulties Jeeves resolves in *Joy in the Morning* are these: how to ingratiate Bertie's friend Boko Fittelworth with Lord Worplesdon, such that the peer will consent to Boko's marriage to his, the peer's, ward, Nobby Hopwood; how to arrange a clandestine meeting between Lord Worplesdon and the American businessman Chichester Clam, to discuss a merger between his lordship's Pink Funnel Line and Clam's equally prominent shipping firm, based in New York; and most importantly, how to break the engagement between his master and Florence Craye, and return her to the burly arms of Stilton Cheesewright, constable at Steeple Bumbleigh, who has been threatening to tear Bertie limb from limb " 'or, at the best, summon me for failing to abate a smoky chimney' " (*Joy in the Morning* 59).

Now, all this goes to Wodehouse's chaste campiness. Jeeves possesses a sort of genius, but it is not the genius Bertie attributes to him. No, Jeeves's genius is for taking Bertie seriously, as does one baby another baby, when they

share a nursery. Despite his air of grown-upness, Jeeves is a child, too, and like all children, he thinks the silliest things are gravely important. He is addicted to artificiality. Not only in the company he keeps—mostly Bertie, Bertie’s fellow Drones, and the young ladies whose steps they dog, proposing marriage every quarter hour—but in his views on, for instance, clothes. This is where the true Jeeves is revealed: Jeeves the head boy.

In chaste camp, there is either an alliance or rivalry between the schoolboy for life and the head boy. Both character types are not only present, but front and center, and both may appear to be grown-ups. Certainly Jeeves seems very much the responsible citizen, and it is often said of Bertie that he is an idiot man, rather than a clever child.

But Jeeves’s grown-up façade carries with it a strong whiff of the public school. When in *Joy in the Morning* Bertie badly misquotes an ode of Thomas Gray’s—“ ‘See how the little how-does-it-go turn tumty tiddly push.’ Perhaps you remember the passage?”—Jeeves corrects him as placidly as always, without gnashing a single tooth at Bertie’s near-total ignorance of English literature (*Joy in the Morning* 28). He supplies the passage in question, and in full, entirely from memory—“ ‘Alas, regardless of their fate, the little victims play,’ sir’ ”—and that is that (*Joy in the Morning* 28). Jeeves is always doing this; it is a staple of his and Bertie’s crosstalk act.

But let Bertie return from Cannes with a white mess-jacket with brass buttons, and Jeeves all but totters—spiritually, of course; physically, tottering is out of the question. He removes the jacket from Bertie’s suitcase, goggles at it—

again, only spiritually—and pretends to believe it has found its way there by mistake: “ ‘I fear that you inadvertently left Cannes in the possession of a coat belonging to some other gentleman, sir’ ” (*Right Ho, Jeeves* 12).

Every bit the feudal overlord, Bertie steels himself and admits it is his; he wore it every night in Cannes, and proposes to keep right on wearing it, in England. This brings Jeeves as near as he ever gets, to a display of emotion: “But, sir—,” he says, before lapsing into scandalized silence (*Right Ho, Jeeves* 12). And then, having mastered his feelings: “ ‘It is quite unsuitable, sir’ ” (*Right Ho, Jeeves* 12). But Bertie will not give in, and the victory is his—until it isn’t. At novel’s end, Jeeves reveals that “ ‘while I was ironing it’—the mess-jacket, he means—“this afternoon I was careless enough to leave the hot instrument upon it. I very much fear that it will be impossible for you to wear it again, sir’ ” (*Right Ho, Jeeves* 257).

Here we have Jeeves’s greatest triumph: not rescuing Bertie from the prospect of marriage either to a Craye or a Cook, or else a Bassett, who informs Bertie that “ ‘Every time a fairy sheds a tear, a wee bit star is born in the Milky Way,’ ” but preventing his master from dressing inappropriately (*Right Ho, Jeeves* 93). In “Leave It to Jeeves,” the first story of Wodehouse’s to feature the great man extensively, Bertie says “it isn’t only that Jeeves’ judgment about clothes is infallible, though, of course, that’s really the main thing” (*My Man Jeeves* 4).

And really it is. Usborne wonders “why Jeeves, with that brain, and that confidence in his own brain, should remain a gentleman’s personal gentleman,”

but the answer is quite clear (Usborne 208). Rather than a gentleman's personal gentleman, he is a schoolboy's personal boy. He takes Bertie, and Bertie's troubles, seriously, as only a boy can take the problems of another boy. And nothing matters more to Jeeves than seeing Bertie remain in boyhood (and therefore bachelorhood—for as we learn in *Thank You, Jeeves*, when a wife comes in the front door a valet goes out the back).

And so it is best, I think, to say that Wodehouse wrote chaste camp, than farce, the other contender for the title. Usborne takes it for granted that Wodehouse was a farceur, and Edward Galligan published a reevaluation of Wodehouse in *The Sewanee Review*, entitled "Master of Farce." But farce requires not only improbable plots, but crudely-drawn characters: idiots, as Galligan calls them, or "morons," Q.D. Leavis' preferred term (Leavis 301). And for all their artificiality, and laughable ways of thinking and speaking, Wodehouse's great characters are not idiots at all. They are incorrigible fifth-formers, so firmly committed to their childishness, that it is not only reflexive, but natural.

As odd as it may seem to a lover of Wodehouse, chaste camp is more apt a description of the Wodehousean style, and major characters. Farce is a difficult and valuable form, but Wodehouse submitted to it no more than he did to the detective novel, which he dearly loved—not just Conan Doyle's, but Rex Stout's, Agatha Christie's, and Ngaio Marsh's—and from which he borrowed plot points pretty liberally. Wodehouse's characters defined by their idiosyncrasy, not their

“benign idiocy” (Galligan 2). If they are oblivious to what is going on around them, it is because they have sought refuge in their Edens, or rather their nurseries.

Bertie is neither an idiot nor a moron. Granted, he is no genius. Neither is Jeeves. Perhaps Jeeves might become a genius, if he ever grew up. But this would mean his leaving Eden. It would mean putting the nursery behind him, and succumbing to certain realities, rather than floating from boyish fantasy to boyish fantasy, bottle to bottle, rattle to rattle. If Bertie is a fantasist, so is Jeeves. They are united in their commitment to extravagance in word and deed: and “extravagance” is the “spirit” of pure camp, its very “hallmark” (*Sontag Reader* 283). Like Kay Thompson’s Eloise, what they do all day is pretend.

It is extraordinary that Galligan finds Bertie to have “enough trouble perceiving what anyone, himself included, is doing without trying to grasp why he is doing it,” and—forgive me—it is laughable to call Bertie “perilously close to being inarticulate” (Galligan 3). As for Bertie’s being inarticulate: what nonsense. He is, as I have shown, simply articulate in his own strange, vaguely knutty, chastely campy way. He is articulate as a fifth-former is articulate; he pretends to be learned, but really he is just burbling, as a baby burbles.

Bertie may be a bungler—his nickname at his preparatory school was “‘Bungler’ Wooster”—but that does not make him an idiot (Usborne 176). It is brilliant of him to have remained a boy. Not even Peter Pan could manage that. And Bertie is far more charming a boy than Peter ever was. To lay such emphasis on Wodehouse’s “preposterous characters” and their “ridiculous actions,” as Galligan does, is to miss how endearing these characters are

(Galligan 3). To speak of Wodehouse's "farcical premises" is to misspeak (Galligan 4). Wodehouse does not establish premises, like a Greek logician. He wore no beard and toga.

Chaste camp is a charming thing, for its characters are children let loose in a world of grown-ups, to make mischief there, or as Uncle Fred puts it, " 'to spread sweetness and light' " (*Uncle Fred in the Springtime* 125). That is why chaste camp is at once funnier, and more profound, than its parodic cousin. Chaste camp gives us a picture of the hilarious strangeness of human nature, or if you prefer it, human artifice.

Oddly enough, Galligan seems to understand this. And yet it never occurs to him that Wodehouse wrote camp, rather than farce. He writes that Wodehouse's "plots always flowed from his characters: they never require that a personage in the tale act inconsistently with his own bizarre personality" (Galligan 5). Wodehouse basically said the same thing. In his interview with Gerald Clarke, published in the *Paris Review*, Wodehouse placed both plot and humor on the sturdy shoulders of character; what makes a story work, what makes it funny, said Wodehouse, is "character, mostly" (*Paris Review* 8).

This is why I have paid such close attention to Wodehouse's greatest creations: Bertie and Jeeves. For it is in them that we see Wodehouse at his funniest, and most chastely campy. In them we see Wodehouse "ignoring real life altogether" (*Wodehouse on Wodehouse* 313). Yet by ignoring real life, by having no particular "message for humanity," Wodehouse succeeded in revealing a timeless human tendency (*Over Seventy* 28). To have our own way, to be as

artificial as we can manage, to deliver, in response to the world's stern "This is how it is," a cheerful, insouciant "If you prefer it. I am in no mood to split hairs."

2. Camp by Accident: Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*

It is a little surprising that Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited* should be camp, but not the sort that his idol Wodehouse wrote. Waugh's adoration of Wodehouse suggests that he, too, would write chaste camp. The catch is, Waugh did not know that he was writing campily. He wrote seriously—*Brideshead Revisited* is “his first major effort not to be funny, to be other than a comic novelist”—and his seriousness failed so spectacularly as to become the sort of unintentional comedy that Sontag calls pure camp (Wykes 168).

Wodehouse's heroes are schoolboys for life or head boys—innocents, in other words, who are blind to their innocence. They live in nurseries for grown-ups “in which it is always playtime and where it is permissible to make a mockery of the conventions which preserve its being. Wodehouse is the supreme master of this particular universe, by virtue not only of his linguistic skills and narrative invention, but also of sheer *bonhomie* and good nature” (Cavaliero 12).

It is never playtime in Waugh's novels. There is very little *bonhomie*, and about as much good nature. Rather than creating a heavenly nursery like Wodehouse's for his heroes to play in, Waugh preferred to remain in the prison of contemporary England. The better to satirize it, it would seem. But when, in the 1940s, Waugh began to retreat into an imaginary England of his own making, he convinced himself that his fantasy was quite real, a thing of the actual past, a place he could reach by “a little hop in the Time Machine” of H.G. Wells (*A Little Learning* 4). To “hover gently back through centuries” was, he wrote, “the most

exquisite pleasure of which I can conceive,” for that was where the England of his dreams came true (*A Little Learning* 4).

Waugh lived the last decade of his life in Combe Florey, a little Somerset village, refusing to drive or use the telephone, writing with a quill pen, and wishing he had been born in the “seventeenth century”, the “time of the greatest drama and romance” (“Art of Fiction XXX” 12). He would also, he said, have settled for the “thirteenth century” (“Art of Fiction XXX” 12). He got the twentieth century, instead.

Waugh hated contemporary England. He hated it in 1927 when he was writing his first book, a nostalgic study of the pre-Raphaelites, and he liked it no better in 1962 when he wrote one last story, “Basil Seal Rides Again.” It stunk (the century, not the story); it had cannibalized the past. After dining with savages on a *pot-au-feu*, Basil Seal, the hero of *Black Mischief*, learns with horror that he has just eaten his now former mistress Prudence Courteney, daughter to the British Minister. Waugh seemed to want his readers to feel the same sort of horror. They were living in an England hungry for the beauty and nobility of its past in the way that a cannibal is hungry for his fellow man.

And so, even when retreating into the past, even an imaginary past, Waugh could not escape his hatred of the present. His best and worst novels spring from this same source. In his early, intentionally funny ones—*Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies*, *Black Mischief*, *A Handful of Dust*, and *Scoop*, all published in the Twenties and Thirties—Waugh turned repudiation of contemporary England into blandly destructive laughter. When Waugh was being funny on purpose, he

very effectively pointed up the desolating failures of his age. When he was being serious, as he was in *Brideshead Revisited*, the restraints imposed by irony fell away, and his snobbery and rancor showed through. His social criticism became frivolous, petulant, or both.

Waugh's conversion to Catholicism, in 1930, was his attempt to return to England at its best—meaning its snobbiest and most exclusive. *Brideshead Revisited* is not only his first serious novel, but his first Catholic novel, as well. The following “Warning” appeared on the first-edition dust-jacket of *Brideshead Revisited*, everywhere but in America:

When I wrote my first novel, sixteen years ago, my publishers advised me, and I readily agreed, to prefix the warning that it was “meant to be funny”.... Now, in a more sombre decade, I must provide them with another text, and, in honesty to the patrons who have supported me hitherto, state that *Brideshead Revisited* is not meant to be funny. There are passages of buffoonery, but the general theme is at once romantic and eschatological.

It is ambitious, perhaps intolerably presumptuous; nothing less than an attempt to trace the workings of the divine purpose in a pagan world, in the lives of an English Catholic family, half-paganised themselves, in the world of 1923-39. The story will be uncongenial alike to those who look back on that pagan world with unalloyed affection, and to those who see it as transitory, insignificant, and, already, hopefully passed. Whom then can I hope to please? Perhaps those who have the leisure to read a book word for word for the interest of the writer's use of language, perhaps those who look to the future with black forebodings and need more solid comfort than rosy memories. For the latter I have given my hero, and them, if they will allow me, a hope, not indeed, that anything but disaster lies ahead, but that the human spirit, redeemed, can survive all disasters. (Patey 224)

Waugh's Catholicism is even more morbid a form of romanticism than is his patriotism. There is little accent on religious experience; in its place is a shocking absence of the human compassion that is said to be so much a part of

the Catholic spirit. The Catholicism of Waugh's novels and stories—his faith is not under discussion; his expression of it is—is another kind of worship of what is merely old and exclusive. The Church amounts to a particularly stuffy Mayfair club whose members blackball the creatures Kipling called “lesser breeds without the Law” (*Complete Verse* 327). That Waugh could make a clubman of Almighty God is funny; that he did this with a straight face, without meaning to be funny or even seeing the humor in it, is pure camp.

Sontag writes that “the Art Nouveau craftsman who makes a lamp with a snake coiled around it is not kidding, nor is he trying to be charming. He is saying, in all earnestness: ‘Voilà! the Orient!’ “ (*Sontag Reader* 282). This is Waugh's cry in *Brideshead Revisited*: “Voilà! the Church!” He steadfastly refuses to admit how thoroughly artificial and idiosyncratic his Catholicism is. By contrast, Firbank's *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* is mere camping; while Pirelli's sheer artificiality and idiosyncrasy provide much of the novel's humor, it would be funnier and more purely campy if he took his shocking lapses to be strict Catholic praxis.

Running beneath Waugh's Catholicism like a sewer main is a brand of romanticism that robs Waugh of his one great comedic trick, the contrast between grand, gorgeous diction, on the one hand, and absurd events in the lives of trivial people, on the other. On this trick Waugh's comic style depends, and it is style that makes his comedy go.

The plots of his funny novels are serviceable, but they lack the pleasing symmetry and unpretentious sophistication of Wodehouse's; in their grotesque

chaos they resemble Hieronymous Bosch paintings. By contrast, the plot of, say, *Leave it to Psmith* is more like a Swiss watch as designed by Rube Goldberg. Waugh's characters, even his protagonists, give the impression of being toys of a malignant and arbitrary Fate—the Fate of which Wodehouse's characters are toys could not be more benevolent if it patted them all on the head and tucked them in at night.

Take away the contrast between Waugh's style, on the one hand, and his plots and characters, on the other, and you have no deliberate comedy. What you get instead, in *Brideshead Revisited*, is a gooey romanticism that sticks in the teeth like Jelly Nougats, and will not come out.

It is not Waugh's romanticism, but its earnest, doctrinaire, and above all *snobbish* character, that makes *Brideshead Revisited* pure camp. That is what Waugh's Catholicism is, at its heart: a boyish romanticism turned priggish, pedantic, and snobbish, a love of an imagined past taken so seriously that it is mistaken for history. Of course Waugh was not always this way. Nor were his heroes. In this connection it is I think useful to compare Tony Last, the hero of *A Handful of Dust*, to Charles Ryder, hero and narrator of *Brideshead Revisited*.

Tony Last is at once hero and clown; when his wife Brenda betrays him, the Gothic paradise in his imagination collapses like a soufflé, and we cannot help but smile at the sight of it: "A whole Gothic world had come to grief.... there was now no armour glittering through the forest glades, no embroidered feet on the greensward; the cream and dappled unicorns had fled" (*A Handful of Dust* 184). This is an English schoolboy's Eden, filled, but not to bursting, with the

anachronistic and fantastic. It would be out of place in a Wodehouse novel, of course. Wodehouse is a fantasist, not a romantic. But it is schoolboyish all the same, and charming to the extent that Tony Last, though grown to a man's estate, cherishes it precisely as he did in boyhood: innocently, without the least whiff of snobbery. It is John Beaver, the man Tony's wife Brenda is carrying on with, who is the " 'snob and, I should think, as cold as a fish' " (*A Handful of Dust* 59).

While he is every bit the romantic Tony is, Charles Ryder's romanticism is cold and sentimental, all at once. What makes him a hero of pure camp is the astonishingly high temperature at which his cold fire burns. Tony is a picture of Waugh before snobbery becomes doctrine; Charles Ryder is snobbery incarnate, and so a figure of pure camp. Where Tony's ideal England is charming and spare—there is just enough there—Charles is pedantically precise, and as overstuffed as one of the fancier rooms at Brideshead.

One of Charles's underlings in the Army is a Sergeant Hooper; he is low-class, and his knowledge of English history is confined to "humane legislation and recent industrial change" (*Brideshead Revisited* 15). And so of course he is "no romantic"—"as a child he had not ridden with Rupert's Horse or sat among the camp-fires at Xanthus.... Hooper had wept often but never for Henry's speech on St. Crispin's day, nor for the epitaph at Thermopylae" (*Brideshead Revisited* 15).

Here we see romanticism gone stale. We see the "armour glittering through the forest glades" which so perfectly and charmingly captures the

Arthurian Gothic tenor of Tony Last's imagination—if there is such a thing as Arthurian Gothic—give way to a tiresome history lesson (*A Handful of Dust* 184). The best that Ryder can do, by way of recapturing the beauty of England Lost, is a catalogue famous battles (*Brideshead Revisited* 32).

This persistence and intensity of Tony's romanticism and Ryder's are roughly the same, as I have suggested; so is the fierceness of the conviction that Then must hold out against Now. But Ryder lards his romanticism with real events, and in all sincerity calls it recorded history, just as Waugh buries his romantic yearnings in Catholicism, and dubs it divine truth. They are both too vehement, too serious in claiming for their own something that is not theirs.

This is Waugh's voilà moment—the moment at which he reclassifies his personal Neverland as bygone England. Thus fantasy mixed with fact becomes out-and-out nostalgia. Thus comedy becomes pure camp.

Though he is a grown man, Tony Last's bedroom forms

a gallery representative of every phase of his adolescence—the framed picture of a dreadnought (a colored supplement from *Chums*), all its guns spouting flame and smoke; a photographic group of his private school; a cabinet called 'the Museum' filled with the fruits of a dozen desultory hobbies." (*A Handful of Dust* 15)

Rather than patience, bezique, or craps he plays "animal snap"—it is " 'just a child's game,' " and yet it is the only game he has ever been able to learn (*A Handful of Dust* 136 & 134). In an uncharacteristically tender and delicate bit of comedy, Waugh has Tony object to playing animal snap with another grown-up: " 'it would be ridiculous,' " he says, " 'with two' " (*A Handful of Dust* 136).

