Recalling the Trenches from the Club Window: Contrasting Perspectives in Dorothy Sayers and P. G. Wodehouse

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British cultural historians often cite World War I as a pivot point in the advent of modernity and Modernism. Despite pre-war works of Modernism (and Virginia Woolf’s famous tongue-in-cheek statement that “On or about December 1910 human character changed”), World War I is a clear landmark that seems self-evidently an event after which Nothing Would Ever Be The Same. In fact, many works on the Victorian period use 1914 as a bookend when defining the period by broad-reaching political events rather than a change in monarch. (You may have noted that this makes the period longer—Victorianists like to colonize things.) The other end of this period is often the 1832 Reform Act, which began an extension of the franchise to middle-class men. In fact, universal male franchise only came to Britain at the close of the war in 1918, with the same Representation of the People Act that began enfranchising women. While it is undeniable that the First World War had a resounding impact on Britain, its effects, particularly on the literary scene, can be overstated. The Victorians did not just go away in 1914. Particularly in middlebrow culture, much stayed the same—which itself constitutes a response to the war.

Take, for example, humorist Jerome K. Jerome, whose 1889 hit Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog) has never been out of print. He continued writing until his death in 1927, including a World War I novel, All Roads Lead to Calvary (1919). The novel contains a scene in which a conscientious objector is killed by a mob, and Jerome drew on his own experience driving an ambulance in the war (being too old for traditional service). Yet his Times obituary marked him as irrevocably dated: “He had not, in fact, kept pace with the changes of public taste, and remained to the end in the naïveté both of his laughter and his tears a typical humorist of the ‘eighties.”

Jerome and his close contemporaries, centered around the Idler magazine, established a mode of joking about late-Victorian changes to the social landscape that relied on the club as exemplar of the best and worst of Victorian sociability: convivial on the one hand and exclusive on the other. I discuss this phenomenon elsewhere, but here I’d like to focus on the two youngest subjects in my study: Dorothy Sayers and P.G. Wodehouse. Each employs jokes about the club in a post-war context, but Sayers emphasizes the generational gap the war created, whereas Wodehouse emphasized continuity. Nevertheless, both ultimately rely on the structures of the club, particularly when cultivating a relationship with their own readers.

“Club” in this context has a fairly narrow definition: a social club for men in London’s West End, known as “Clubland” for the proliferation of these institutions. The club in this sense originated in the late seventeenth century but saw its high-water mark in the Victorian period. In the twentieth century, the clubs saw a decline, although many exist to this day—and some continue to exclude...
women. Beyond their physical and historical presence, however, these clubs loomed large in print culture, fictional and non-fictional. Fictional clubs in particular, I argue elsewhere, offer an imagined community whose essential fictionality means that common readers have as much of a right to belong as anyone else.

Dorothy Sayers’ *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928) renders a Victorian joke horribly real: that a member has died behind his newspaper and no one has noticed. The club and its rules, written and unwritten, become a synecdoche for the pre-war social order. Lord Peter Wimsey, Sayers’s detective, navigates a range of social contexts, using detection as therapy for his shell-shock. The structure of the mystery, now well established, imposes a sense of order for both Wimsey and perhaps also his readers, yet *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* also suggests the limits of this kind of containment.

The joke practically opens the novel: the club is called a “Morgue” in the opening line, and Wimsey’s friend George Fentiman, a First-World-War veteran with wounds visible and invisible, follows the reference up: “Place always reminds me of that old thing in ‘Punch,’ you know—‘Waiter, take away Lord Whatisname, he’s been dead two days.’” Yet the joke is fulfilled: Fentiman’s grandfather is discovered, behind a newspaper where all thought he was sleeping, in full rigor mortis. When they discover the body, Fentiman hysterically recalls the joke:

Fentiman laughed. Peal after hysterical peal shook his throat. All round the room, scandalized Bellonians creaked to their gouty feet, shocked by the unmannerly noise.

‘Take him away!’ said Fentiman, ‘take him away. He’s been dead two days. So are you! So am I! We’re all dead, and we never noticed it!’

The club is figured as the bastion of conservatism, the representative of the Old Guard—the previous generation who doesn’t understand the young men who have fought in the war. On the one hand, it’s an “old” joke—the age and reference to *Punch* makes it seem Victorian, at very least pre-war. But the joke has changed: to the younger Fentiman, his grandfather’s death is indicative of a larger social problem: “We’re all dead, and we never noticed it!” As an absurdist postwar sentiment, this recalls T. S. Eliot’s evocation of malaise in *The Waste Land*: “Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?” The body behind the newspaper becomes just that: not merely a body from whence the mind engages in imaginative journeys of reading, but a corpse.