Tony remains a boy, and he knows it, and does not try to hide it, or to pretend that he is in any sense a man. He is unaffected. Charles Ryder, by considerable contrast, is practically nothing but grown-up affectation. He describes his fling with Sebastian Flyte, whose family home is Brideshead, as “a brief spell of what I had never known, a happy childhood, and though its toys were silk shirts and liqueurs and cigars, and its naughtiness high in the catalogue of grave sins, there was something of nursery freshness about us that fell little short of the joy of innocence” (*Brideshead Revisited* 45-6). Tony is naturally innocent, and in the course of *A Handful of Dust* he finds innocence to be a less than joyous state. In Waugh’s various fictional worlds, there is joy only in affected innocence passed off as the real thing.

It is the difference, or rather the similarity, between Sebastian’s teddy-bear Aloysius and Tony’s dreadnought. There is a coy self-awareness in the teddy-bear, but only because it falls victim to Ryder’s narration; to Sebastian Aloysius exists with the matter-of-factness of Tony’s dreadnought. Wodehouse’s Bertie and Jeeves do not yearn for the blissful days of childhood. Why would they? Their toys are silk shirts and liqueurs and cigars, more or less, but they do not account them toys—to do so, they would need to know that they are children still, and that is a fact of which they are entirely, blissfully ignorant.

Cara, mistress of Sebastian’s father Lord Marchmain, describes Sebastian as being “in love with his own childhood” (*Brideshead Revisited* 100). Ryder is in love with Sebastian’s childhood, too. He fetishizes it. In this way he mistakes Aloysius for an affectation, when the bear is really a totem. Sontag writes that

“the relation of Camp taste to the past is extremely sentimental,” and Ryder, as Waugh’s alter ego, takes this much, much farther, by worshipping someone else’s past, and in sentimentalizing it, trying to make it his own (*Sontag Reader* 109).

In chaste camp there is no sentimental worship of childhood, for childhood is simply life, and everlasting life at that. An advanced form of childhood, a special type that passes for adulthood, but childhood all the same. Charles Ryder and Sebastian have both lost their childish selves, and both men try and fail to cling to Sebastian’s childhood. Charles does not love Sebastian as much as he wants to *have been* Sebastian. Ryder’s fantasy is not one of becoming, but of always having been. Despite its wealth of detail, there is no matter-of-factness in Ryder’s fantasy. There is no love, only sentiment.

By contrast, Tony Last is not sentimental; he simply feels deeply the loss of his innocent England. The same could be said for Sebastian; he really is “ ‘mourning [his] lost innocence,’ ” though some innocence remains (*Brideshead Revisited* 77). Ryder is not innocent, only inexperienced; he mourns what Sebastian has lost until he feels, or feels that he feels, the loss as his own. Only he cannot quite manage it. He has not lost anything that truly belongs to him.

Tony and Ryder are each house-obsessed, and the contrast between Hetton Abbey and Brideshead is instructive. Tony has loved and lived in the Abbey, “formerly one of the notable houses in the county,” all his life (*A Handful of Dust* 13). Though it is no longer a notable house, having been rebuilt in 1864 in the Gothic style, Tony’s love for it burns on, brighter and brighter. But Ryder

first comes to Brideshead during his Oxford days, when he is nearly twenty. It is not his home; he is converted to it, and its artistic and architectural beauty, as Waugh is converted to Catholicism. There is a pedantic zeal to his love, a desperate desire to notice and appreciate every exquisite detail, in order to insist on the reality of his fantasy home. Knowing and appreciating something is not the same as owning it, as being heir to it.

To a would-be artist like Ryder, it is “an aesthetic education to live within those walls, to wander from room to room, from the Soanesque library to the Chinese drawing-room, adazzle with gilt pagodas and nodding mandarins, painted paper and Chippendale fretwork, from the Pompeian parlour to the great tapestry-hung hall which stood unchanged, as it had been designed two hundred and fifty years before; to sit, hour after hour, in the shade looking out on the terrace” (*Brideshead Revisited* 78). This is England as choreographed by Busby Berkeley. It is pure camp of an advanced type, and reveals Ryder’s inability or refusal to be content with his childish England as Eden. He could of course share Tony Last’s fantasy. It could be his, for fantasy is free.

But Ryder, being a creature of pure camp, insists on the reality of his fantasy. It must be perfect, down to the last detail. It must be factual, and yet all those facts are in service of a made-up history, a true chronicle of false sentiment. As I said a few paragraphs ago, Tony Last’s innocence is the real McCoy; it is charming and appalling all at once; it is the sad, matter-of-fact absence of what little good there is in adulthood. I mean of course the power to protect oneself from harm. Unlike the novels of Wodehouse, where it is

unsentimentally prized, innocence in Waugh's early, funny novels always amounts to weakness, and as such it is just a prelude either to destruction or to what I have called mere survival. Destruction is more common. Tony is vulnerable where Ryder is not. The worst and least vincible snob is the man who has nothing to be snobbish about.

3.1 *The Book of Common Snobbery*

Edmund Wilson, writing in *The New Yorker*, condemned *Brideshead Revisited* as a snobbish novel; he had of course delighted in *Decline and Fall*, *Scoop*, and the rest. As an attitude snobbery is perfectly acceptable; Wilson objected only when it was formulated as a doctrine. Tony Last is not a snob as much as he is a fantasist whose fantasy happens to be quite real. It is all around him. It belongs to him. The same can be said for Sebastian Flyte. No, Ryder is the snob. He is the one who insists that the unconscious attitude become established doctrine. He is the one who believes in an aristocracy of taste, for the simple reason that that is the only nobility he can attain.

In "Notes on 'Camp' " Sontag writes that

Aristocracy is a position vis-à-vis culture (as well as vis-à-vis power), and the history of Camp taste is part of the history of snob taste. But since no authentic aristocrats in the old sense exist today to sponsor special tastes, who is the bearer of this taste? Answer: an improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste. (*Sontag Reader* 117)

Nothing better describes the Waugh of *Brideshead Revisited*, the Catholic Waugh, than an aristocrat of snob taste, a self-elected arbiter of the true and beautiful. It is when he becomes a Serious Novelist that Waugh begins to take snobbery with a new and dangerous seriousness; it is no longer his hobby, something to dabble in occasionally and more often to mock, but his calling, instead. And so the comic novelist, all unawares, begins to write pure camp.

What in *Brideshead Revisited* amounts to a mystical veneration of the upper classes, appears much earlier, in *Decline and Fall*, in a far softer and slightly burlesque form. Paul Pennyfeather, the novel's hero, is arrested and jailed entirely through the fault of the woman he loves, Margot Beste-Chetwynde, a rich, beautiful, aristocratic—wait for it—white slaver. She has done him a great wrong, and he forgives her in the twitch of an eye. It is Paul's belief that "that there was in fact, and should be, one law for her and another for himself, and that the raw little exertions of nineteenth century Radicals were essentially base and trivial and misdirected" (*Decline and Fall* 261). But really it comes down to this: "It was just that he saw the impossibility of Margot in prison; the bare connection of vocables associating the ideas was obscene" (*Decline and Fall* 261).

Paul, even by marrying Margot, which he very nearly does, cannot become a peer. Conversion to the aristocracy is beyond him. Ryder cannot convert to Flytehood, but he can become an artist and a Catholic. He seizes an opportunity that was never made available to Paul Pennyfeather, poor fellow. Waugh's own conversion—to Catholicism, and to Serious Art—came two years too late. This is a crucial point—maybe the most crucial in this chapter. By the

time Waugh writes *Brideshead Revisited*, Catholicism, the one true religion of the one true England, has replaced class in his imagination, and Literature has taken the place of comedy.

In *Black Mischief* Basil Seal's well-born friends are impoverished by the Depression; in Waugh's later novels the shadow deepens (brightened by the brief rally of the Churchillian renaissance in 1940 and '41) into the midnight of *Brideshead Revisited*. "These men," reflects Ryder, contemplating the fate of some relatives of Lady Marchmain's, "must die to make a world for Hooper; they were the aborigines, vermin by right of law, to be shot off at leisure so that things might be safe for the travelling salesman with his polygonal pince-nez, his fat wet handshake, his grinning dentures" (*Brideshead Revisited* 134).

It all seems so simple. Horrified, Waugh witnesses England's betraying its aristocracy and hunts through history until he finds the Original Sin, the First Betrayal: the kibosh Henry VIII put on Catholicism. But he also finds an aristocracy of faith, or rather religion, for a religion is something you can convert to, or pretend to—just as one can become an artist. The Gothic dream, nostalgia for a fantastic, artistic past, snobbery made into doctrine—these are the strange ornaments, the longings, fears and prejudices, "wistful, half-romantic, half-aesthetic," which Waugh decorates his Catholicism (*Complete Stories of Evelyn Waugh* 282). But there is no Catholicism here, nor art, just a more refined and less murderous form of the mimicry Patricia Highsmith's famous character Tom Ripley went in for.

During Ryder's first tour of Brideshead Sebastian takes him to the chapel. Once a religious site, it has "been gutted [and] elaborately refurnished and redecorated in the arts-and-crafts style of the last decade of the nineteenth century" (*Brideshead Revisited* 39-40). *Brideshead Revisited* is a novel of sentimental education masquerading as a novel of religious conversion. One of the winning moves in the game of Aestheticism, as Walter Pater played it, was to free the sensuous qualities of Christian art from Christianity. Catholicism freed from Christianity—that is Waugh's religion, and Ryder's, too.

The meat in the shell of Waugh's Catholic religion seems to be an aesthetic education, but really it is a sentimental one, in which Waugh's proxy Ryder tries to feel the loss of something irreplaceable—Sebastian's innocence, which I suppose for Waugh stands in for the Edenic innocence of England at a time when the aristocracy was in full flower—without ever having to lose it, as poor Sebastian does. He is doomed to failure, and yet he is sure that he succeeds. Voilà!

Brideshead Revisited pretends to be a novel of mourning—mourning for an idealized youth, for an imaginary past, and for beauty before it was twisted into decadence—but the mourning is false. You cannot mourn what you have never lost, and you cannot lose what you have never possessed. Ryder is not one of H.D.'s "wistful, ironical, willful" people

who have no part in
new-world construction,
in the confederacy of labour,
the practical issues of art

and the cataloguing of utilities. (*Collected Poems* 15)

Ryder converts to Catholicism so as to have something to mourn, but his conversion is really to sentimentalism. He wants to feel what Sebastian feels, and yet he cannot accept that Sebastian feels as matter-of-factly as he does. Tony Last is a romantic, but he does not romanticize his own romanticism. This is precisely what Ryder does, or tries to do, to Sebastian, and in the process he makes into doctrine—false doctrine, at that—what he can never adopt as an attitude.

It is I think significant that Ryder is not only Waugh's first first-person narrator but by far the closest thing he has to an alter ego until Gilbert Pinfold comes along. And who is Ryder? How would you describe him? As an aesthete I think of a peculiarly characterless kind; a "man without content," to borrow the phrase Giorgio Agamben himself borrows from Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. Everything he has, is borrowed or stolen (Agamben 131).

I have said quite a bit already about Waugh's grand style, but in *Brideshead Revisited* its campiness lies in its false fullness. It is overstuffed, yet it is empty, for its fullness is not Ryder's, but Sebastian's—it is furnished entirely with stuff from Brideshead, the sort of "priceless...furniture" Ryder finds the upstairs rooms "cram-full" of, when he returns as an Army Captain (*Brideshead Revisited* 326). In a similar way, the fullness of Ryder's narrative voice is not Ryder's, but Walter Pater's. There is no conversion here, only impersonation of a rather sinister sort. Tom Ripley would approve, though he would tut-tut at Ryder's sad failure to murder Sebastian—lots of good murdering spots on the grounds of

Brideshead—and take his place. That Ryder does this spiritually rather than physically might provide Ripley with some little consolation.

The talented Mr. Ryder steals from Pater a number of tricks that help to evoke his idealized childhood, which of course is Sebastian's real childhood; chief among them is a stately pace or deliberate languor that resists the arc of development. The technical term for this is parataxis, which places clauses or phrases one after the other, without words to indicate coordination or subordination. In chapter six of his book *Aesthetic Afterlives* Andrew Eastham discusses at at least enough length the paratactic quality of *Brideshead Revisited*; I mention it only briefly, but would not do so at all if Eastham had not called it to my attention.

This is how Ryder describes his and Sebastian's Oxford, the place where he first began to want to be a child, or rather, to be the child Sebastian was and still is:

In her spacious and quiet streets men walked and spoke as they had done in Newman's day; her autumnal mists, her grey springtime and the rare glory of her summer days – such as that day – when the chestnut was in flower and the bells rang out high and clear over her gables and cupolas, exhaled the soft airs of centuries of youth. It was this cloistral hush which gave our laughter its resonance, and carried it still, joyously, over the intervening clamour. Here discordantly, in Eights week came a rabble of womankind, some hundreds strong, twittering and fluttering over the cobbles and up the steps, sight-seeing and pleasure-seeking, drinking claret cup, eating cucumber sandwiches; pushed in punts about the river, herded in the droves to the college barges. (*Brideshead Revisited* 23)

The paratactic stateliness of Pater's style is precisely its appeal to Ryder. He never stops evoking the languor or timelessness of The Life Aesthetic, to which

Brideshead is, he thinks, a temple, even after he claims to have moved on to Catholicism, to “accept the supernatural as the real” (*Brideshead Revisited* 83). He converts of course at Brideshead, not at Oxford, for at Brideshead he begins to believe he can share in Sebastian’s solitude. This is the conversion to the aristocracy that was denied poor Paul Pennyfeather; it is spiritual, rather than a matter of a tap on the shoulder with the Queen’s sword.

Is Ryder’s soul worth more to God than Hooper’s? No, but Sebastian’s is. Waugh’s religion, even before his conversion, abounded in consolation for the rich. That obliging and ever-present priest, Father Rothschild, S. J., (of *Vile Bodies*) refuses to object to the cheerful havoc the Bright Young People are wreaking: “It seems to me that they are all possessed with an almost fatal hunger for permanence. I think all these divorces show that. People aren’t content just to muddle along nowadays.... And this word ‘bogus’ they all use” (*Vile Bodies* 166).

The paradoxes of Father Rothschild are not perhaps meant to be taken very seriously, but the same sort of spiritual consolation, this time with no perceptible trace of irony, may be derived from *Brideshead Revisited*. Lady Marchmain confesses that once she thought it wrong “to have so many beautiful things when others had nothing,” but she overcame these scruples, saying: “The poor have always been the favourites of God and his saints, but I believe that it is one of the special achievements of Grace to sanctify the whole of life, riches included” (*Brideshead Revisited* 122).

What Waugh wants is permanence; it is his almost fatal hunger for it that drives him to pretend he, or rather Ryder, has converted to Catholicism when

really his religion is Sebastianism. Not Sebastian as he is, though. Sebastian as he, Ryder, idealizes him to be. The irony of course is that Sebastian's reality is already ideal. When Ryder infuses it with his own sentiment and sentimentalism, and then denies that he has done so, it becomes pure camp. The Oriental, to use an outdated name, does not say "Voilà! The Orient!"

Sebastian's "constant, despairing prayer is to be let alone," yet Ryder clings to him with the tenacity of the most tenacious limpet (*Brideshead Revisited* 123). He pretends—so well that he believes his own lie—that his motives are pure: friendship, on the one hand, and an aesthetic education, on the other. But what he is really doing is emptying himself of himself, and filling himself with Sebastian. His desire is wholly personal and highly idiosyncratic; yet he magnifies and ennobles it until it becomes doctrinal and universal.

What Ryder is mourning is not the brief time in which he and Sebastian were in love, but rather his failure to remain "a part of Sebastian's solitude" (*Brideshead Revisited* 123). If Sebastian is Adam in Eden, Ryder is very much Eve. Yet they live in two very different Edens: Sebastian's is real, and as matter-of-fact as Tony Last's, while Ryder's is nothing but affectation. It is a myth, an origin story, like the Eden of the Bible. Ryder never entered Sebastian's solitude; had he done so, he would not speak of it as sentimentally as this:

It was thus I like to remember Sebastian, as he was that summer, when we wandered alone together through that; Sebastian in his wheel chair spinning down the box-edged walks of the kitchen gardens in search of alpine strawberries and warm figs, propelling himself through the succession of hothouses, from scent to scent and climate to climate, to cut

the Muscat grapes and choose orchids for our button-holes....
(*Brideshead Revisited* 77)

Here we see Ryder claiming the ideal object as his own, within the same form of sentence in which he has described the “cloistral hush” of Oxford (*Brideshead Revisited* 23).

That is, Ryder does not simply mourn what he has lost—and never really possessed—he does so as an exile grieves for his lost homeland. It is all rather silly. Not even Adam grieves for Eden as Ryder does for Brideshead. The death-bed conversion of Lord Marchmain is the decisive crisis of the novel; the death of an upper class and the death of all earthly hope are two of its principal themes. Ryder and Julia Flyte, Sebastian’s sister, are forced apart by their mutual sense of sin; Brideshead is deserted; the family scattered; the only child born in the novel soon dies.

Out of all the tragedy, apparently justifying it, one good seems to emerge—the conversion of the narrator. But as we have seen, the conversion is false. It is Ryder’s ticket into Brideshead as he imagines it once was. Brideshead as it is, is valuable to Ryder only insofar as it allows him to fantasize about Brideshead as it once was—and to call that fantasy, fact. The same is true of Waugh. Replace “Brideshead” with “England,” which after all is what it stands for, and you have a perfect picture of Waugh’s idiosyncratic, self-serving Catholicism, in which religious rebirth is the veneer and a disturbing sort of sentimentalism or spiritual vampirism is what lies beneath it. Salvation is strictly private, like Lord Marchmain’s funeral. The Hoopers of the world are not invited, but Ryder is.

Without even marrying Julia he has infiltrated the Flyte family. He could teach Paul Pennyfeather a thing or two.

Pater's is not the only voice Ryder mimics; he does the same with Proust's. But of course the past Proust is remembering in his famous novel is his own. Ryder reminisces about his time at Brideshead only because it is there that he got his fangs into Sebastian, and attempted to suck out of him his past, his childhood, his innocence. One of Ryder's more telling and chilling phrasings is this: "we possess nothing certainly except the past" (*Brideshead Revisited* 215). The only past that matters to him is Sebastian's—not because he loves Sebastian, but because Sebastian's continuing childhood is what he most longs for, and can never possess.

Waugh evidently read some Proust. In *A Handful of Dust* he twice pays him the tribute of misquotation, and there are passages in *Brideshead Revisited*, notably the opening of Book Two, that seem to paraphrase *Remembrance of Things Past*. "My theme is memory," Ryder tells us,

that winged host that soared about me one grey morning of war-time. These memories which are my life—for we possess nothing certainly except the past—were always with me. Like the pigeons of St. Mark's, they were everywhere, under my feet singly, in pairs. (*Brideshead Revisited* 215)

He continues in this strain for much longer than I will quote, and while he drones on our thoughts drift to Proust, whose theme was the same, whose metaphors were equally exuberant, and who developed his theme from a recollection of feeling, under his feet, two uneven paving-stones in the baptistry

of St. Mark's in Venice, where Ryder spends the last portion of "Et in Arcadia Ego."

The resemblance between Ryder's narration and Proust's is neither accidental nor merely superficial, and it amounts to a sort of spiritual plagiarism. The outward lives of the two men are very different—one can hardly imagine Proust in the Commandos—but their mental worlds are, up to a point, surprisingly similar. Proust was tenacious of childhood, with a feverishly romantic mind capable of turning a common seaside town into an enchanted city. This romantic sensitivity to names, and perhaps also his social position (unlike Waugh, all his life Proust belonged to the upper middle-class), led him to a veneration for the aristocracy.

For Proust the name of the Duchess of Guermantes could evoke the Patriarchs and Judges on the windows of the cathedral of Laon, as well as the ancient forest in which Childebert went hunting, and it was in pursuit of these things that he entered the salons of the Faubourg St. Germain. There he acquired a sense of social distinction as marked as Waugh's, though far more nuanced.

So far the resemblance is striking, but there it ends. Proust never raised a political or religious superstructure on these foundations. In Balbec, while dining in splendor at the Grand Hotel, Marcel pictures the dining-room as an aquarium; the "working population of Balbec" peers through the glass wall to see how the "strange fishes" live their "luxurious life" (*Remembrance of Things Past* 732). This, says Marcel, raises "an important social question: whether the glass wall

will always protect the banquets of these weird and wonderful creatures, or whether the obscure folk who watch them hungrily out of the night will not break in some day to gather them from their aquarium and devour them”

(*Remembrance of Things Past* 732).

Though Marcel is one of the feeding fish, the image of their being fed on does not horrify him; he is amused, if pretty archly. Elsewhere in *Remembrance of Things Past* he shows Parisian society decaying and breaking up under the pressure of war, but he writes as a spectator, even as a connoisseur, not as a partisan. His true nature, after all, is that of a “writer, a student of human ichthyology” (*Remembrance of Things Past* 732). Waugh wanted to stay in the aquarium for ever and ever, amen—and yet he never quite got in, and yet he never stopped flopping after the impossible dream.

In respect of romanticism, Marcel is able at last to disentangle the Duchess of Guermantes from Childebert’s forest, and to regard fashionable snobberies as not different in kind from disputes on precedence among greengrocers’ wives. Waugh never took this decisive step. And Marcel’s religious experience, if there is such a thing, is confined to the discrepancies of mortal life in time. He never makes his boyish romanticism into a dogma one must accept or be damned.

The difference between the two writers, and their two alter egos, may be in part explained by their historical setting. Proust lived and wrote at a time when the upper classes were menaced, but not severely damaged. They had suffered an infusion from the classes below, but their money was still safe enough. It was

easy for Proust—especially as his health was bad—to feel that society would last his time. He had no children; no belief in immortality; he was entirely free to cultivate an easy and speculative detachment. In Waugh's time, the upper classes, even in England, were not merely menaced; they were gravely damaged. They felt not merely frustrated or irritated but actually oppressed by the high level of modern taxation; they saw their equals leveled all over Europe and their hold on their own masses broken. Proust's detachment and sense of nuance may have perished in this atmosphere, and the wistful romantic easily develops, as Waugh did, into an embattled neo-Jacobite.

It would, however, be a simplification to insist too much on the direct influence of economic history. Even if the two men had been born contemporaries their evolution would have differed widely, because of the great difference in the manners of their upbringing. Marcel was subjected to no "hardening discipline" as a boy, and while this coddling regimen did not produce an ideal citizen or soldier, it did ensure a continuity of emotional life, with, in his case, a certain lucidity and calm. The same of course could be said for Proust himself.

The young Waugh, on the contrary, was subjected to the discipline of an English public school, and a religious one at that. Ryder speaks sadly of "the hard bachelordom of English adolescence, the premature dignity and authority of the school system" (*Brideshead Revisited* 45). He endured these things and emerged an Englishman, with an Englishman's slight hysteria. Cream and dappled unicorns had no place at Lancing College; an interior life which includes

such exotic, fantastic creatures will inevitably feel itself menaced. If it does not die it will take on a new intensity, becoming a fixed, intolerant mythology.

3.2 Heaven Can't Wait

Marcel, Proust's narrator, favors what is called hypotaxis: the subordination of one clause to another. This makes sense, for the novel he is narrating is one in which time, more often than not, is well-organized. Marcel's fantasy is not Ryder's: a timeless English Eden, an eternal Brideshead in which he lives with Sebastian, or rather as Sebastian. Waugh praised Wodehouse as the creator of an "idyllic world" that "can never stale," without realizing that its freshness is due entirely to its being purest fantasy (*Essays, Articles, and Reviews* 561). Had he realized this, he would never have tried to enter Arcadia by the door marked "Catholics Only."

Ryder's parataxis breaks down when he talks about languor as a concept and a "quintessential" value:

The languor of Youth—how unique and quintessential it is! How quickly, how irrecoverably, lost! The zest, the generous affections, the illusions, the despair, all the traditional attributes of Youth – all save this one – come and go all our life. These things are a part of life itself; but languor – the relaxation of yet unwearied sinews, the mind sequestered and self-regarding—that belongs to Youth alone and dies with it. (*Brideshead Revisited* 77)

Ryder's declarative tone sits uneasily with the languor that he is trying to evoke.

But this may be the only way he can ask himself if the aesthetic life can be led

outside of Brideshead. What happens if he must leave Eden? Does the aesthetic life run on languor? And can it be achieved outside of the stand-in Eden of English class privilege, Brideshead? Can the right to be lazy be rescued from the aristocracy and transformed into a positive ideal of play?

This, finally, is why Ryder latches, Count-Dracula-like, onto Sebastian—if he can just get into Eden, or Brideshead as it is, he can enter it again and make it into a still greater paradise, Brideshead as it was and always will be, Brideshead among the clouds. *Brideshead Revisited* becomes paradise regained, a timeless place in which God means Art, and Art means Youth. Waugh arrives at Catholicism by a bizarrely twisting and purely campy road, convinced that his fantasy of an English Eden that “cannot become dated because it never existed” is not fantasy at all, but a real place (*Essays, Articles, and Reviews* 561). It is, in a word, Heaven, and he is its one true God.

As fantasies go, this is absurd—terrifying, too. Yet it is Waugh’s dogmatic insistence that he is simply being a good Catholic, that the subject of *Brideshead Revisited* is not the aesthetic and sentimental deification of his fantasy of himself but rather “the operation of divine grace, the unmerited and unilateral act of love by which God continually calls souls to Himself,” that lifts what might have been no more than a laughably bad confection into the “deadly serious” realm of pure camp (*Brideshead Revisited* ix).

4. The Joy of Insincerity: E.F. Benson's Mapp and Lucia

Susan Sontag speaks of pure camp as if it were a sort of divine error. And maybe it is, in the Mervyn LeRoy movies she cites in "Notes on 'Camp' ". Oddly, she gives no examples of the literary kind of pure camp. My example, Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, is more disturbing than it is funny; it is a howler only up to a point.

If so skilled a writer as Waugh could not, in stumbling into pure camp, stumble also into very much comedy, it would seem that to write good camp—or for that matter, good comedy—one must nearly always set out to do so. To go along hoping to step in it, is to step far more often in the other thing.

You do not merely laugh while reading E.F. Benson's Mapp and Lucia books; you laugh with unaffected pleasure, as you do when reading Wodehouse. Pompous "silvery" laughter was not Benson's bag (*Queen Lucia* and *Miss Mapp* 236). He left that to Lucia—"pronounced, of course, in the Italian mode—La Lucia, the wife of Lucas" (*Queen Lucia* and *Miss Mapp* 10).

Like Bertie and Jeeves, Mapp and Lucia are funny in a wonderfully accessible way; anyone with a useable sense of humor, who does not fall into the awful camp of "agelasts; that is to say, non-laughers; men who are in that respect as dead bodies, which if you prick them do not bleed," will find them funny (Meredith 4). But how is this possible? To hear Sontag tell it, camp is a "private code," the "badge of identity...among small urban cliques" (*Sontag Reader* 105). Without the hothouse warmth of the secret society, it ought to wither and die.

It is a pity that camp got the reputation of being such an esoteric thing. If it is “one of the hardest things to talk about,” how did Sontag manage to write fifty-eight separate notes on it (*Sontag Reader* 105)? It must have been a terrible ordeal. Of course its mysteriousness worked to her advantage; she got to discover it. And legions of academics, following after her about as warmly as Shelley’s Frankenstein does his monster, get to rediscover it.

But if camp, at least in its literary form, is simply a special type of comedy, then everything becomes looser, more charming, funnier, and perhaps surprisingly, campier. When camp is freed from being “a mode of aestheticism,” and instead permitted to be a sendup of people with aesthetic pretensions; when rather than “a variant of sophistication” it becomes a gentle puncturing of certain sophisticated types not unlike Sontag herself; then it throws off its shackles and makes its escape from the snobby dreariness of esotericism, cliques who talk in cipher, the humorless, and the humbugs (*Sontag Reader* 105). There is nothing campy about humbuggery.

Lucia and Mapp are at once of their time and place and splendidly unmoored from it—as Wodehouse’s greatest characters might just as be little green men living in the distant future on the planet Mars. They would still be funny. Time and place are mere set decorations; the real show is character, and if done properly character is timeless and universal.

Queen Lucia coasts along on a consciously phony esotericism. Pretense without esotericism tends to be boring; nearly as boring as esotericism without pretense. But there can be a consciousness of one’s falseness, and no shame

about it, in chaste camp. To be false is not necessarily shameful. Bertie Wooster thinks of himself as *preux chevalier*, and does his best to live up to the example set by the great Terrail. In this he is perfectly sincere. Lucia is perfectly insincere, yet she is as much a figure of chaste camp as Bertie. She, too, is a sort of schoolboy for life. That is, she performs the Bertie function—always getting herself into fixes, always blundering into messes. And it is Mapp, her great enemy, who extricates her.

Like Bertie, Lucia is the hero—or rather the heroine—of the Mapp and Lucia books. She is quite false, in the sense of not being many of the things she pretends to be, and yet she is wonderful, and very funny, and not at all despicable or despised, except by the awful Mapp. When Adele Brixton and Marcia Whitby, two of Lucia's London friends, uncover another of the Great Deceiver's deceptions, Adele says with great delight: " 'Aren't you feeling more Luciaphil? I'm sure you are. You must enjoy her: it shows such a want of humour to be annoyed with her' " (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 220).

There is no malice in Lucia, or rather, "such malice as she impotently indulged in she much enjoyed, and hurt nobody by it" (*Freaks of Mayfair* 47). Mapp is the malicious one. Her tight-lipped crusade has as its object the tearing off of Lucia's various masks: the Fluent Italian Speaker mask, the Mistress of Calisthenics mask, the Woman of Culture mask, and so on and on.

Why can Mapp not simply join Lucia in her game, by making masks of her own? Everyone in Tilling is doing it—even the parish priest " 'Dear Padre' " gets in on it, for it is " 'one of his little ways to talk Scotch, though he came from

Birmingham' ” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 315). Later, after a trip to Ireland, he acquires “a touch of brogue” and grafts it onto his “Highland accent,” to confusing but very funny effect: “as if men of two nationalities were talking together of whom the Irishman only got in a few words edgewise,” the odd “begorra” and “begob” (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 16).

Mapp does put on the odd mask—this is a bit of a blunder on Benson’s part—but mostly she works to unmask her fellow Tillingites. She entertains “the gravest suspicions about everybody,” as well she should, up to a point, while pretending that their endless game of pretend is beneath her (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 287). To seek to unmask others rather than to mask oneself; to pretend that one wears no masks; in the Mapp and Lucia books, this is the worst sort of bad sportsmanship.

It is also wrongheaded. Mapp is always wanting to claw the surface away, to see what is beneath. Georgie sums her up nicely: “ ‘I never knew an occasion on which she didn’t suspect something,’ said he” (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 249). But in chaste camp the surface is all there is; there is nothing beneath it, or nothing interesting.

Chaste camp’s obsession with surfaces is not aesthetic, though, no matter what Sontag says; it is sometimes a parody of aestheticism, and it sometimes features people with pretensions to Art, but it itself is not nearly so pretentious.

It is a mistake I think to insist, as Sontag does, that camp is a form of aestheticism. In the Mapp and Lucia books the Excavation Impluse—“excavation, indeed, seemed like some beautiful law of Nature which they all must obey”—

often comes in for gentle mockery (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 169). After Lucia buys Mallards from Mapp she makes many improvements, one of which—repairing a leaky, smelly gas pipe—leads her to believe that a Roman temple lies beneath her new house. It turns out to be an Apollinaris bottle.

Incidentally, this is more or less what happens when critiquers gets hold of camp; they excavate, and shamelessly pretend that the Apollinaris bottles they dig up are the remains of Roman temples. Even Lucia does not go so far. (Which is also a bit of a blunder on Benson's part, but by *The Worshipful Lucia* he is slipping just a bit.) When London's Central News Agency hears of her exciting excavations and asks to send a Professor Arbuthnot of the British Museum to inspect them, she shuts it all down: " 'I am very sorry,' she said firmly, 'but it is quite impossible for me to let Professor Arbuthnot inspect my excavations at this stage, or to permit any further announcement concerning them' " (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 174).

What fabulous Roman temple is buried beneath the gardens of camp? A very glorious one, whose god is Queerness. Camp apparently has a purpose beyond mere entertainment; that purpose is nothing less than the "integration" of "[h]omosexuals" into "society," by "promoting the aesthetic sense" (Sontag 64). When "[s]een in these terms," writes Humble, "camp functions as a spearhead for gay rights, insinuating 'queerness' into mainstream culture" (Humble).

The critiquer is deluded about his delusions; the character in a novel of chaste camp is not. This also happens to be the great difference between Benson's funniest character and Wodehouse's. Bertie Wooster is self-deluded

about nearly everything, including himself (and how deluded he really is); Lucia, that arch-deluder, is deluded about nothing, except perhaps her capacity to delude. Bertie's pretensions are unconscious; Lucia's are all too conscious—that is how she recognizes her ever-present danger of being unmasked, and takes steps (which often miscarry) to make herself safe again. Bertie wears the mask without ever putting it on; Lucia never takes it off, except to change it for another mask, and is always adjusting and prettifying it, and is never in better spirits than when she keeps a Mapp from dislodging it or breaking the string that holds it on her face.

But this makes Lucia seem a sort of endlessly duplicitous monster, and really she is anything but. To play pretend, and to play so ably and with such absolute conviction, for so small a purpose—say, to fool only a few fairly gullible but not at all contemptible people in a small English village; to make artistic dilettantism one's life pursuit, when one's life is almost showily provincial; this is to be at once truly campy and wonderfully funny, in the tradition of the best literary comedy.

Benson's version of chaste camp, unlike Wodehouse's, is about pretending and nearly not getting away with it, on a very small scale; it is about masking, but not always perfectly, and pouring all one's ingenuity into the task of not being unmasked, when the consequences of having one's mask knocked off, or letting it slip off, could not be less dire. For the comedy to work, and to be truly campy, the stakes must be village-sized. (Though Tilling is nominally a town, Benson wastes no time in shrinking it to Riseholme proportions.)

But this is not quite right. Even a village is too big for chaste camp. Which is to say, even the childlike are too grown-up.

Benson invented Lucia first, then Mapp. Mapp has *Miss Mapp* to herself; Lucia is absent. Evidently their creator did not realize at once how perfect a pair they would make. Sherlock Holmes had to wait till “The Adventure of the Final Problem” to meet Professor Moriarty, and that adventure was meant to be their last. Lucia is far more fortunate. She leaves Riseholme for Tilling after Lucia in London, which is only the third novel in a series of six.

The glory of Lucia is that her love of playing pretend, and taking her play perfectly seriously, without betraying any knowledge that she is playing, extends to her friends; to her husband Peppino, but more frequently and lastingly to her friend and A.D.C. Georgie Pillson. Whom she marries toward the end of *The Worshipful Lucia*; poor Peppino, having outlived his usefulness as a character, is killed off before Mapp and Lucia begins. Lucia, as Adele Brixton puts it, “ ‘has got more—more dash when he’s not there’ ” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 220).

Lucia’s alliances are the stuff of good generalship, of course; even as great a military strategist as Napoleon, and Lucia and Mapp are known both to have “Napoleonic brains,” needs allies, or he is sunk (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 473). But it is also the sort of generosity one kindred spirit extends to another.

V.S. Pritchett is not quite right about the basis of Georgie and Lucia’s “close relationship”—it is kinship, not “fascination”; but Pritchett does see that

“[e]ach is the other’s mirror” (Pritchett). Georgie is the only other character in the books who takes appearances as seriously as Lucia does; their mutual mirroring is by choice as much as disposition. I will say more about this shortly.

Lucia and Georgie—and everyone else in Riseholme and Tilling, with the exception of Mapp—live to keep their own masks on straight while knocking off, or fantasizing about it, as many of the masks of their friends as they can. Yet they live to keep their friends’ masks in place, too—so they can knock them off in the future, or threaten to, or just because it is so interesting to know that a mask is a mask, while pretending otherwise.

4.1 Queen of Camp: Lucia as Head Boy

This is the spirit of childlike play—pleasurable even at its nastiest—that animates the camp novel. And Lucia is Queen of Camp. What makes camp comedy is how seriously the adults, who are just children really, take their play, without ever taking it so seriously as to make comedy into tragedy. In this respect Benson’s novels *do* resemble Wodehouse’s: just the right amount of seriousness, and the right kind, too. This is a tricky business.

It may seem that Lucia and her subjects have no other option than to pretend all day. Perhaps this is just “life as it must be enlivened” among the social elite of “an English village,” as nursery life must somehow be made tolerable, to keep the children from crying all day or trying to murder one another in their cribs (Kiernan 71).

But there is no Nurse in Riseholme or Tilling; there is a Queen, instead. And yet she behaves in a thoroughly Nurse-like way, cajoling rather than issuing orders, and this is the mark not of Nurses, but of the Head Boy. Rather than Bertie Wooster, Lucia better resembles Jeeves—if Jeeves were the sort of monster another writer than Wodehouse would have made him.

Naturally Lucia is not exactly the sort of head boy Jeeves is, though he is pretentious, too, in his Tennyson-quoting way. Like Wodehouse's Bertie and Jeeves series, Benson's Mapp and Lucia books are about the risks one runs in playing pretend. Bertie knows dimly that he is not Head Boy, but insists on acting as though he were. He brings home white mess jackets from Cannes, and rouses Jeeves's ire. Lucia knows that she *is* Head Boy, though she is in constant danger of losing her crown to the pretender Mapp.

This is the drama in nursery life, and the chaste comedy, too. *This* is why it is so silly to associate camp, all camp, with queerness; chaste camp is entirely free from sex of any description, for its characters are children playing pretend in a nursery of their own making. There are no actual, physical children in the Mapp and Lucia books—not a one. They would be redundant.