 Indeed, the club is so ossified that George’s joke registers on a level comparable to his grandfather’s death: “It is doubtful which occurrence was more disagreeable to the senior members of the Bellona Club—the grotesque death of General Fentiman in their midst or the indecent neurathenia of his grandson. Only the younger men felt no sense of outrage; they knew too much.” If the other young men, presumably who had also been in the war, don’t share George’s hysterical laughter, they “get” his joke. The discovery of the body takes place on Armistice Day: the murder of one old man contrasts darkly with the war deaths of millions of young men on all sides of the

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conflict. For much of the novel, George appears guilty of his grandfather’s murder, both to a reluctant Wimsey and ultimately to himself: in the throes of a post-traumatic episode, he even falsely confesses.

In fact, the novel itself turns on the joke that nothing changes in the club. After both Fentiman brothers have been suspected of the murder, Wimsey proves that Robert tampered with the body after death in search of an inheritance but that the doctor who examined the body—also a member of the club—committed the murderer. Wimsey encourages him to write a confession, and another club member provides him a pistol with which to shoot himself in the club library. The novel closes with Wetheridge, a longstanding member, complaining about a slew of troubles, culminating in corked wine, crying, “My God! I don’t know what’s come to this Club!” The dark joke, after all, is what has not changed—both what has not materially changed after the war and also the changes that clubmen refuse to acknowledge. Wetheridge blames the War, but more as an indication of a social and cultural shift.

Meanwhile, in the writings of P. G. Wodehouse, the war makes much less of an impact. Some critics claim neither World War registers in Wodehouse’s fictional world. Literally, this is only a slight exaggeration: in an oeuvre of about a hundred books, one has to hunt pretty hard for direct references to the war (I’ve found about a handful). References to Hitler and Mussolini are more common (especially in the inter-war period). But none of Wodehouse’s characters—certainly not his main characters—are said to have served in either war. Certainly Wodehouse’s world, which centers on the fictional Drones Club, is a far cry from Sayers’s, in which Wimsey’s war experience defines him as a character and a detective. In fact, Sayers uses Wodehouse in her characterization of Wimsey: in Murder Must Advertise (1933), when Wimsey goes undercover at an advertising agency, his new colleagues describe him as “like Bertie Wooster in horn-rims.” But while Wimsey’s frivolous exterior conceals a razor-sharp intellect, Bertie Wooster’s…does not. Wodehouse does write clever and/or impecunious characters, but mainly in his pre-war fiction.

The name of the Drones Club suggests a bee metaphor, implying that these upper-class men idly profit from the labor of others while waiting around to serve their only essential function: mating. This reads like quite stark political commentary, but the Drones’s silliness makes the whole thing seem more like a joke. In the Drones Club, members perpetually chuck dinner rolls at each other, play practical jokes, and call each other by absurd nicknames. These antics often appear as parenthetical asides leavening a moment that threatens to verge on the serious, such as the threat of a renewed engagement with Madeline Bassett: “Only once in my career had I experienced an emotion equally intense, on the occasion when Freddie Wigeon at the Drones, having possessed himself of a motor horn, stole up behind me as I crossed Dover Street in what is known as a reverie and suddenly tooted the apparatus in my immediate ear.” The Drones exaggerate some of the real

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6 Sayers, Bellona 192.

7 “the often observed fact that Wodehouse's mature stories take place in a world where time has basically stood still ever since ca. 1920” Robert A. Hall, Jr., The Comic Style of P.G. Wodehouse (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1974): 51.


qualities of West-End clubs, such as absurd bets, including wagering on matrimonial prospects or playing golf through the streets of London. An element of Thomas Hobbes’s “superiority theory” of humor may be at play here. Yet I doubt most readers feel unmitigated “scorn,” as Hobbes has it. The Drones’ general affability mitigates this effect. Bertie in particular goes to great lengths to help his friends and relations, frequently putting himself into ridiculous situations. Of course, one can never completely generalize about readers’ feelings, but I suspect most readers feel fond of Bertie, even as they laugh at him.

In one instance from Uncle Fred in the Springtime (1939), Wodehouse writes directly against the characterization of “post-war youth” as fundamentally troubled. After nerve specialist Sir Roderick Glossop meets Pongo Twistleton in a railway carriage, “Sir Roderick carried away with him an impression of a sombre and introspective young man. He mentioned him later in a lecture to the Mothers of West Kensington as an example of the tendency of post-war youth towards a brooding melancholy.” Pongo is, in fact, afflicted with a classically convoluted comic plot. His Uncle Fred delights in involving him in outrageous schemes, for which Pongo lacks the constitution. In this case, Uncle Fred is attempting to insinuate himself, his nephew, and Polly Pott into Blandings Castle under assumed identities. To make matters worse, these identities hinge on Uncle Fred’s impersonation of Sir Roderick Glossop—yes, the same Sir Roderick that they meet in the railway carriage. Pongo thus has an obvious reason for appearing brooding and melancholy, but by its nature he must keep it concealed from Sir Roderick.