Yet it is still simply taken for granted that to be camp is to be queer. Here is Nicola Humble, cited at the beginning of this chapter, on Benson:

Many of the characters are themselves camp: the lisping Lucia, a vulnerable dominatrix as appealing to the queer sensibility as any Judy Garland or Bette Davis; the barely-closeted Georgie; and Quaint Irene, an artist who dresses as a man and harbours an openly-acknowledged "schwarm" for Lucia. (Humble)

Calling Lucia a dominatrix is absurd; assuming that Irene is what she pretends to be is naïve; calling Georgie barely-closeted is simply bad criticism. Though Benson was queer, there is no queerness in the Mapp and Lucia books, and therefore no closet to be in or out of. To put Georgie in one, only to open the door and leer at him, adds nothing to our appreciation of his character or his place in the chaste little universe Benson has made. And why is it chaste? Because of the way in which it is comic.

Like Wodehouse, Benson remained an essentially Edwardian writer; they both specialized in what V.S. Pritchett calls the “fairy tale for adults” (Pritchett). This is another way of saying what I have said already: that chaste camp is children’s literature for grown-ups, featuring grown-ups who are essentially children.

But Pritchett, too, must mention that Georgie is “homosexual probably, but no boys in sight; certainly a Narcissus” (Pritchett). But Georgie is the boy, with no sex in sight. Besides the Narcissus of Greek myth this last bit refers I think to the “replica of the Neapolitan Narcissus” in Georgie’s garden at Mallards Cottage (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 28). Never mind that in body if not in mind or spirit Georgie is long past his Narcissus days; he “once told Lucia that he had had just that figure when he was a boy, and with her usual tact she had assured him he had it still” (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 28). Tact, one of Benson’s wonderful euphemisms, is greatly prized by Lucia and Georgie; it is the oil that makes their shared life run so smoothly.

They often play duets on Lucia's piano; she always practices the treble part "with the soft pedal down" a number of times before proposing to Georgie, as if it had just occurred to her, that they might run through, say, Glazonov's "Bacchanal"—which is the closest either of them will ever get to wild and drunken revelry; Georgie always hears her "soft-pedalled tinkle" from his garden; he himself practices the bass part when Lucia is "out taking her exercise," or otherwise out of hearing (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 290).

Then they sit down at the instrument and play, pretending to be embarking on a maiden voyage, and Georgie wonders—this is at the end of Benson's run, when he has begun to blunder a bit, and to let characters say or think explicitly what the coarser reader has been thinking and saying all along—" 'Why is she such a hypocrite? She was practising it half the afternoon' " (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 290). For her part, Lucia says to herself " 'Georgie can't be reading it. He must have tried it before' " (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 290).

But when the duet is over, tact again reigns supreme: "At the end were mutual congratulations; each thought the other had read it wonderfully well" (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 290). Georgie knows the truth, and Lucia all but knows it, and yet neither would dream of exposing the other's falseness.

Georgie is deeply interested in surfaces; he loves beauty only insofar as it is decorative; Art decorates his life, rather than enriching or enlarging it; he dabbles in "playing the piano" and "making charming little watercolour sketches," but "his finest accomplishment was needlework, and his house was full of the

creations of his needle, wool-work curtains, petit-point chair seats, and silk embroideries framed and glazed” (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 30). To Georgie a beautiful man or woman is just a living bit of petit-point; gender does not enter into it, much less sex.

As for Pritchett’s “no boys in sight,” this is simply incorrect. Besides being a boy in spirit, a version of Wodehouse’s schoolboy for life, Georgie has a “handsome young chauffeur” called “Dicky” or “Dickie,” who could not be a more minor character (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 30; *Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 474). He appears only a handful of times in the six novels, and is given no dialogue or anything to do beyond drive Georgie’s car (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 30). And when he fears that marriage to Lucia might deprive him of his car, it is named—“his Arnaud”—but Dickie is not (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 927).

By contrast, Georgie cannot live without his “very pretty parlour-maid Foljambe,” and it is she, not Dicky, who “valet[s] him” (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 30). Had Benson given Georgie a sexuality, and had it been the sort to make Dickie more attractive to him than Foljambe, surely Dicky would have valeted him, and an incongruous comic subplot would have been born, involving Georgie’s ineffectual flirtations with his valet and his, Georgie’s, efforts to hide his own signs of age—the expanding waistline, the second chin, above all the bald spot he covers with an “expensive toupée” made so beautifully by the “artist” Mr. Holroyd that it matches the shade of his hair, which he dyes with “the contents of

a bottle that always stood in a locked cupboard in his bedroom” (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 175).

Is Georgie more likely to be homosexual than not? Probably he is. But what purpose does this sort of speculative criticism serve, when the sort of book the critic is writing about is, in Benson’s words, a “bloodless idyll” (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 29)? It is like saying a zebra is more likely to be a horse than a donkey; it serves no purpose.

Lucia is just as sexless. She is so chaste, “ ‘a kiss would scorch her’ ” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 170). If in London she takes a lover, one Stephen Merriall, she has “ ‘no more idea of keeping a real lover than of keeping a chimpanzee’ ” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 170). Stephen is merely a “ ‘public lover’ ” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 170). He looks “ ‘as if he had been labelled “Man” by mistake when he was born, and ought to have been labelled “Lady” ’ ” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 170). Like Georgie he is “ ‘a tall man in Oxford trousers with auburn hair’ ” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 27). When Olga says, “ ‘It sounds like your double, Georgie. And a little cape like yours?’ ” Georgie “rather coldly” admits the existence of Stephen’s little cape (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 27). Poor fellow, he thinks he has been replaced. He should know better; Lucia cannot do without him. He is her great and faithful playmate.

Stephen is not Georgie’s double to this extent. He soon comes to the conclusion that Lucia means to make him a real lover. And as he is as sexless as she and Georgie, the thought fills him with an overpowering fear. Though he

writes “Five o’clock Chit-Chat” for the *Evening Gazette*, he cannot think why she would want a public lover. The truth ought to be obvious: “the talk of the town,” as he well knows, is Babs Shyton’s divorce case, and it occurs to Lucia that “ ‘in this naughty world it gives a cachet to a woman to have the reputation of having a lover. So safe too: there’s nothing to expose’ ” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 220).

When Lucia mistakenly enters her lover’s bedroom during a weekend they are both spending at Adele Brixton’s, and finds him standing by the bed, “voluptuous in honey-colored pajamas,” he first stares at her in mute horror and then, when he has recovered the power of speech says “ ‘How dare you?’ ” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 232). Lucia hisses “ ‘how dare you?’ ” before realizing that the mistake is hers; she gives “a little squeal, of a pitch between the music of the slate-pencil and the bat,” and staggers back to her room and locks the door behind her (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 232).

This is a recurring joke in the Mapp and Lucia books: two people who are publicly thought to have some romantic interest in one another, putting every available obstacle, including marriage, between themselves and romance, each fearing all the while that the other really desires it. Georgie is understood by all Riseholme to be the “implacably Platonic but devout lover of Lucia” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 581). Somehow this “interesting fiction” has taken root, and Lucia has “abetted it as well as himself” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 330). But what if Lucia has not been pretending?

There is no danger of this, of course; Georgie ought to know better; Lucia is always pretending. But his great fear is that their pose of “stainless devotion” is for Lucia not a pose at all (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 331).

When the two friends visit Tilling, for Lucia means to take a house there for several months, they stay at the Trader’s Arms. Separate rooms, of course, but with a dangerous connecting door: “There was a bolt on Georgie’s side of it, and he went swiftly across to this and fastened it. Even as he did so, he heard a key quietly turned from the other side of it” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 581).

Georgie is horrified by the thought of marriage to Lucia, if it entails the exchange of his “passionate celibacy for an even more passionate matrimony” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 581). This, incidentally, is a wonderful display of the clever economy of Benson’s narration. After being carefully cultivated for years, a popular superstition—Georgie’s passionate celibacy—leads inexorably on the sentence level, and seems to be leading in the plot, too, to the shattering possibility of real passion in matrimony.

The terror of a pleasant fiction’s turning into a dreadful fact, and pulling Georgie along behind it like a horse dragging its rider, keeps him awake; and Lucia is lying awake, too, in the next room, “tossing and turning” despite the locked door (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 331). By bringing Georgie with her to Tilling, and encouraging him to take Mallards Cottage once she has taken Mapp’s Mallards, she thinks she has been “ ‘encouraging him to hope,’ ” for he

“knows that my year of widowhood is almost over, and on the very eve of its accomplishment I take him off on this solitary expedition with me. Dear me, it looks as if I was positively asking for it! How perfectly terrible!”

Though it was quite dark, Lucia felt herself blushing.

“What on earth am I to do?” continued these disconcerting reflections. “If he asks me to marry him, I must certainly refuse, for I couldn’t do so: quite impossible. And then, when I say no, he has every right to turn on me and say I’ve been leading him on. I’ve been taking moonlight walks with him; I’m at this moment staying alone with him in a hotel! Oh, dear!” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 331)

Of course this shared fear of “connubialities” is entirely groundless (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 486). When at last Georgie and Lucia do agree to marry, it is with the firm understanding that there be no hanky-panky of any kind. About “the question of connubialities” they are “quite definite: it must be a sine qua non of matrimony, the first clause in the marriage treaty, that they should be considered absolutely illicit” (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 253).

Once each half of the “half-espoused couple” agrees to this, and they sort out the other great difficulties—where they are to live (Mallards, of course; Lucia has just pried it out of Mapp’s grasping hands, and renovated it); what is to be done with Georgie’s beloved furniture (everything in what is to be Georgie’s bedroom and sitting room at Mallards is sent to Mallards Cottage, to make room for his own personal piano, pictures and embroideries, sofa, particular armchair, bed, bibelots, and “six occasional tables”); how to retain the services of both Foljambe and Grosvenor, neither of whom will consent to being bossed by the other (there will be “ ‘a sort of equality’ ” between them, like “ ‘King William III and Queen Mary’ ”)—the engagement is on (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 253, 256, & 255). To celebrate their good fortune Georgie even considers

“kissing Lucia once, on the brow,” but after what has been “said about caresses, he felt she might consider it a minor species of rape” (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 258).

Benson’s characters are perfect children, resolutely sexless and solemnly silly, and yet their world is a comic paradise as perfect as Wodehouse’s snakeless Eden. If they are “anything,” they are “intensely serious,” as only children can be, who cannot begin to imagine what true seriousness is (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 203). Sex would spoil things; it is not of course an evil in itself, but it introduces a grown-upness that is entirely out of place in camp.

When children play pretend they are not concealing anything—they are just playing. This is not “dishonesty,” as Pritchett calls it, but simply play, and it is bad form not to play along and thereby keep the “delicate bloom” intact (Pritchett; *Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 220). By playing children do not mean anything, just as Lucia does not mean anything by taking Stephen as her lover or Georgie as her husband. They all (except Stephen) just want to play pretend, and to pretend that they are not pretending. There is nothing private that their pretense hides; there is nothing beneath their masks.

So what is so funny, and so pleasurable, in the Mapp and Lucia books? It should be obvious, from what I have said about them so far. But they may seem too much like the sort of literary candies that make the teeth ache—Diva’s “nougat chocolates” in book form (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 388). They are no such thing. The humor in the books and the drama come from the

same sources: Benson's elegant, fussy narration; Lucia's inventiveness, her endless games of pretend, and her steadfast, cheerful refusal to admit that that is what she is doing all the time, playing and pretending; and Mapp's tireless efforts, nearly all of which end in the most pleasing failure, to spoil Lucia's play.

But that is a little long-winded, as a description of the books' great appeal. Here is a shorter version: it is how perfectly seriously everyone—Mapp, Lucia, and Benson's narrator—takes what in itself could not be less serious. And that is camp, in large part: taking trivial things seriously, as long as they are interesting. For being interesting is not trivial at all. Nor is playing pretend. Making drama out of everyday life; Sontag, in her typical agelastic way, calls this “the theatricalization of experience”—this apparently is “embodied in the camp sensibility” (*Sontag Reader* 115).

I cannot say if it is embodied or not, for I do not know what it would mean for something to be embodied in a sensibility. But making good drama—playing pretend, but playing it well—is certainly very campy. Sontag is certainly right to say that “camp taste...is not stirred by is the sense of the development of character,” though I do not know that the camp character “is understood as a state of continual incandescence—a person being one, very intense thing” (*Sontag Reader* 114).

I would say that what “stirs” camp taste—though somehow I cannot picture taste being stirred, as if it were a glass of lemonade—is a person very intensely or earnestly pretending to be a number of things. This is Lucia all over. We learn very early in *Queen Lucia* that the queen does everything—“and really

she did an incredible deal”—“with all the might of her dramatic perception,” with “such earnestness that she had no time to have an eye to the gallery at all” (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 5). The world, or at least her little world, is her playhouse, and she is the sort of great actress who refuses to let drop the slightest hint to her audience that she is acting at all.

And as Lucia is not Benson’s narrator, the narration must be equally earnest, which does not keep it from being sly and catty. Above all it cannot give Lucia away; the reader must see her for what she is, and love her, rather than cluck his tongue at her, for so energetically guarding her masks against the Mapps of the world, the critics who poke holes in everything, who insist on dreary reality or nothing. For they are dreary themselves, and want to spoil everyone else’s fun.

4.2 *La Bella Lingua: Baby Talk in Benson*

Maybe the longest-running joke in the books is Lucia’s Italian. It is “firm and perfect” as far as it goes, but cannot be considered “as going far, and was useless for conversational purposes” (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 12). She has memorized various words and phrases, but sometimes the phrases go wrong. In *Mapp and Lucia* she invites the social elite of Tilling to her home for dinner and “*un po’ di musica*”—a bit of music (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 459). Even her fellow Tillingites can see the absurdity in this word-for-word translation, the sort that a child would make with the help of a dictionary. Only the Countess

Faraglione, a distressingly fluent Italian speaker who visits her brother Stephen Wyse in Tilling from time to time, rescues Lucia's po-di-mu from ridicule, and only after becoming an unwitting pawn in Lucia's great game.

Lucia could of course simply learn *la bella lingua*, but it is far more interesting, and far funnier, for her to pretend to know it, and always to risk being unmasked. In *Queen Lucia* it is Olga Braceley's friend Signor Cortese, the eminent Italian composer, who without at all meaning to reveals the extent of her fraudulence. Olga invites Lucia and Peppino to dinner with Cortese, for he " 'hates talking English,' " and Olga truly believes that the Lucases, as English Italiani, " 'always talk Italian at home' " (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 206).

Of course she is immediately exposed, and before the social elite of Riseholme, no less. This includes her nemesis Daisy Quantock, an early version of Mapp. But when Lucia realizes that "as an Italian conversationalist, neither she nor Peppino had a rag of reputation left them," she does not admit defeat, but launches an offensive (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 208). It is Signor Cortese and his Italian that are suspect:

"No, we did not quite like our evening, Peppino and I, did we, caro?" she went on. "And Mr. Cortese! His appearance! He is like a huge hairdresser. His touch on the piano: if you can imagine a wild bull hitting the keys, you will have some idea of it. And above all, his Italian! I gathered that he was a Neapolitan, and we all know what Neapolitan dialect is like. Tuscans and Romans, who between them, I believe—*lingua Toscano in bocca Romana*, you remember—know how to speak their own tongue, find Neapolitans totally unintelligible. For myself, and I speak for mio sposo as well, I do not want to understand what Romans do not understand. *La bella lingua* is sufficient for me."

"I hear that Olga could understand him quite well," said Georgie, betraying his complete knowledge of all that had happened.

“That may be so,” said Lucia. “I hope she understood his English, too, and his music. He had not an ‘h’ when he spoke English, and I have not the slightest doubt in my own mind that his Italian was equally illiterate.” (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 216)

The narrator’s verdict on Lucia’s performance here, and Georgie’s verdict, too, for Georgie is the character with whom Benson’s narration keeps most closely in step, and about whom it is cattiest, is this: “Really it was rather magnificent” (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 216). It would be boring, deeply disappointing, and entirely uncharacteristic for Lucia to admit that she knows no Italian, even when this is proven to everyone’s satisfaction. She knows she has been exposed, but refuses to admit it, and goes off on a new, brilliant flight of fancy.

Benson well understands “the baby talk of fairyland which, of course, sex and our four letter words have destroyed” (Pritchett). This is one of Benson’s greatest jokes: having babies talk baby talk, thinking they are adults all the while. Lucia often mixes Italian with baby talk, for both dialects serve her fancy, rather than tether her to dreary reality. Her Italian is not real Italian; it is baby Italian. Pritchett cites the following exchange between Lucia and Georgia, as an instance of the various lingos of fairyland:

“*I domestichi* are making *salone* ready.”

“*Molto bene*. Then Peppino and you and I just steal away. *La lampa* is acting beautifully. We tried it over several times.”

“Everybody’s tummin,” said Georgie, varying the cipher.

“Me so *nervosa!*” said Lucia. “Fancy me doing Brunnhilde before singing Brunnhilde. Me can’t bear it.” (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 265)

Then Pritchett gets a little selfish. The “key word,” he writes, “is ‘cipher.’ Benson knew the cipher of all his characters” (Pritchett). But there is no cipher. Benson is handling the word very lightly. Pritchett is handling it more roughly, and in the process doing it a little violence. Benson does have a marvelous ear; he gets at character through dialogue, in a few brief and beautiful strokes. That is Pritchett’s point. But Benson is using “cipher” humorously; *that* I think is what is most worth noting here.

Lucia and Georgie’s cipher hides nothing; it is all surface and no depth; their code could not be easier to crack, for every word in it stands for itself. Behind the snatches of Italian meant to suggest a fluency in Italian there is no fluency, and Lucia and Georgie both know it. They talk these two sorts of baby talk to reassure each other, to solidify their alliance, as two representatives of allied powers might speak to one another in the empty formalities of diplomacy.

But Georgie and Lucia really are fond of one another, and this helps the reader be fond of both of them, if she needs any additional help. You love Georgie and Lucia for their games of pretend, *and* in spite of them—but mostly for them. More importantly, their fondness for one another relaxes things, and makes a relatively safe space for conversation.

This is extremely rare in the Mapp and Lucia books, which are propelled so much by conversation; in fact, it is entirely unique. In books filled with “gratuitous acts of war”—at one point Mapp talks baby talk to Georgie in Lucia’s hearing, to try to convince her that Georgie has profaned “the language consecrated for his use and Lucia’s” by spreading it beyond that little circle, and

to Lucia's great rival, no less—it is necessary for peace sometimes to reign (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 505 & 503).

Georgie knows exactly who and what Lucia is, and she knows him as well or better, for they are very similar—this is the more obvious sense in which they mirror one another, but they are also mirrors-plus, meaning they make each other look better than ordinary mirrors would. They prop up and prettify each other's games of pretend. They are tactful with each other, as Benson understands tact: each gilds the other's life with half-truths and what Pritchett in his severe way would call outright lies.

Remember the Neapolitan Narcissus in Georgie's garden? Georgie is long past his Narcissus days, but when he tells Lucia that he “had just that figure when he was a boy,” she assured him with her usual tact...that he has it still” (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 28). But it is not Georgie's figure that counts; it is the way he decorates it. And perhaps this is why Georgie half-admits that he is no longer Narcissus in body. He has ways of ornamenting himself that make the body almost beside the point.

Benson's narrator occasionally mentions Georgie's “increasing plumpness,” which he combats first with yoga lessons from a great Guru from Benares who turns out to be a curry cook from London, and a burglar to boot, and then by joining Lucia's short-lived calisthenics class in Tilling, whose Bible is a book called *An Ideal System of Calisthenics for Those No Longer Young* (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 42). What helps persuade Georgie to keep his shingles beard once his shingles have gone is the decorative—not camouflaging;

too rough a word—effect it has on his “plump second chin,” and on “the slightly receding shape of the first” (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 47).

Quite as decorative as his beard—it is a Van Dyke, or rather a Vandyck, for it greatly resembles the beard on that painter’s Gelasius—are his suits, jackets and coats, and trousers. Georgie’s love of clothes is not vanity as much as it is his fondest form of playing pretend.

He does this, as he does everything, fussily—he lacks Lucia’s brio, her love of “ ‘the broad sweep of the brush, the great scale’ ” (*The Worshipful Lucia and Trouble for Lucia* 137). I have said that Benson’s narrator speaks with a voice more like Georgie’s than any other character’s, and it is the wonderful contrast between the fussy but strangely blunt elegance of the narration and Lucia’s ambitious restlessness that provides no little bit of the humor of the Mapp and Lucia books, as well as keeping Lucia from overwhelming her fellow characters—Georgie especially.

What counts with Georgie, and Benson, too, is not what something is, but how it is decorated and furnished, or how—if it is a person—it decorates itself and with what furniture it fills its life. Lucia pretends to furnish her life with Great Art. Georgie is content with baubles. Take his baubles away, and he cries like a baby. Which is not surprising, for a baby is just what he is.

In *Queen Lucia* a curry cook from London posing as a Brahmin from Benares comes to Riseholme to be Daisy Quantock’s Guru; this after a lingering cold like a skilled burglar robs her of her faith in Christian Science. Yoga cures the cold and thereby secures Daisy’s wandering allegiance.

Besides being a cook the non-Brahmin is a burglar; he burgles Georgie's home, among others, in the night, then disappears. Before I say what he burgles, it is necessary for you to know that Georgie has a little toupee, which is his great secret. He also has a Queen Anne toy-porringer that he is a little sensitive about, for it is not quite the treasure his other treasures are. It is no miniature of Karl Hulth, after all.

In the morning Georgie nips into the drawing-room for his cigarette case, only to find it has been stolen, along with the rest of his "treasures" (*Queen Lucia* and *Miss Mapp* 138). Gone

was the Louis XVI snuff box, gone was the miniature of Karl Hulth, gone the piece of Bow china, and gone the Fabergé cigarette case. Only the Queen Anne toy-porringer was there, and in the absence of the others, it looked to him, as no doubt it had looked to the burglar, indescribably insignificant. (*Queen Lucia* and *Miss Mapp* 138)

Georgie's reaction to this disaster is perfectly proportionate to its magnitude: he "gave a low wailing cry, but did not tear his hair for obvious reasons," then "rang the bell three times in quick succession," which signaled to Foljambe that a great and terrible event had happened, one on par with the fish bone that had stuck in his throat or the threat of a marriage proposal from Piggy Antrobus (*Queen Lucia* and *Miss Mapp* 138).

At first quaintness is, as far as Lucia is concerned, the decorative ideal, though its appeal fades as the Mapp and Lucia books grow in number. Georgie prefers things to be more ornate. The need for decoration and furnishing is never

questioned; it is as essential as air or water, though far more stimulating to both spirit and intellect.

Lucia's entrance-hall at Riseholme, with its "dish of highly realistic stone fruit that stood beside the pot-pourri and the furry Japanese spider that sprawled in a silk web over the window," is of such amusing quaintness as to inspire "her memorable essay read before the Riseholme Literary Society, called 'Humour in Furniture' " (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 14). Lucia often creates "a new little quaintness for quite a sequence of days, and she had held out hopes to the Literary Society that perhaps some day, when she was not so rushed, she would jot down material for a sequel to her essay, or write another covering a rather larger field on 'The Gambits of Conversation Derived from Furniture' " (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 15).

Benson's mixture of elegant, slightly fussy exactness—"highly realistic stone fruit," a spider that "sprawled" in its web—and his peculiarly formal near-colloquialisms—"quite a sequence of days"—combine to delightful effect, and achieve for his narration the effect of quaintness that Lucia and Georgie so highly prize (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 14). He always says a great deal more than is necessary, yet the reader never feels that it is too much. She has learned to rely on the narrator's strange, often excessive restraint.

Camp narration takes the excesses and eccentricities of its characters with perfect seriousness, as if it did not know any better. Benson often mirrors the too-muchness of Lucia and Georgie, both reflecting and prettifying it. Really it is the reader who knows better than to take their games of pretend too seriously,

and this is enough. No need for the narrator to tip his hand. The reader laughs at the titles of Lucia's essays; she laughs all the harder because Benson betrays not the slightest sign that they might be absurd, and therefore laugh-making.

But "covering a rather larger field" *is* a bit excessive, for the very title of the second, as yet unwritten, but sure to be memorable essay tells us that it will be more capacious, more ambitious even than the first (*Queen Lucia* and *Miss Mapp* 15). In fairly subtle ways, but sometimes not so subtle, Benson's narrator often gilds the lily, yet always in the service of comedy, and so the reader not only forgives but applauds him. He sets up the joke, to put it crudely, with his "covering a rather larger field" (*Queen Lucia* and *Miss Mapp* 15). Really what he does is tell the reader that something funny is on the way; he reserves his driest and most formal language for the moments before something especially funny.

Let me say a little more about quaintness. In Benson this is an important word; it signifies eccentricity, but not of the free-floating kind. To be quaint one must pledge allegiance to something foreign but describable in one word—"suffragette," "post-Impressionist artist," "socialist," "Germanophil"—without actually being that thing (*Queen Lucia* and *Miss Mapp* 309). People who are what they claim to be have very short lives, meaning a very limited usefulness, in the Mapp and Lucia books. Olga Braceley is the least quaint of Benson's characters, and she barely makes it out of *Queen Lucia*. She does not die, but merely begins to fade away in *Lucia in London*, and her name (but not her lovely person) appears only three times in *Mapp and Lucia*.

Open quaintness—quaintness that spills onto the streets, as do so many group discussions of condemned prisoners in Westerns, which begin in saloons and end as torch-bearing mobs at the jailhouse door—is too extreme for Georgie and Lucia; it is a way of declaring war. Lucia wages many wars, far more than any other of Benson's characters, without declaring a one of them. Oddly, Olga's opposite number in quaintness is too quaint, and is thereby of as little sustained use as Olga is. I refer of course to Irene Coles, or Quaint Irene.

Irene is Lucia gone much too far. She plays pretend too earnestly, at too great an extremity. She is the Hyde to Lucia's Dr. Jekyll. In the books that come after *Miss Mapp* her comic purpose is make the Lucilic comedy to which Benson's readers are well accustomed, seem slightly different—subtler— by moderating Lucia's effect on the reader. Irene has a number of masks, but wears them all at once, and so there is very little drama, for you know what they all are. Lucia's unstoppable ambition and energy means she is always on the lookout for a new and better mask, one that often comes as a surprise to the reader and Lucia's fellow characters alike.

It is interesting to note that when Mapp briefly puts her "malignant curiosity" on the shelf and dons a mask of her own, it is always entirely predictable (*Queen Lucia* and *Miss Mapp* 304). She marries Colonel Flint, thereby becoming Elizabeth Mapp-Flint (not the other way round), and pretends awhile to be expecting a child. Irene's masks are not so predictable, but she sticks to them doggedly—this is what I am calling open quaintness. Critics tend to confuse it with campiness, because it seems to conceal queerness. But Irene

is the Rebellious Baby of the nursery, always doing shocking things mostly just to shock. She is no more queer than Mr. Bartlett, Tilling's Dear Padre, is Scotch—or Irish.

Chaste camp is so often a matter of probability and predictability, and their inverses. Lucia has mastered the art of making the improbable seem probable. Which is to say, she wears her many masks so well, and changes them so often, that her fellow characters—though they know the answer is yes—must ask themselves if each new mask is a mask at all.

Irene does not know how to play this game, or does not appreciate the tact, energy, and resourcefulness required to play it. She does not even sprinkle her conversation with German! Her improbabilities are always on full display, for everyone to see, in a consciously vulgar way. Lucia dresses conventionally; Irene outrageously, meaning masculinely, in “an old wide-awake hat,” which she wears “jammed down on her...closely-cropped” hair, “a tall collar and stock, a large loose coat, knickerbockers and grey stockings. In her mouth was a cigarette,” which she only takes from her lips to do “something in the gutter which is usually associated with the floor of third-class smoking carriages” (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 310). Her one concession to normalcy is “the orthodox wicker basket” (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 309).

Irene—here one cannot help but think of Peppino's disappointingly firm grasp of the obvious—does everything with a “dismal directness” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 460). She flaunts her strangenesses, and takes them to such extremes, the reader cannot but laugh at her, though of course she

does not despise her any more than she despises Lucia. Irene's game of indirect rebellion is an entertaining one to the extent that it provides a stark contrast to Lucia's, and irritates or enrages Mapp. Not so dismal, after all.

For Irene has a "violent *schwärm*" for Lucia, and feels only a scornful amusement for Mapp (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 438). Irene's first appearance in the Mapp and Lucia books comes courtesy of Mapp, who regards her as "the Disgrace of Tilling and her sex," for she is

the suffragette, post-impressionist artist (who painted from the nude, both male and female), the socialist and the Germanophil, all incarnate in one frame. In spite of these execrable antecedents, it was quite in vain that Miss Mapp had tried to poison the collective mind of Tilling against this Creature. If she hated anybody, and she undoubtedly did, she hated Irene Coles. The bitterest part of it all was that if Miss Coles was amused at anybody, and she undoubtedly was, she was amused at Miss Mapp. (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 309)

The source of Irene's amusement is Mapp's predictability and hatred of improbability, and her rage when confronted by same. Very early in *Miss Mapp* we learn that her mind is "incapable of believing the improbable," and Irene delights in ramming improbabilities down her throat (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 293).

For instance, Irene lives "in a very queer way with one gigantic maid, who, but for her sex, might have been in the Guards"—the queerness is of Irene's own making; it is yet another of her public scandals (*Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp* 310). But what is it, exactly? Are they lovers? Irene would like all Tilling to believe it, but Lucy is simply her maid and her model. With Irene one outrage always

leads to the next—a gigantic maid leads inexorably to post-Impressionism—but there is a very fixed number of them, and the number is fairly small.

Indeed, they are the same improbabilities, again and again, and so soon go stale—for everyone but Mapp, who is eternally enraged by them. Certainly they go stale for Benson; Irene is a fairly major minor character in *Mapp and Lucia*, but she is very much a bit player in *The Worshipful Lucia* and *Trouble for Lucia*.

Lucia, not Irene, is queen of Benson's little kingdom. Quaintness is too obvious, and obviousness is anathema to chaste camp. It is very dull for everything to be known—much more interesting, as Lucia well knows, are those “conjectural exercises” which give “little thrills of pleasant excitement” (*Queen Lucia* and *Miss Mapp* 3). Small wonder Peppino is killed off; he has a “firm grasp of the obvious” and is “disappointingly capable” of arriving at the truth about something, when what is wanted is the joy of speculating.

Pritchett is not quite right to say that “gossip above all” makes the world of *Mapp and Lucia* go round (Pritchett). It is not gossip, which Pritchett describes as “spying from windows,” and “a genteel greed for...news,” but a greed for any reason, any at all, to speculate about things (Pritchett). What is dressed up as “inductive reasoning” is really just guessing (*Lucia in London* and *Mapp and Lucia* 6). This is another of Benson's wonderful euphemisms, like “tact.” Being a “powerful logician” simply means a good guesser, though the fun of guessing far outstrips the pleasure of being right (*Lucia in London* and *Mapp and Lucia* 7).

This is the camp version of gossip, in which a real drama is made all the more dramatic by the audience, as they guess what is happening and why. It is not about finding out the truth; it is about spinning out lovely exciting speculations, as a silkworm does silk.

4.3 Bad Detective: Chaste Camp and the Virtues of Concealment

In a very real sense, then, the camp novel is the anti-detective novel. The truth is beside the point; what counts is how false you are and how well—meaning, how agilely and ambitiously—you do falsehood. Those who are best at falseness, the Queen Lucias, are far more beloved than the detectives, the Mapps, who set themselves the dreary task of exposing them in their many thrilling pretenses.

But these pretenses must of course all be very small in scale, to preserve the campiness. What is funny about Irene's queerness is that it matters not a bit to Mapp that it is pretend; what infuriates her is that the pretense is *public*—that she must encounter it at market every morning, and everywhere else in Tilling. Lucia's queerness is funnier, for it is far more private a thing, and yet has very public results. Like the Holy Spirit, she moves in mysterious ways its wonders to perform.

But the queerness in a detective story—particularly a murder mystery—must be brought to light, for its scale is as large as can be. The scale of the characters may be very small though, nearly as small as it is in camp. This truth

was first or at least best realized by Agatha Christie; it led her to create her most original detective, Miss Marple.

Marple is unlike Mapp in nearly every way, physically and spiritually, yet both have a bottomless thirst for village gossip, and for spying on their fellow villagers. Though of course Miss Marple spies with far less insidious intent than does Mapp. Miss Marple's Tilling is a village called St. Mary Mead; it seems to be what W.H. Auden calls "an innocent society in a state of grace," but of course it contains no end of villainy (*The Dyer's Hand* 150). Here is Miss Marple's description of her village, in answer to the rather naïve question, " 'Is St. Mary Mead a very nice village?' ": " 'It's quite a *pretty* village. There are some nice people living in it and some extremely unpleasant people, too. Very curious things go on there just as in any other village' " (*A Pocket Full of Rye* 189).

Benson turns the curious or queer English village into a nest of very busy and largely fangless vipers, though of course to campy effect. Gossip in Benson is a vehicle not for the truth, but for theater; it is not news at all, but just another game. In the Miss Marple books gossip is very much news, and is a far more accurate and interesting form of the thing than any product of inductive reasoning. Having created a small Belgian Sherlock Holmes in Hercule Poirot, that " 'detached logical man,' " Christie veered away from detachment and logic, and Miss Marple was born (*A Pocket Full of Rye* 216).

It is not quite right to say, as P.D. James does, that Miss Marple prefers to "work in isolation," for her Watsons are all those women whose great source of power lies in their conversation: "[t]alk, conjecture, reminiscences, repetitions of

things said and done” (*Talking About Detective Fiction* 57; *A Pocket Full of Rye* 106). Conversation, which often amounts to gossip, becomes a sort of unofficial oral history. The truest history, in fact, because it contains all the nasty things official histories tend to leave out—if they are histories of pretty English villages, that is. The myth of the English Eden lives on.

In the Mapp and Lucia books conversation is as false as can be, and is appreciated in direct proportion to its falseness. The great detective Mapp naturally finds this enraging. Her chief joy in *Mapp and Lucia* comes when she thinks she has found a way to expose Lucia’s Italian as pure dictionary stuff, rather than the sort of nuggets with which a fluent speaker cannot help but stud her conversation like diamonds in a bracelet. Mapp schemes as she has never schemed before, to get all Tilling to accept Lucia’s po-di-mu, and “listen not so much to Mozart as to her rich silences or faltering replies when challenged to converse in the Italian language” (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 438).

Mapp fails, of course, and so spectacularly that Lucia’s false fluency in Italian becomes a truth nearly as incontrovertible as the existence of God. It is not so much that Mapp is a bad detective, though of course Lucia outsmarts her at every turn. (And soon enough, after her honeymoon in Monte Carlo, Mapp is sprinkling her conversation with French.) It is that in Benson’s little world there is no need for the truth to be detected, for the truth is both beside the point and a terrible bore.

Riseholme and Tilling are Edens of falseness, in which the falseness is not evil but good, meaning interesting and enlivening. Without it there would be

no great game of pretend. It is the curious sort of falseness that hides nothing. Nothing lies beneath—no murder, not even an ulterior self—for as I said a few pages before, children who play pretend are merely playing.

In St. Mary Mead and its equivalents in the Miss Marple books, the villagers only seem to be children, innocent in mind and heart. The paradise is no paradise at all. There is no “innocence which is discovered to contain guilt; then a suspicion of being the guilty one,” and in the end we have no paradise regained, no “real innocence from which the guilty other has been expelled,” no “cure effected” (*The Dyer’s Hand* 177). There is no cure for human nature. Human nature, as Miss Marple puts it to Pat Fortescue in *A Pocket Full of Rye*, “ ‘is much the same everywhere’ ” (*A Pocket Full of Rye* 188).

It is only necessary for Miss Marple to find the village parallel, to get on the right track, and once she is on that track, the murder is as good as solved. In Benson this process is exactly reversed; Lucia creates the village parallel, shrinking things of large scale—Shakespeare, “ ‘celestial Mozartino’ ”—until they are small enough for her to handle and manhandle (*Lucia in London and Mapp and Lucia* 279).

There is sometimes a need for “deeply suspicious detectives who look past the surface in order to root out what is underneath it,” though one would like them to be more Miss Marple and less Miss Mapp (Best and Marcus 18). But there is nothing wrong with a surface that hides nothing, as long as it is interesting, entertaining, amusing, and benign. Camp offers just this sort of surface. Indeed, its great theme is the beauty, pleasure, and value to be found in

surfaces with no depth, or hardly any. That Benson was able to write six novels about people whose real selves are either hidden or nonexistent (and it hardly matters which) testifies to the enduring charm of camp—as does the enduring popularity of the Mapp and Lucia books.

As I say in my introduction, the job of criticism is I think this: to talk about a piece of Art in such a way that the lay reader's appreciation of it is enhanced. So often critics talk about literature only to burnish their own reputations, and apparently feel that the best way to do this is to run down literature and the people who love it and make it. But it is a terrible mistake to look always beneath the surface of a literary object, for if there is nothing there, one is liable to fill the void with one's own hobbyhorse. In the case of camp, the hobbyhorse is often, as I have said, queerness, and while there is nothing wrong with queerness or indeed sexuality, there is plenty of room in camp for chastity.

Camp is all about mystification—its pleasures and even joys. To see this does not require “ideological demystification” (Best and Marcus 1). In fact, demystification is just what is *not* needed to appreciate camp, and to see it for what it is. Though she did not see it as clearly as she might have, Sontag saw camp far better than most critics, and it is not surprising that the author of “Notes on camp” and “Against Interpretation” are one and the same.

I will let her have the last word. Today, she writes, and it is true of our day, too, “the project of interpretation is largely reactionary, stifling,” for interpretation is nothing less than “the revenge of the intellect upon art” (*Sontag Reader* 98). Art cannot simply be beautiful and pleasurable; it must carry some very heavy

ideological freight that only the critic can unload. In short, it must *mean* something, and if it does not, the critic will make it mean whatever it ought to mean. To interpret, then—this is truer now than ever—“is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of “ ‘meanings’ ” (*Sontag Reader* 99). Criticism has lived too long in this shadow world, and has dragged some very fine books in with it. Here is to a time when criticism shines a light of appreciation on literature, rather than ruthlessly snuffing it out, like one of the little candles in Scrooge’s counting-house. Let’s not be Scrooges; let’s open our hearts freely to every good book, and our minds, too, and say “God bless it!”