Furthermore, Pongo has a host of other problems. His customary “anemia of the exchequer” has been exacerbated by a series of bad bets, leaving him £250 in debt and in danger of both bodily harm and expulsion from the Drones Club (one of the original purposes of clubs was as a group of men whose bets could be depended on). Moreover, he has fallen in love at first sight—as he is wont to do—with Polly Potts, who is engaged to someone else. To make matters worse, the very scheme that brings Pongo and Uncle Fred down to Blandings is designed in part to facilitate Polly’s engagement. But ultimately Pongo’s troubles are laid squarely at Uncle Fred’s door. When he meets Polly, she “laughed—the gay, wholehearted laugh of youth. Pongo remembered that he had laughed like that in the days before he had begun to see so much of Uncle Fred.” In this case, the generational gap is ascribed to disposition rather than circumstance: no evidence suggests that Pongo has been influenced directly by the war.

Wodehouse and Sayers each also depict an influential relationship between an upper-class clubman and his valet, or “gentleman’s personal gentleman.” Jeeves, who fills that role for Bertie Wooster, is Wodehouse’s best-known character [More recently, a search engine was named for him]. Jeeves serves as a “Mayfair consultant,” extricating Bertie and his friends from scrapes, often in ways that make them look ridiculous, and frequently for explicit compensation, monetary or

14 Wodehouse, Uncle Fred in the Springtime 79.
otherwise.\textsuperscript{15} Bertie, who narrates their “saga,” hyperbolically describes Jeeves as almost inhuman, particularly in the display of emotion: “One of his eyebrows had risen about an eighth of an inch, and I knew he was deeply stirred, because I had rarely seen him raise an eyebrow more than a sixteenth of an inch.”\textsuperscript{16} Even the verbs ascribed to Jeeves’s motion make him sound other-worldly; in one early story alone he “float[s],” “flit[s],” “filter[s]” and “shimmer[s].”\textsuperscript{17} Although Jeeves has several romantic entanglements (his elaborate plot in \textit{The Inimitable Jeeves} extricates Jeeves himself from one of two simultaneous “understandings”), he remains fundamentally apart from his fellow characters. (I should note that Wodehouse has a range of valets and butlers throughout his canon, many of whom are quite different from Jeeves.)

Lord Peter Wimsey’s valet, Bunter, on the other hand, is far less distant from his employer. They have several overlapping roles in relation to each other. Bunter served under Wimsey as his sergeant during the war, and he continues to assist Wimsey’s detective “hobby,” principally as a photographer. Furthermore, Bunter helps nurse Wimsey through his shell shock, as seen in \textit{Whose Body} (1923):

\begin{quote}
Lord Peter allowed himself to be dosed and put to bed without further resistance. Mr. Bunter, looking singularly un-Bunterlike in striped pyjamas, with his stiff black hair ruffled about his head, sat grimly watching the younger man’s sharp cheekbones and the purple stains under his eyes…. He peered at him anxiously. An affectionate note crept into his voice. ‘Bloody little fool!’ said Sergeant Bunter.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

Bunter steps outside his valet role here, appearing “un-Bunterlike” and as a sergeant, regarding the sleeping Wimsey with almost parental affection. The war makes the crucial difference here. Not only did it create Wimsey’s shell shock, but it gives Bunter the role of “Sergeant Bunter,” who can view his employer and superior officer with familiar affection—and common sense.

Wimsey solves crimes as direct therapy for his shell shock: both a productive use of his horrific wartime experience and a way of making himself useful as a minor member of the aristocracy. Wimsey’s actions are full of purpose, but what of his readers? In consuming middle-brow fiction, they are, perhaps, as idle as a clubman (except, of course, those of us who read for Serious Work). In her other writings, Sayers depicts Wimsey as thoroughly enjoying his membership of other clubs, particularly the Egotists’. Despite their differences, Sayers and Wodehouse both use the club and upper-class masculinity as an aspirational model for readers—even as both also critique the club (Sayers directly, Wodehouse through gentle humor). In this way, they serve as less of a break from their Victorian predecessors than the conventional narrative of the war’s effect would imply. But in following their Victorian predecessors, especially the New Humorists, in humorously re-defining the club space as one imaginatively accessible by readers of wider class and gender backgrounds, these twentieth-century, middle-brow novelists were radical in their own way.

Rather than completely rejecting Victorian spaces of exclusivity, these novels re-define them—and open them up to common readers.

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