5. A Good Game: Angela Thirkell's Barsetshire

There is a telling scene in *Marling Hall*, one of Angela Thirkell's twenty-nine Barsetshire novels. Barsetshire is of course the English county first invented by Trollope; finding it no longer in use Thirkell took it for her own and considerably improved it. In Trollope's Barsetshire, when people talk about something they talk about it, by which I mean they generally keep to the point and wear it out in rather predictable ways, each according to her character.

Thirkell's Barsetshire is far more engaging; in their divine idiocy people hardly ever keep to the point, if there is one, but instead say all sorts of wonderful surprising things, and there is hardly any of Trollope's disgraceful directness, yet there is no bleeding through the edges of character, either; it is all kept very orderly, like the odious Lady Norton's garden, though in their strangeness the finest of the flowers better resemble "rare bulbs or slips from the Himalayas or the Andes" than the Dreadful Dowager's Herbs of Grace (*Wild Strawberries* 44).

But here is the scene. Diana and Clare Watson, "aged five and three," are blissfully engaged at the old horse trough outside the stables at Marling Hall, playing with three celluloid ducks, a celluloid fish, and a small red boat (*Marling Hall* 21). Being dimly aware that a war is happening, and that their father was until recently going ship to ship with some people called Germans, the girls are playing what might be called Navy. The game is soon ended. Diana gives the red boat a push and says " 'That's Daddy's ship, and I'm the Germans' " (*Marling Hall* 23). Having thrown "several handfuls of water over the boat which heeled and

sank,” she cheerfully proclaims “ ‘Now Daddy’s drowned’ ” (*Marling Hall* 23).

Clare shrieks, but “with pleasure” (*Marling Hall* 23).

After watching this little drama play out, the girls’ mother Lettice Watson, née Marling, wonders if she “ought to go white, put her hand to her heart and gravely lead her little ones into the house,” for sadly Captain Watson really has been killed in the previous year, “sunk in the sea before Dunkirk” (*Marling Hall* 23 & 114). But Lettice “cannot give satisfaction in any of these respects” (*Marling Hall* 23). She prefers Diana and Clare “to think of Daddy being drowned as a good game” if the alternatives are “nightmares, or repressions, or complexes about his death” she knows “from her own experience exactly what all these feelings were like and did not want anyone else, especially her own little girls with their enchanting boiled macaroni arms, to share her knowledge” (*Marling Hall* 23).

Far from being “horrifying studies of English repression,” which Hermione Lee strangely calls them, or perhaps not so strangely, for Lee is clearly a Thirkell hater, the Barsetshire novels have as their common theme getting on gracefully with one’s life when one has faced sadness or disappointment of any magnitude (Lee 91). Mockingly reducing this often noble and courageous course of action to mere “stiff-upper-lippery,” as Lee does, is not only ungenerous and unfunny, it is imperceptive (Lee 93).

The essential quality of the Thirkell heroine is not her “resistance to change” but the grace with which she accepts and moves on from those changes, however terrible, that cannot be resisted (Lee 94). Lettice’s project,

though project is putting it a bit dully and unattractively, is to do away with her repressions, to stop being merely a widow and mother and become a wife again, thereby making life into something other than “an eternity of looking after children and being alone in the evening” just because “Roger was gone and nothing would bring him back” (*Marling Hall* 164). But she does not move on so quickly as to deprive Thirkell’s readers of the sort of romantic unromantic drama one finds in paradise, with its fiends angelical.

The arch-fiend is of course David Leslie, the last man in existence who can “kiss a lady’s hand gracefully”—his hand-kissing is pure “perfection” but he does it “more to show off than from any serious feelings of respect or affection” (*Miss Bunting* 229). Anne Fielding, when she is a naïve girl of sixteen, suggests that “ ‘[p]erhaps he wasn’t ever really in love with anyone,’ ” but of course no one has “ ‘ever known him when he was not in love. That is why he did it so well,’ ” meaning kissed ladies’ hands, though “ ‘it never meant anything. He is fundamentally selfish’ ” (*Miss Bunting* 229).

If one is one of Thirkell’s heroines, getting on with one’s life means playing the courtship game. This is a very good game indeed, and to win it is to avoid marriage. Thirkell’s reigning champion is her least marriageable man, her practitioner of chaste camp, her Bertie Wooster, her “ ‘gilded butterfly of uncertain age’ ” (*Peace Breaks Out* 88). Like Wodehouse’s butterflies, David Leslie flits from flower to flower and sips, flits and sips. He is, in Bertie’s admirable phrase, “ ‘a flitting sipper’ ” (*Joy in the Morning* 43). Also: a sipping flitter. In the words of Gussie Fink-Nottle, “ ‘a mere butterfly flitting from flower to

flower and sipping,' ” to whom a “ ‘girl...is just the plaything of an idle hour’ ” (*Stiff Upper Lip*, Jeeves 129).

David, whose life is nothing but idle hours, toys with people. This is his way of making boredom, which is the occasional child of idleness and also certainly the worst thing in the world, into a good game. David is of course Thirkell's great comic creation; his mother Lady Emily is funnier in speech but has by virtue of her rather advanced age less to do in Thirkell's novels, which after all are romances, and so cannot be nearly as funny in action.

Naturally David toys most cruelly—though again it is not conscious cruelty as much as it is consummate thoughtlessness—with the unmarried women who take his fancy. He has no desire to marry them, of course, no wish to get on with his life, having made for himself a “schoolboyish” paradise, equal parts city and county, from which he cannot be banished as Adam was from Eden, for there is no Eve around to make trouble (*Peace Breaks Out* 194). Despite his endless flirtations he is far more chaste in spirit than most of Thirkell's characters of marrying age; he fears marriage and true courtship and wants no part of them.

What David represents to the girls he woos usually without strictly speaking meaning to woo them, though it takes these girls several hundred pages to realize they are being toyed with in the least malicious way imaginable, is not a truly possible husband but rather an escape from nursery and family and county, though not into full adulthood. David is prince of a certain sort of paradise of divine dissatisfaction. This distinguishes David most starkly from Bertie Wooster, whose paradise is one of perfect content. Lucia's paradise is more like

David's than Bertie's, and of course Charles Ryder's is the most dissatisfied of all.

In Thirkell one's full adulthood is ratified when one has children, for the greatest form of attachment is that of parents to their offspring, and the more of these, the better. The eternal question is: how are the children? There are nurseries everywhere in Barsetshire: day nurseries and night nurseries ruled by nurses and under-nurses and nannies, and new parents often cannot "believe that there had been a babyless period in their lives" (*Love Among the Ruins* 14). Though Mary Preston, the heroine of *Wild Strawberries*, has never been married, she is during her visit to Rushwater, where the Leslie's live, a sort of under-mother to her cousin Agnes's children, who are everywhere and in Agnes's belief "a panacea for every ill" (*Wild Strawberries* 65).

This can be rather oppressive. Not an insignificant element of David's appeal is his barely disguised distaste for nursery life. When in Marling Hall his sister Agnes mentions having read her dear darling Emmy " 'the Footly-Tootly books, about the little elves that take care of baby animals and Emmy loved them and got well quite quickly,' " David wryly says " 'If they are anything like the story of Hobo-Gobo and the fairy Joybell you were reading to the children the summer John got engaged,' " which was the summer of *Wild Strawberries*, " 'I don't wonder Emmy got well quickly. I'd have got well at once' " (*Marling Hall* 32).

At its best love in Thirkell is entirely unsentimental, and however much we like Agnes we find her Doting Mother routine pretty treacly. Thirkell's narrators

are amused at Agnes's endless fascination with her children, for really they are pretty dull creatures. Here they are at their most fascinating:

they flung themselves into an angelic group round their grandmother, all talking at once. It appeared that at nursery tea Robert had put a piece of crust under the rim of his plate to avoid eating it, which Nannie's eagle eye had at once spotted. He had been made to finish it but Edith, inflamed by his heroic action, had taken out of her mouth her piece of crust and put it into John's saucer. No one could quite bear to make her eat it; the nurserymaid had borne it away, Nannie had preached a sermon on waste in war time which had made John and Robert offer to give up all their crusts for the poor soldiers for the duration of the war, while Edith had cried so loudly for her crust that the nurserymaid had been told to fetch it back and put it in the canary's cage. When the story reached this point Lady Emily drew a picture of the canary eating the crust for John and Robert, while Edith dined a private dance with a transfigured face, singing in a very tuneless voice "Crust, canary; canary, crust," over and over again.
(*Marling Hall* 213)

Charming, perhaps, but not very interesting. One wants to see very little of these creatures, and one recoils when they are doted on. It is very refreshing that David never dotes. He loves his mother Lady Emily more than anyone else in the world but even when he plays the Doting Son we doubt, and quite rightly, his sincerity.

And yet sincerity is a sad necessity in Thirkell's Barsetshire, for the war is horrible and the peace far worse. All "the old world" is "tumbling down" and there will be "no new world to replace it" unless a few of its families keep it going by keeping going themselves (*Love Among the Ruins* 102). One suspects that Thirkell, the novelist if not the woman, is secretly pleased by this development, for her theme is County People: the "little groups of civilized people here and there" who are rapidly "becoming marooned" and in danger of dying out

altogether, for their “girls were working too hard to think of marriage” and their “sons sought other brides,” and this sad development lends a great deal of drama to Thirkell’s marriage plots (*Love Among the Ruins* 42). It makes of marriage and the resultant children not just the climax of the plot but the key to civilization, or at least to English civilization, which is the same thing. England means county, the place where the monarchy is replicated again and again on a very small scale, every landed husband and wife a king and queen, their kingdoms farms and villages.

Lettice Watson is swallowed almost at once by David’s engulfing charm, as is Mary Preston in *Wild Strawberries* and Anne Fielding in *Peace Breaks Out*.

Here is a sampling of the David treatment and its quick results:

John and David Leslie came in without being noticed, except by Lettice, whose heart battered her so violently that she had to tell it quite contemptuously how confident she had been all along that David would come. John, who was as kind as could be, took charge of Lucy and explained everything to her while David approached Lettice.

“I hoped you would wait till I came,” he said.

Lettice knew that any woman of spirit would say that she had not noticed whether he was there or not, but she also knew her own incapacity for putting a good face on her Hes, so she smiled at him. Her smile was meant to convey that she cared not a whit about his movements, but it is rarely that our smiles look from the outside as they feel from the inside.

“What a pleasing anxious being you are,” said David.

Lettice looked startled.

“You do worry, love,” said David. “I may be a laggard in love, but I am not a dastard in war, and nothing would have induced me not to come here when you were coming. Look at old John teaching Lucy’s young ideas how to shoot. You wouldn’t believe it, Lettice, but it was I who got John married. He and Mary were so full of delicacy that they were quite paralytic and I more or less knocked their heads together. Lord! Lord! I can make happy endings for other people, but I can’t make one for myself. And now I must go back to Little Misfit or Agnes will ask me how I could be

so cross and naughty as to be late for dinner. Farewell, thou art just about the right dearness for my possessing. Give my love and good-bye to Cousin Amabel.”

He picked up the end of Lettice's scarf, kissed it, waved his hand to the company in general and was gone. (*Marling Hall* 173-74)

As seen above so vividly, David's technique is to lavish compliments on one and holding and kiss one's hand and then “suddenly be bored and drop” one (*Marling Hall* 113). He has a habit “of melting away whenever he was not being amused or interested,” of forgetting the names of the children of a woman he seems to be wooing (*Marling Hall* 113). When he finds Lettice at Holdings, his sister Agnes's house, David asks her “ ‘and how are your daughters whose names I do not pretend to remember though I adore their faces?’ ” (*Marling Hall* 217).

5.1 Toying Your Life Away: Chaste Camp in the Courtship

Game

We recognize this hatred and fear of boredom as the engine of chaste camp in Benson, the inexhaustible fuel that propels Lucia tirelessly onward and debatably upward. Incidentally, Thirkell wisely denies David the dubious privilege of being a sort of Georgie Pillson, and the closest she comes to creating a Queen Lucia is the monstrously pretentious and altogether “terrifying” Mrs. Rivers, a “grasping and conceited” novelist known to her publisher Mr. Johns as “the Baedeker Bitch...in allusion to the amount of local colour that she piled into each of her books” (*Pomfret Towers* 148).

It is difficult to believe that Thirkell did not have Lucia at least partly in mind when she allowed Lady Pomfret to say of the characters in one of Mrs. Rivers's novels " 'about people in Rome,' " in which " 'a woman with a grown-up son...lets herself have a kind of affair with a young American writer,' " that " 'when the characters spoke Italian it was not very correct' " (*Pomfret Towers* 185).

David's fear and hatred of boredom moves him in a very Bertielike way to silly charming literary verbiage, though Bertie's talk if not always better is far funnier. When Lettice very gently refuses David's unexpected, uncharacteristic, and unwise offer of marriage, he says in a highly representative little speech " 'Well, I have offered you free from stain courage and faith, and I am reluctantly compelled to admit vain faith and courage vain.... But I still like you very much' " (*Marling Hall* 293).

Captain Barclay, the man Lettice does marry, proposes in these less stirring words: " 'I love you like anything. I'm likely to be in England for another six months at least, so you know what the chances are and can make up your mind. And what is more you must make up your mind, now.... If you find you really don't want to marry me, tell me now. If not I shall marry you and that's that' " (*Marling Hall* 319-20).

This, by the way, is precisely the sort of man Lettice needs: not only a loving husband but a " 'keeper,' " meaning the sort of man who will protect her from dragons she is too polite to slay—French colonels who look like generals and will not shut up at tea, younger sisters who will not stop telling her what,

children who will not stop being children, Davids who insist on being so appealingly “Davidish” (*Marling Hall* 319 & 288).

As Bertie develops sudden, dangerous obsessions with an impressive range of unsuitable objects, not only women who read *Types of Ethical Theory* but banjoleles and Alpine hats, David when he is not flirting with the Lettices of Barsetshire pursues every other entity in which he has the least interest— Broadcasting House, for instance, Thirkell’s unflattering version of the BBC, where David spoils his chance at a job doing Uplift Poetry Readings by rashly choosing for his audition the bit of *Paradise Lost* with the spattering noise that so recently made his cousin Martin laugh and make so funny a face. When he comes to the spattering noise, he remember’s Martin’s laughing face

and sitting back in his chair, roared with laughter into the scandalized microphone. Joan Stevenson, the very competent young woman who was in charge of the department which dealt with Uplift Poetry Readings, had been shocked, or as she preferred to put it, Frankly, shocked, and took him back to her office in disgrace. (*Wild Strawberries* 94)

Unlike Bertie, David has not learned the first lesson of the schoolhouse: chivalry, meaning always coming to the aid of one’s fellow children. Bertie has the Drones and many other friends; David has his family of course, but mostly he has just David, and so “would always be the same charming, perfectly unreliable creature, delightfully selfish, quite heartless, if to have a heart meant pain for himself” (*Wild Strawberries* 234). The rub is, David has forgotten his nursery days but hasn’t quite left the nursery. He is always “ ‘making mischief’ ” and remains very much a child, “a cross child” when he does not get his way (*Peace*

Breaks Out 315 & 321). And of course in Thirkell the nursery is always with one in the form of one's nannie, who if she has new children to care for does not allow her interest in her old children to wane. But more on this, much more in fact, when Bunny, Miss Maude Bunting, pops up.

Whatever bores David, or seems too serious or earnest, he chucks, and in this he better resembles Lucia than Bertie Wooster. Since the beginning of the war, in which he is an R.A.F. pilot with only half a wing, for he has not “the faintest idea how to fly” —“ ‘Flight Lieutenant they call me,’ said David. ‘But it means nothing. They just gave it to me so that I could go for drives in aeroplanes without getting into trouble with the police’ ” —he has come over to *Marling Hall* “a great deal and amused and excited [Lettice] and made her wonder what she really felt and then he had vanished without a word, without telephoning. On the whole she hated him,” but her heart still “leapt” upon seeing him or hearing his voice or thinking usually mistakenly that he has rung her (*Peace Breaks Out* 87 & 52; *Marling Hall* 213 & 166).

This is David's particular way of playing pretend, of doing chaste camp: to flirt, but with no desire either to marry or to seduce. He is the world's first chaste rake. Always sipping, never even dreaming of drinking deeply. As such he is a double threat to Thirkell's heroines; they cannot marry him, but their attraction to him might well keep them from marrying other, infinitely more suitable men. And making the right marriage, as we shall see, is the great good in Thirkell's books. It is the inalienable right of all her heroines, and the majority of her other characters, as well. If old Mr. Nandy does not marry it is only because he is a

wicked, dirty-faced man and “ ‘drinks and smokes all day long and lives in one room and it simply stinks’ ” (*Marling Hall* 129).

David’s blissful bachelordom lasts until *Peace Breaks Out*, when Rose Bingham swoops down on him in the manner of a falcon desirous of a spot of pigeon, ptarmigan, or grouse. She takes him as he is: “ ‘the most charming man I know and the most careless about hurting people’ ” (*Peace Breaks Out* 315). Before David quite knows what is happening, she has married him, which as far as he is concerned is only slightly better than what falcons do to pigeons, ptarmigans, and grouse. And so the light of chaste camp, which in Thirkell is a pretty meager light but burns steadily, is sadly snuffed out.

But we are here mostly concerned with David at his most “Davidish,” which is to say, as a practitioner of chaste camp (*Marling Hall* 286). This David, who is after all the true David, the devastating David with a full head of hair who “ ‘always does take pretty girls’ hands’ ” and not only takes them but kisses them, but with no desire to kiss anything else of them unless it is the top of their collective head, tends persistently to attract various of Thirkell’s more susceptible heroines—Mary Preston and Anne Fielding, besides Lettice Watson—by overawing them (*Peace Breaks Out* 321).

For David’s charm, quite by design, is of the overawing sort. It is the sort of charm that manages to advertise its “delightful emptiness” without ever ceasing to be charming (*Wild Strawberries* 92). But the Lettices, Alices, and Marys cannot immediately see that David is playing “a private game” of pretend-courtship, which is “not a very kind game” insofar as the girls he plays it with do

not “quite understand” what it is about (*Peace Breaks Out* 180). Even David, as we have seen, sometimes believes he means to marry a Lettice, and later he cannot “imagine why he had ever imagined he was in love with her” (*Peace Breaks Out* 80).

David’s strategy is to drown his playmates in blandishments, mostly as a “showing-off” sort of self-display, though he is rarely insincere (*Peace Breaks Out* 313). Sylvia Halliday really is beautiful and really does play tennis well, and after a match at Rushwater, the Greatish House in which he was raised, he tells her “‘your playing was as superb as your appearance’ ” (*Peace Breaks Out* 127). When she replies as Lucy Marling would have done, with a very emphatic “ ‘Rot,’ ” David in his usual faux-literary, half-facetious, gently comically overwrought, very self-aware manner says

“Compliments that I pay in the boudoir, the morning-room, the ballroom, leaning on the railings of Rotten Row or reining up my foam-flecked steed—also in Rotten Row—on its haunches to salute a fair equestrienne, are but idle flattery. But the compliments I pay on the field of mimic battle are from the heart; and very well turned too as a rule....” (*Peace Breaks Out* 127)

At this salvo Winged Victory—which is what David has been calling Sylvia—is rather defeated. She becomes redder in the face than she was during tennis, mutters something unintelligible, and seeks refuge at the side of her brother George.

The trouble with David is of course his “spoilt fastidious mind,” for which no “port of call” is good enough (*Peace Breaks Out* 80). This is simply a way of

avoiding life, to put it tritely, with all its dull unchastity—more on this, too, soon enough—in favor of his own thrilling chaste Heaven, where the angels quote snatches of Tennyson when they are not singing jazz. And for Thirkell's really very sheltered heroines, particularly Anne Fielding, this sort of paradise has a great allure. It is after all very exotic and romantic. When Anne learns from Martin Leslie that David once sat at the piano at Marling Hall and “ ‘sang jazz like a Negro,’ ” she “nearly fainted” (*Peace Breaks Out* 238).

5.2 A Safe and Comfortable Man: The Taming of David Leslie

The un-Davidish men whom David's conquests eventually marry—Martin in Sylvia Halliday's case; Captain Barclay, as we have seen, in Lettice's; Robin Dean in Anne's; David's brother John in Mary's—are hardly profligate, but they see love in practical, distinctly unromantic terms. This is not very alluring. It does not sweep one off one's feet. If anything it plants one's feet more firmly on the ground. It gives one roots, and roots in Barsetshire are the greatest gift Thirkell bestows on her characters.

The Captain Barclays and Robin Deans and John and Martin Leslies are, as Thirkell's narrators never fail to call them, “safe and comfortable” men who do not for a moment present in Anneish minds an “exquisite and romantic...picture of a heartless gallant, probably with ruffles and a velvet coat” (*Wild Strawberries* 178; *Miss Bunting* 229). Robin is the most charming of this dull trio and the most literary, but he could hardly be called dashing. He is missing a foot, after all,

having lost it at Anzio. Captain Barclay is dullish, ditto Martin, and John Leslie, in the words of “ ‘so extraordinarily nice, but so entirely dull,’ ” just like his wife Mary (*Peace Breaks Out* 113).

Among these men David shines out like a beacon of romance. How could he not? Though the question does arise in the reader’s mind, why David should be shining in Barsetshire rather than London, Paris, or Lisbon.

Before answering this question, and getting to everything else I have promised to get to, I will just mention, in a very brief excursus, to use a very pretentious word, that Thirkell’s earlier books, by which I mean the ones set before and during and just after the war, are her best. *Peace Breaks Out* is I think the last of the very good ones, and not at all coincidentally it is the last book to feature David Leslie to any great extent, for as we have seen it is the book in which he is finally forcibly married. In the books that follow, Thirkell relies a little too much on her great flair for dialogue. Her plots, such as they are, either have no center, or the center does not hold, and if the result is never anarchy, it does often seem like a free-for-all—so much so that if Thirkell’s narrators were less funny and less conservative, or not so persuasively so, she would I think be celebrated quite wrongly and stupidly as Woolfian in her shattering of the so-called chains of narrative form that once bound her, if that is how admirers of Virginia Woolf talk. Which I suspect it is, only much more vaguely and stream-of-consciously. End of excursus, really such an awful Latinate word that one can hardly resist writing it twice.

Yes, David is selfish. But let me just say this: so are all Eden-makers selfish. To make a paradise for oneself is to exclude with a bored smile all that is not paradisaal. Lucia is selfish. Bertie Wooster is selfish in this way, though of course his code compels him to go the aid of all his friends. Still, this takes him out of paradise only temporarily, and soon he is back where he belongs, all “boomps-a-daisy” with his hat on the side of his head (*Joy in the Morning* 1). Really the God of Genesis could have learned a lot from Wodehouse.

Even in Bassetshire, that last bastion of “a more golden age,” David’s paradise is threatened on all sides: by the war, by one’s tendency to age, however slowly, and go a bit bald on top, by very good-looking young women who turn out to offer “only temporary relief from boredom,” by Rose Bingham, who marry one, and above all by one’s family (*Happy Returns* 157; *Peace Breaks Out* 84).

Above all David’s Eden amounts to a refusal to wade too far into the slough of family and county ties and affiliations. This, incidentally, is why marriage to Rose Bingham is not such a disaster, after all, for Rose would die if she lived in the country, as would David; “‘life,’ ” they agree, “‘is too terrific in the country,’ ” and only in “‘Paris, or London, or even Lisbon or Rome’ ” can they put their feet up and relax (*Peace Breaks Out* 281). This is Bertieish, too, though not at all Lucialike; when disaster is not striking Bertie enjoys his visits to Brinkley Court, mostly because of the great Anatole, “God’s gift to the gastric juices,” but his address is 3A Berkeley Mansions, Berkeley Square, London W1 (*How Right*

You Are, Jeeves 10). Lucia, by great contrast, spends a novel in London and is spirited away to Tilling, where she best belongs.

David is apt to disappear so suddenly to London, Lisbon, Paris, Who-knows-where, and no wonder. Far better that than be swallowed whole as Jonah was, though what threatens to swallow one in the Great Houses of Barsetshire is that slow-acting “family atmosphere” which closes round one more “like treacle” than anything so Biblical as a whale, though (*Marling Hall* 222). Particularly treacly is Holdings, where David’s sister Agnes lives. Imagine “swansdown which combined the strength of concrete and the slipperiness of oil,” and you have a pretty accurate picture of Agnes and the “super-domestic” but mist that hovers around her (*Peace Breaks Out* 95; *Wild Strawberries* 35).

As David ages family and county exert on him an increasingly suffocating influence, and it is only natural for him to prefer the courtship game to courtship itself. Courtship means not only wife but home and children, and when they are stripped of their very charming Himalayan and Andean chatter, Thirkell’s county families are really very disappointingly Herbal. Naturally Rose Bingham is Himalayan, or if you prefer Andean, but she appears rather out of nowhere, and her command that David marry her is entirely unlooked-for, by him if not entirely by the more alert of Thirkell’s readers. In other words, until Rose takes him in hand marriage to David means county.

He is drawn back to Rushwater and Holdings again and again, like little lead filings to a vast magnet, though Thirkell is not so condescending as to have her narrators explain this curious principle of attraction, beyond saying how fond

David is of his mother and sister Agnes. Yet he is so very unlike them, it seems odd that he should pop up so often. Why does he?

This is Thirkell's great challenge: to make provincial homes and families interesting and appealing not only sentence to sentence, but over the course of a novel, novel after novel, rather than assuming her readers will find them preferable to her amusing but cartoonish version of London just after the war, in which one finds

Esquimaux, Tibetans, Americans, Free French, Tierra de Fuegians, Poles (who owing to each supporting a different kind of Government seemed even more numerous than they were), Mixo-Lydians, Canadians, Slavo-Lydians, Australians, Indians (which to the English mind roughly included any Persians, Arabs or South Sea Islanders who happened to be about), Argentines who had loyally come into the war the day before, Chileans who were all called Eduardo O'Coughlin or Ignacio Macalister, a clergyman who had once lived on Tristan da Cunha, Irish labourers out of whose large wages paid by the Saxon Oppressor Dark Rosaleen was doing very nicely while her sons pursued a divil-may-care policy of sitting on doorsteps all day smoking and contemplating the repairing jobs they had been imported to do, Lapps, Swedes, Broccoli, Calabresi, Chinese who being used to three million people dying of famine or being drowned in floods were unimpressed by crowds, some Russians one supposes, practically the whole of the Balkan states, the head chief of Mngangaland, who was in England with a large retinue to put his eightieth and favourite son to Balliol, and the President of the Republic of Sangrado, so-called from the great Liberator Shaun O'Grady (murdered 1843).

And all these people walked up and down London all day, with very little to drink and little or nothing to eat, and squashed each other loyally in front of Buckingham Palace, irritably in the Strand, angrily in Trafalgar Square, furiously in the Tubes as long as they were open, and drove the long-suffering Metropolitan Police nearly demented by being funny at night in Piccadilly Circus. (*Peace Breaks Out* 341)

David Leslie is Thirkell's brilliant but imperfect means of meeting this great challenge, the challenge of making Barsetshire in itself appealing. He embodies

all that is glamorous in City Life yet clings, if one can cling to gleams, to “the last gleams of a murdered civilization,” which gleams shine brightest not in Paris or Lisbon or London, where one embraces novelty for novelty’s sake and accepts “whatever entertainment was offered...with equal enthusiasm, applauding to the echo the bad with the good, and always just before the last note of the music had died away,” but in the country (*Peace Breaks Out* 124).

In the country, meaning of course Barsetshire, it is Bunny—her full name is Miss Maude Bunting—who has for forty years held aloft the torch of civilization. To create the sort of nurseries for grown-ups that Benson does in Riseholme and Tilling, to make them pleasant alternatives to the actual nurseries that dominate Barsetshire, would seem a perfectly natural thing for Thirkell to have done—particularly after the war, when to economize several of her great families—the Pomfrets among them—really do move into the “nursery wing” of their houses (*Love Among the Ruins* 32). Yet Thirkell kept to her formula, in which marriage and children are twin virtues and David’s cheerfully obstinate pre-Rose singleness a vice.

Naturally it is not so simple as this. For one might quite justifiably counter what I have been saying with the simple but indisputably true observation that really all Barsetshire is a nursery, but one strictly if quietly (meaning modestly and decorously) supervised by certain Nurses and Nannies who would never allow a child of any age—a David, say—to lay claim to the title of Head Boy, as Lucia does to such delightful effect. David’s sister Agnes likes to think of her children as panaceas, but Thirkell’s readers know that the novels’s real cure-alls

are the Bunnies and Merries, those peerless instructresses and perfect companions who exercise “unswerving and equable rule” over the great families they serve (*Marling Hall* 200).

Miss Merriman’s vocation is not only to fulfill her various mistresses’ every need but to supervise servants, guests, heads of households, and above all to mind the children of the house, who have long since been released from the nursery but are only “pretending to be grown up” (*Pomfret Towers* 211). Merry picks up where Bunny—Miss Bunting, who gets a whole novel to herself as well as many bits of many of Thirkell’s other novels—leaves off. They are separate but equal powers each with her particular sphere, and

Not for a day, Miss Merriman knew, could she have taught and controlled the schoolroom as Miss Bunting had done; nor for her was it to tell the sons of dukes on their twenty-first birthday that their hair needed brushing or that their appearance at the christening of their eldest sons left much, by Miss Bunting's standards, to be desired. Not for a day, Miss Bunting realised, could she have kept her patience with the quicksilver spirit, that windblown fountain, that irresponsible fiend angelical, Lady Emily Leslie; nor could she have dealt with her letters, her servants, her writings, her myriad avocations. In the look that passed between Miss Bunting and Miss Merriman a Throne spoke to a Throne and a silent language sped between them which none else in the room could understand, which none else might share. (*Marling Hall* 208)

Merry moves from great house to great house, from Pomfret Towers to Rushwater to Holdings, while Bunny until her much lamented death—she dies, as she does everything else, “ ‘very quietly’ ”—stays on at Marling Hall at Mrs. Marling’s invitation after teaching her brothers and their boys (*Miss Bunting* 294). For four decades Miss Bunting has instructed Marlings and other members of

“the gilded early youth of England before it went to its preparatory school” and she is not about to stop now, for when the gilded youth back from school she finds it still needs quite a bit of instruction if it is to be made suitable for marriage (*Marling Hall* 13).

David was once Bunny’s pupil. He remains, as Bunny says, “ ‘one of my favourite pupils’ ” (*Marling Hall* 294). And entirely by his own choice he is still very much the public schoolboy. As such, he needs a great deal of molding, for his logical end is as husband to one of Barsetshire’s legion of marriageable women. But Bunny does not supply this need. Which is to say, she does not interfere. Nor does Merry, though she knows “David’s place better than he knew it himself” (*Marling Hall* 219). No, it is Rose who gives him “ ‘a lesson he will never forget to the end of his life’ ” (*Peace Breaks Out* 233).

Until *Peace Breaks Out* Thirkell’s plots of course dictate that David mostly have free rein, or as Mr. Macpherson the estate agent at Rushwater rather darkly puts it, “ ‘all the rope he needs’ ” (*Peace Breaks Out* 249). But apart from the question of plot function—I am speaking of course of character—even the Merries and Bunnies of Barsetshire, its “two éminences grises,” do not account marriage and children—meaning ratifying one’s grown-upness—an unmixed good (*Marling Hall* 208).

Bunny and Merry, unlike Jeeves, Wodehouse’s Head Boy, are versions of what W.H. Auden calls “the perfect omniscient nanny” (Auden 144). They fully appreciate the silliness of the children, literal or figurative, in their charge, and serve them anyway. For they are protectors of innocence, preservers of the sort

of spiritual chastity that is one of Bertie's finer qualities. Thirkell does not allow David's chastity to be nearly as pure, and it is worth asking why.

Merry "in her wisdom had taught herself never to criticise even in her secret mind the beings whom it was her appointed task to serve and protect" (*Peace Breaks Out* 93). These beings are "the upper classes," whom Merry has "devoted" her life "to sheltering" (*Peace Breaks Out* 76). Sheltering from what? From the horrid "levelling effects" of an increasingly " 'communal,' " citified England, in which there will " 'soon...be practically no eccentrics left' " (*Peace Breaks Out* 201). In Thirkell's Bassetshire, eccentricity is a county phenomenon, one most manifest among the upper classes. Like Wodehouse, Thirkell makes of wealth and privilege an incubator of innocence and purity. And what innocence needs is not experience but cultivation. Purity must be kept pure, rather than levelled and thereby sullied. This is where Bunny comes in.

Only an innocent, however much a " 'sweet idiot' " he is, or she, has a chance of keeping well out of whatever absurd trends are afflicting "millions of their fellow-citizens" (*Peace Breaks Out* 123). In short, to be innocent is to offer one's governess "virgin soil to work upon" (*Miss Bunting* 51). Miss Bunting has

no opinion at all of Barchester High School and its headmistress Miss Pettinger (now by a just judgment of heaven an O.B.E.), and a very poor opinion of the whole system of women's education and the School Certificate examination in particular. It was too late to go back to the beginning, as she would have liked to do, so she contented herself with encouraging her pupil to read. Anne, like so many young people of her age, even with a cultivated background, had somehow never acquired the habit of reading, but Miss Bunting, by reading aloud to her in the evenings from the works of Dickens, Thackeray, Miss Austen and other English classics, besides a good deal of poetry, had lighted such a candle as

caused that excellent instructress to wonder if she had done wisely. For Anne, a very intelligent girl who had never used her intelligence, fell head over ears into English literature and history, and made excursions into many other fields. Never had Miss Bunting in her long career had a pupil who had tasted honeydew with such vehemence, or drunk the milk of Paradise with such deep breaths and loud gulps; but it didn't appear to do Anne's health any harm, so the two of them had a very agreeable time in spite of the war, the weather and their rather lonely life; for though the Fieldings were liked in Hallbury, they were not natives, as were the Pallisers and the Dales; and were still treated with caution by most of the old inhabitants. (*Miss Bunting* 31)

But of course Anne will marry one day, and she will cease to be one of Bunny's pupils. David, Bunny's " 'poor little David,' " who as Bunny says " 'was always one of my favorite pupils,' " may not marry (*Marling Hall* 294). And while this will preserve his Eden, his paradise of chaste camp, it will not swell the ranks of the upper-classes, which is what is most needed as peace is breaking out.

It never seemed to occur to Thirkell that David's selfish innocence might in fact be the best defense against the horrors of postwar England, that "Brave and Revolting New World" in which one must say as Laura Morland does " 'goodbye to everything nice forever' " (*Peace Breaks Out* 333 & 361). Wodehouse's solution to this problem was of course to ignore it as he ignored most everything unpleasant. It had no effect on either his books or his life, for by then he had been essentially banned from England and was living very happily in Remsenburg, on the South Shore of Long Island.

That Thirkell did not realize the full extent of David's value as a character is a shame, for at close- or long-range he is by far her best creation. Thirkell's Barsetshire, though real, is an idyllic one; while one by no means wants it destroyed, one wants, in a manner of speaking, the treacle cut. Until his

marriage, which blunts and then disappears him, David is the designated treacle-cutter. He is the innocent whose innocence does not prevent him from pricking the lovely bubbles in which his fellow innocents—chief among them his own mother, Lady Emily Leslie, and his sister Agnes, or Lady Watson—live their lovely lives.

This allows Thirkell to have it both ways. She can have her “ ‘extraordinarily nice, but so entirely dull’ ” children, and hold them up as England’s saviors or preservers—it comes to the same thing (*Peace Breaks Out* 200). And she can have her David, too, who is “ ‘always up to some sort of mischief,’ ” always laughing and mocking the dull children, and protesting quite sincerely that mockery is his way of showing affection, even love (*Peace Breaks Out* 84).

Lettice, scandalized at David’s “rather heartless baiting of people like Mrs. Smith,” an entirely absurd middle-aged widow of his acquaintance “who, it was true, did not feel it—at least [Lettice] hoped they didn’t—but who might at any moment awake to the fact that they were being made a motley to the view and be bitterly perplexed or wounded,” is driven to ask “ ‘do you really need to mock so much? Don’t you ever like people enough not to laugh at them?’ ” (*Marling Hall* 113 & 115).

But for David not laughing means not caring. He answers:

“when you know how much I adore my mamma and how often I laugh at her, you will realise the full extent of—I can’t remember how I was going to end that sentence, but anyway you will realise how difficult it is. If I ever met anyone, a woman particularly, that I didn’t laugh at, it would either be

because she was so dull that she had nothing in her to laugh about, or because she made me feel that I couldn't and needn't mock; and then how dull I'd be." (*Marling Hall* 115)

In *Peace Breaks Out* David tells Sylvia, when she asks him if he is engaged—" 'Lord, no,' said David. 'Only sometimes one wonders, that's all' "— that the result of his wondering about a wife is the certain knowledge that she must, if she is to be his, " 'be funny as hell all the time' " (*Peace Breaks Out* 86). That is, she must entertain him, but not in a cheap way. She must make him laugh; she must let him laugh at her; she must catch his literary allusions; she must allow him to be a schoolboy without herself being "a staid uninteresting schoolgirl" (*Peace Breaks Out* 84).

But what he gets in the end is a sort of funny Bunny, a charming, urbane girl who teaches him a great lesson and keeps on teaching him until he learns. Wife as governess, that is Thirkell's ideal when it comes to her best and favorite character. chaste camp must be quashed for the sake of the greater good, meaning the good of the great, who are increasingly few. David is " 'Lady Emily over again,' " except that Lady Emily has returned to an increasingly eccentric innocence after doing her part for county and country, meaning marrying and having children (*Peace Breaks Out* 108). She has earned her second childhood; David has not earned his.

To Bunny, as we have seen, teaching means instilling the habit of reading, and reading means the English classics: Dickens, Miss Austen, Tennyson. David has done this, and has shown considerable literary talent. But he has not put his talent to work. I do not mean he has not written a play or novel, though of course

he hasn't. Playing pretend on paper for profit, meaning writing novels historical or romantic, as Mrs. Rivers and Mrs. Barton do in *Pomfret Towers*, or even " 'rather good bad books' " like Laura Morland's that " 'are all the same as each other so you know exactly what to expect,' " is for one so Campy as David—or Benson's Lucia, for that matter—far too difficult and unpleasant (*High Rising* 32; *Northbridge Rectory* 257).

David pretends to be working on a novel, though it comes out that he means to do " 'the film version and the dramatic version, and then with that success behind me it will be as easy as anything to write the novel. People often do, you know. "The Story of the Play" ' " (*Wild Strawberries* 192). Far better then to flit, to invent little conversational dramas in which his playthings feel they have been cast as heroine, to trifle brilliantly with their affections and lead them on to the edge of the cliff called Romance, which is thrilling as long as one does not fall off.

But really the cliff is pretend Romance, and so even more dangerous than the real thing. Still, the women David romances prefer his games of amusing pretend to real Romance, which is of a seriousness at once alarming and rather boring. David offers a thrilling alternative, a brief little space that is neither the nursery nor wedlock. This is a place for advanced children to play, mostly in conversation, with the occasional sweet affected romantic gesture thrown in—always by David—for good measure. It is a distinctly Campy place, a little theater for two.

In *Wild Strawberries* he pretends to be writing a play, “ ‘a simple love-story,’ ” and offers Mary Preston the part of

“the wife. She hasn't much to do but look lovely and deeply wronged. You have just the hands for a wronged wife,” he said, taking one of her hands in his, “absolutely perfect.”

“What is a wronged hand like?” asked Mary, too conscious of the warmth of David's hand on hers.

“Quite perfect.”

He pulled a large yellow silk handkerchief out of his pocket and folded it round Mary's hand. “So perfect that I shall do it up in a parcel and give it back to you.” So saying, he laid her hand, neatly enfolded in his handkerchief, back on her knee.

Mary hardly knew whether she was more afraid of the silence or of the sound of her own voice, but David spared her any further embarrassment by resuming possession of his handkerchief and getting up. (*Wild Strawberries* 57)

No, what I mean by saying that David has not put his literary talent to use is not that he has squandered it, or misused it—though he has, as we have just seen. What I really mean is this. If David is Bunny's favorite pupil, Anne Fielding is her second-favorite. Anne is the only girl in Barsetshire who recognizes David's literary allusions for what they are: more than just pretty talk. David and Anne both quote Tennyson rather often, and when Anne says David's mother “ ‘reminds one of old happy far-off things,’ ” David asks her approvingly if she is “ ‘a Wordsworthian in addition to your other attractions?’ ” (*Peace Breaks Out* 136).

Thirkell's narrators never mind revealing their literary prejudices, which are very rightly against Tolstoyish writers of what the narrator of one of Wodehouse's golf stories calls “sombre realism” (*The Clicking of Cuthbert* 20). In answer to

David's question Anne says " 'Only the bits everyone knows. Otherwise I honestly think he is dreadfully dull,' " with which very sound judgment David entirely agrees, while admitting that he has not read *The Excursion* and intends to go on not reading it forever (*Peace Breaks Out* 136).

Thirkell finds no sublimity in Nature, and permits none of her characters the great Wordsworthian silliness of going looking for any. This does not mean that Thirkell is bored by Nature or uninterested in it, and Hermione Lee is quite wrong to equate Nature to mere "scenery" (Lee 94). Nature is a sort of trust, passed down from county family to county family. And county families are Thirkell's great preoccupation, not "the little Barsetshire towns" (Lee 94).

What this has to do with David and chaste camp will become clear in a moment, when I discuss Thirkell's conservatism. For now let me say a bit more about Nature. Nature is where England, Thirkell's great love, has its deepest roots. When Anne Fielding, "a town child," visits Rushwater House, where Leslies have been raising cows and bulls and children for five generations, she begins to appreciate "the feeling of responsibility that the landed people still kept for those who lived in their villages and worked on their estates; dimly apprehending a society more deeply rooted than the urban life of the Close or the rather small-town life of Hallbury" (*Peace Breaks Out* 225).

Lee is quite right to refer to Thirkell's England as a "Little England," though she does so disparagingly (Lee 90). Every county family is an England unto itself, a little England uninterested in Empire, for there is so much to do at home: "parish meetings, cows, hens, kitchen-maids, old men at Hacker's Corner,

judgment, skill, patience, time of the landowners, upon whom every person and every animal and every piece of work on the place seemed to depend” (*Peace Breaks Out* 271).

Thirkell’s landowners, as I have said, are her guardians of England and its King, for they themselves are little kings and queens, and their subjects are the villagers who live on their estates. To be a landowner is to see at one and the same time the literary beauty of the land and its utility, to stand on Hangman’s Hill and “quote from Cowper’s threnody on poplars and make an allusion to the Woods of Westermain,” and at the same time, “that same observer” must be able to appreciate “the skilful way” in which his estate agent has managed the land, replacing those “beeches and thorns” cut down as timber with “conifers” also to be cut down, but growing while they grow in “long open rides” cleverly disposed so that whichever way one looks “a different enchantment” is offered “to the view” (*Peace Breaks Out* 250).

What I mean is I think pretty clear, but I shall try to make it clearer still. In Thirkell literature allows one to mourn with appropriate beauty the passing of the past, that old golden age, but one must not delude oneself into taking literature for a sufficient defense against the horrid Brave New World. Literature is not enough. Innocence is not enough. Even among Thirkell’s upper classes, where eccentricity is preserved by the all-powerful Bunnies and Merries, loss is inevitable. One loses one’s husband at Dunkirk. One loses one’s foot at Anzio. One loses one’s country after winning a war. Bunny dies. Merry dies. Lady Emily dies.

What one must do is preserve one's Little England by perpetuating it, and this means marriage and children. As a political philosophy this is charmingly myopic and rather dull, quite as dull as the landowners in Thirkell who practice it. As a way of making the romantic novel into something much greater and more dramatic—and more romantic—it is a very clever maneuver. Thirkell's strength, as I have said, is her dialogue, but her narration is strong, too, for her narrators speak very much as do her more entertaining characters. One detects a strongish note of Laura Morland, she of the very good bad books, with a little Lady Emily Leslie thrown in for good measure. Thirkell's weakness is her plotting; by keeping the scale of the romance novel small but so raising its stakes that the whole of English civilization seems to depend on the incredibly dull John Leslie's marrying the equally dull Mary Preston, Thirkell makes dramatic what of itself could hardly be less so.

But in heightening the drama of her plots and in so doing brilliantly circumventing the dullness of her more heroic characters, so that their dullness becomes a virtue rather than a vice—for it is the dull, safe, comfortable, dependable people who will keep their Little Englands from going the way of Big England—Thirkell sacrifices her best character. He may be “‘bone-selfish,’” he may never “do anything except what he wanted to do,” he may not make a very good husband to a wife who relies on him to “help her” if she becomes “unhappy, or has a difficulty in her life,” but he is endlessly interesting and creates drama in a much more satisfying, intimate way than does all that Fate of England stuff (*Peace Breaks Out* 241).

Until *Peace Breaks Out* Thirkell makes a small, sacredish place for chaste camp, which is to say she does not snuff it out but carefully controls and nurtures its burning, even as she shows its silliness and careless cruelty. This I think is also very clever, for it is an acknowledgment of the frightening ease with which a real civilization, however idyllic, can be—in Thirkell’s word—“murdered,” and while keeping the “last gleams” of his own Little England gleaming David makes for himself an imaginary paradise that, however vague are its boundaries, however ghostly its landmarks, cannot be destroyed, unless by marriage (*Peace Breaks Out* 145).

Thus the savior of Thirkell’s Little England becomes the destroyer of David’s Little Eden. Rose completes Bunny’s auntly task of educating and domesticating David, which is a sort of happy ending. Yet one feels a sense of loss. David has been swallowed up by family at last, if not by county.

Sadder still is Thirkell’s abandonment of a perfect formula. In brief and abbreviated form, for I have traced its outlines in the preceding pages, the formula is this: David romances heroine, who is rather dull, and we enjoy seeing her roused from her dullness, and David is allowed to stand in for the man the heroine will marry, who is as dull as she is. We pity the heroine in spite of her dullness, we deplore David’s flitting and sipping but never hate him, and in the end the heroine marries the safe and comfortable man and David flits away to sip again.

The appeal of chaste camp is that properly managed it is gloriously formulaic. It allows children to remain children forever, even when menaced on

all sides by grown-ups, for the favored child—the schoolboy for life—is given as his faithful ally or implacable adversary another child—the Head Boy—who only seems more grown-up. Bertie has Jeeves. Lucia has Mapp. Ryder and Sebastian are sad, almost tragic deviations from this formula. As Auden observes, the perfect nanny keeps the favored child “out of trouble without, however, ever trying, as most nannies will, to educate and improve him” (Auden 144). But Auden assumes that the ideal nanny must be a grown-up. He casts Jeeves in this role, which as I have just said is a mistake, an error of critical acumen.

Thirkell’s mistake is of the same type, but more serious because it occurs in novels rather than an essay in *Harper’s*. When Thirkell allows David to be educated and improved, when Bunny, who disapproves of his Eden but has not quite cast him out of it, allows Rose Bingham to finish the job, she does a disservice to her pupil that Thirkell roundly and I think foolishly endorses.

Foolishly because Thirkell spoils her formula, which if less perfect than Wodehouse’s or Benson’s would still have been perfectly durable. One gets the sense that Thirkell believes she has done David a good turn, but we who know and love Bertie Wooster and worship Queen Lucia know better. The eternal child is too precious a jewel to cast among pigs, unless that pig is the Empress of Blandings. Do this and the “voice of Agape, of Holy Love,” which “speaks comically—and in what other mode than the comic could it on earth truthfully speak?,” is silenced (Auden 145). David’s selfishness might have been a kind of Holy Love. Instead it is reduced to romantic love, and the vital center of Thirkell’s Little England, her fiend angelical, becomes just another of her dull heroes.

Conclusion

Critics typically react to the works of P.G. Wodehouse with an odd combination of happiness and dismay; this irony, and it is an irony as I will demonstrate, is the subject of my conclusion. My argument, such as it is, is that any dismay one feels while reading Wodehouse, the leading light of chaste camp and pure comedy, is a testament to his uniqueness, his unprecedented means of “resuscitating and transforming and interacting with [his] predecessors”, as Robert Alter puts it, and thereby “perpetuating and modifying the canon” (*Pleasure and Change* 7).

As Carey Perloff so aptly observes, it is not professors of literature but its writers who keep the canon alive and in so doing enter it to enlarge and enrich it. This “impulse of innovation or even, as [Frank] Kermode proposes, of transgression within a community of admired predecessors may distinguish the pleasure of the text from at least the simpler kinds of extraliterary pleasures” (*Pleasure and Change* 7). A related question has preoccupied me from introduction to conclusion: are chaste camp and pure comedy refused admission to the canon because their pleasures are, or seem to be, too simple, and is this just?

James Wood is representative of those critics who read Wodehouse with both happiness and dismay. Wodehouse’s language “is quite capable of floating away from its tethers and becoming a fantastic music, made up of Edwardian slang, Wodehouse’s own neologisms, and the clichés of popular fiction”, which

music affords its readers “a verbal release, into and out of language (or at least out of language as we ordinarily know it). The words rustle like free money: how nice it is to have more than we know what to do with” (“Moral Baby”). Happiness is a Wodehouse sentence. But Wood is clearly dismayed, though he claims only to be confused, that “an intelligent and sensitive teenager, precociously talented at writing, wanted to emulate popular entertainers such as G.A. Henty and H. Rider Haggard and Conan Doyle, and not major writers such as Conrad or James or George Eliot” (“Moral Baby”).

Here we have the irony with which I began my conclusion, and it is no less ironic for its relative mildness. Precisely this conjunction of happiness and dismay defines the particular pleasure of canonical literature. There is “something different about the pleasure afforded by a great work of literature”—a canonical book, in other words, which is the kind with which Frank Kermode is concerned in *Pleasure and Change* (*Pleasure and Change* 6). This sort of pleasure is a very serious thing, so serious that it can only be described in French. *Jouissance* is Roland Barthes’s word for it, and Kermode borrows from Barthes to distinguish the pleasure of reading the canon from that of rope dancing, drinking sherry, and indulging in a bit of Henty, Haggard, Conan Doyle, or Wodehouse.

Naturally *King Lear*, which I am plucking from the canon more or less at random, provokes in critics vastly different sorts of happiness and dismay than does *The Code of the Woosters*. But this is a revealing difference. What we might call canonical pleasure is a response to “the magisterial power (and the

courage) of the poetic imagination” in *King Lear* “together with a wrenching experience of anguish over the vision of suffering or gratuitous evil or destructiveness articulated in the work” (*Pleasure and Change* 9). This is “the sublime,” and it is a high and narrow standard (*Pleasure and Change* 9).

The obvious problem, according to Alter, is that not all canonical works are expressions of the sublime. Two large categories of literature that include many eminent canonical texts have very little to do with the sublime and “cannot be linked with the experience of loss or dismay except by a long interpretive stretch” (*Pleasure and Change* 9). The first is the “worldly literature of the quotidian”, Austen territory, in “which a delighting play of perception, an invitation to ponder motives and make subtle discriminations about behavior, character, and moral predicaments” (*Pleasure and Change* 9). The second is comedy.

English comic novels in the canon include *Tristram Shandy*, *Tom Jones*, and *Ulysses*; France has contributed the fiction of Rabelais, and some of the plays of Moliere; first among Spain’s contributions is certainly *Don Quixote*. It is to the comedy of *Don Quixote*, the comedy, that is, of “the master-servant relationship, especially the table-turning of servant usurping master,” that Wood compares Wodehouse’s books (“Moral Baby”). This is not a novel comparison. Wodehouse is a master of “mangled allusions—classical, biblical, and literary,” and the Bertie-Jeeves partnership is itself a brilliant allusion to and variation on that of Sir Quixote of La Mancha and his servant Sancho Panza (“Moral Baby”).

Why, then, do the finest of Wodehouse’s Bertie and Jeeves stories have no place in the canon? Why does Wood not argue that Wodehouse deserves a

place in the canon? Though he had no “moral purpose,” whatever his biographer Robert McCrum would have us believe, Wodehouse becomes “‘serious’ in a literary sense” by virtue of “the singularity of his achievement; and this singularity was owed not to moral seriousness, the possession of a thousand earnest scribes, but to the absolute absence of it” (“Moral Baby”). That a Wodehouse story

can march so easily, morally speaking, on an empty stomach; that it can achieve so many traditionally literary things without ever daring the scandal of meaning; that it can be bottomless—ungrounded, unmoored by reality—but threaten no abysses whatsoever, is completely fascinating, because it seems so fatly happy with what, for most of us, would be hardship and starvation—a cosmos of eternal and relentless frivolity. (“Moral Baby”)

It is tempting to say that Wood’s silence on the subject of Wodehouse’s exclusion from the canon can be explained very simply, by the fact that the canon is no more. But Wood, as Cynthia Ozick sees it, “recalls the glory days of American criticism during the middle of the last century, the age of Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, Alfred Kazin and Irving Howe” (*Nation* 46). Whether this is an accurate assessment of Wood’s skill as a critic—William Deresiewicz thinks not—it is certainly true that Wood is a throwback to an age in which the canon was simply great books. He is far more interested in the greatness of a book than in any of its other qualities.

It is telling that Wood’s essay on Wodehouse—really it is a review of McCrum’s biography—has reappeared in none of his books. You would expect to find it in *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*, but he somehow

ignores Wodehouse altogether. Nor does the essay find a second home in *The Fun Stuff: And Other Essays*, whose subjects run a very strange gamut from Robert Alter's translation of the Hebrew Bible to Paul Auster's shallowness. Wood's willingness to claim his appraisal of Wodehouse is greater than King Lear's to acknowledge Edmund as his son, but only slightly.

Chaste camp and pure comedy do have this effect on critics, even those that love literature and take it seriously as art. Academe remains a "somber intellectual climate" of which the "neglect of playfulness" is "a symptom"—there is no choice but to take literature seriously, "as an existentially serious business, and they do not allow much room for the possibility that the pleasure of the canonical text might also sometimes be unserious or even 'low' (though perhaps at the same time complex)" (*Pleasure and Change* 11).

It is a great irony that critics refuse to take seriously writers who are serious not about life but about writing, about offering their readers the "delight or exultation" that can only be felt in the presence of "sheer word-magic and the architectonic mastery of the imagination" (*Pleasure and Change* 12). If literature "involves some sort of grappling with the multifarious aspects of the human condition, including the most deeply troubling ones, it is also a form of play with language, story, and represented speech, and the playfulness itself, exhibited by a master of the medium, may give us, creatures that we are of language, story, and speech, abiding pleasure of a sort that makes us want to retain such works in a canon" (*Pleasure and Change* 10).

Wodehouse created an Eden of astonishing sophistication and simplicity. Indeed, chaste camp and pure comedy stand alone in their seriousness about not only frivolity but the pleasure of their readers. I suspect that critics ignore or resent Wodehouse because his Everest-sized erudition and writerly skill serve a form of pleasure that they find to be low, too low to require their readerly expertise. Wodehouse leaves so little to the critic—except the task of explaining how so intricate an apparatus as one of his stories can reliably deliver pleasure of such simplicity and intensity. Reading Wodehouse is like drinking champagne; it is liable to make one not only happy, but giddy. You feel you could float off on one of his stories like a bubble.

The purity of pure comedy, the chastity of chaste camp, are thrilling things and completely unique in English literature. And if not every writer of these two types of light fare deserves canonization—Wodehouse may be the only one of them who does—that does not diminish the value of lightness, of fluffiness. Whether it is canonical or not, literature that frees one from the burdens of life and literature both ought to be better appreciated—that is, better understood and better enjoyed—and it is my hope that I have at least slightly turned this *ought to be* into an *is*.

In insisting that Wodehouse, Benson, and Thirkell wrote not just comedy but a type of pure comedy called chaste camp, I have tried to reclaim comedy for camp, or rather reclaim a region of camp for comedy. My greater ambition has been to get at the uniqueness of these three writers, which uniqueness has the advantage of bringing them together rather than setting them apart. The term

“comic novelist” doesn’t go far enough, or say enough. Wodehouse in particular, as I have shown, is wildly inventive. He essentially created his own subgenre of the comic novel, in which the romantic comedy marries the crime caper and together they beget something far funnier, better constructed, and more childlike than one would have imagined. It is Wodehouse’s incredibly sophisticated childlikeness, and his extraordinarily childlike sophistication, that sets him apart from other writers of comedy and camp. He created his own comic world, an English Eden, and so deserves his own literary category; that is what I have given him. Benson belongs there, too, and Thirkell would have better belonged if she had not abandoned her version of the chaste camp formula.

More broadly, what I have tried to do is show how an old and unfashionable type of literary criticism, close reading, can yield new and surprising discoveries about writers and genres unjustly ignored by academe. Comedy is just such a genre, and Wodehouse, Benson, and Thirkell are such writers. Taking comedy seriously by reading it closely, with an eye to its strangeness and a willingness to reconsider its literary merits, can rejuvenate the academic study of literature. For comedy is a genre devoted to its readers’ pleasure, and the pleasures of reading great comedy are so great and lasting, even a professor of literature can experience them.

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