Sarah Säckel

Jokes Don’t Jump from Nowhere:

Comic Dialogism
in P.G. Wodehouse’s ‘Jeeves and Wooster’ Novels

Walter Göbel, Therese Fischer-Seidel, Klaus Stierstorfer (Hg.)

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Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier
Tel.: (0651) 41503
Fax: (0651) 41504
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E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

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1 Introduction

> Westbrook asks me whether reading some English classic did me any good. I say "Well, I suppose it was like meat going into the sausage mill. It will come out in the form of sausages sometime."
> (qtd. in McCrum 73)

Being one of the very few German literary critics who engage with the works of P.G. Wodehouse, I take it as a due national prerogative to analyse the sausages.[1] The 'sausages' here are his 'Jeeves and Wooster' novels,[2] which were created through incorporating various intertextual and intermedial references.[3] This study presents new readings of these comic novels by analysing them as 'textual sausages' – texts that rewrite various works from English and American literature as well as Wodehouse's own writings and bear intermedial traces of his career in musical comedy. Hence, I will approach the novels under the scope of intertextual and intermedial dialogism. The term 'dialogism' is a reference to Bakhtin's socio-culturally grounded theory of what Kristeva in her reception of his works called 'intertextuality' and stresses the interaction between production, text and reception. This is especially important when analysing comic works because laughter is always a "*fait social*" (cf. Pfister 2002, vi). Ironically, the very term 'dialogism' was not coined by Bakhtin,[4] but according to Michael Holquist "the history of Bakhtin's reception seems to suggest that if we are to continue to think about his work in a way that is useful, some synthetic means must be found for categorizing the different ways he meditated on dialogue" (Holquist 15). I will also use the term 'dialogism' for three different, albeit overlapping, phenomena: first, the 'communication' between author/narrator, text and reader,[5] secondly, the interaction between texts and images as well as between different texts and between different images, and thirdly, the incongruities created through these interactions. With regard to the two latter points, my concept differs diametrically from Bakhtin's con-

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1 Parts of chapter 1, 2 and 4.3 have previously been published in Säckel 2009.

2 There are 15 'Jeeves and Wooster' books, however four of them are not novels, but collections of short stories (cf. Usborne 2003, 137ff.). For simplicity's sake, I shall mostly use the term 'novel' instead of 'short stories and novels' and I shall not pay attention to the generic differences. (The Penguin edition I am using for my analyses only counts 14 works as the first collection of short stories included not only 'Jeeves and Wooster' stories, but also Reggie Pepper stories and the 'Jeeves and Wooster' stories were republished in 1925 in the collection *Carry On, Jeeves* (cf. Usborne 2003, 158).)

3 None of the novels is actually called 'Jeeves and Wooster' and neither did Wodehouse call the series so; most novels include the name 'Jeeves' because he was the more popular character. *Jeeves and Wooster* is the name of Clive Exton's popular film adaptation (1990-1993) starring Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry.

4 "For this reason, the term used in this book to refer to the interconnected set of concerns that dominate Bakhtin's thinking is 'dialogism,' a term, I hasten to add, never used by Bakhtin himself." (Holquist 15)

5 For simplicity's sake, I will use the male pronoun when talking about persons without a defined gender, e.g. 'the reader' or 'the narrator'.

cept of 'heteroglossia' because it includes interactions that are 'monologic' in a Bakhtinian sense. There is no 'social voice' in the P.G. Wodehouse novels, but society is present through already mediated accounts. Hence, studies of cultural memory will help to explain why the intertextual and intermedial dialogism of the novels is responsible for their popularity and their creation of a somewhat stereotypical, fictitious and partly nostalgic Englishness.[6] Moreover, the popular comic novels' 'effects' cannot be explained without theories of the comic, intertextuality, intermediality and visuality because some results of intermedial dialogism are the very visual comedy of the novels and the incongruities between the visual and the verbal. It has to be pointed out here that it is not the aim of this project to add new theoretical concepts to visual culture studies, but to analyse Wodehouse's works. Concerning the novels' visuality, theories by other critics will be applied in my analyses and will only be modified where the object of my study necessitates this.[7]

The application of recent theoretical approaches to Wodehouse's works has not been undertaken before – probably because a number of studies on his works are biographical or dated, possibly because the novels' comicality often seems to escape serious theorisations. However, this is the challenge that my study embraces and, as will be shown, such an approach promotes a much deeper understanding of the novels, their popularity and on-going prominence in cultural memory as well as their creation of humorous effects. Furthermore, although critics have repeatedly pointed out Wodehouse's 'cannibalising' of his own and others' works, hardly any of these examine the effects these intertexts have, but simply notice their existence; none apply theories of intertextuality to the novels and there are no studies of intermediality, visuality and cultural memory of Wodehouse's works. In providing what could be called a 'thick description'[8] of cultural embeddedness, my study operates on the borderline between cultural and literary studies; the theoretical approaches from both fields help to create a better understanding of Wodehouse's works and their effects.

The selection of the 'Jeeves and Wooster' novels from among the works of a popular prolific writer of course demands explanation. Firstly, the 'Jeeves and Wooster' novels, and especially the character of Jeeves, have become part of English – and American – cultural memory. In the UK, an internet engine called *Ask Jeeves* exists and Jeeves even has an entry in the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* and *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: On Historical Principles*.[9] Modelled on the

6 The term 'Englishness', as it is to be understood with respect to the 'Jeeves and Wooster' novels, will be explained in 5.1.

7 An example would be the 'visual running gag'/'comic configuration' (cf. 2.1.3; 6.2.2), a term and concept that I created with reference to Renate Brosch's concept of a 'configuration' (cf. Brosch 2007b, 180f.).

8 I understand the term 'thick description' as Clifford Geertz defines it (cf. Geertz 3-30) with reference to Gilbert Ryle (cf. Geertz 6).

9 Cf. the entry in *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*: "[A character in the novels of P.G. Wodehouse.] A valet, a personal attendant, esp. one who is resourceful and omniscient."

character of the clever servant, the *eiron* and *servus dolosus* from Greek comedy (cf. Mooneyham 124) as well as on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century classic detective, the character of Jeeves already incorporates several popular characters from cultural memory, reinscribes them, retains them and is therefore itself easily contained.

This is generally a feature of Wodehousean intertextual reference, which creates a fictitious Englishness and furthers the containment of literary characters and quotations in cultural memory, while frequently subverting them for comic effects. The 'Jeeves and Wooster' novels will be predominantly analysed in their dialogic relation to literary works by other English and American writers and further texts and images of cultural memory like idioms, proverbs and biblical quotations in order to show their dialogue with English and American literary and cultural memory. The novels' references to American and English cultural memory account for their popularity in both countries as well as for their creation of a very fictitious Englishness through e.g. 'othering' from an American perspective and British post-World War I escapism.[10] Superficially, this 'transatlanticism' or 'transnationality' links Wodehouse with his modernist contemporaries, but much more so with Raymond Chandler. Moreover, the comparative analyses in the 'intertextuality chapters' help to position the novels historically and generically within English and partly American literature and show that their popularity is grounded in the specific rewriting of sources from literary and cultural memory, which is always a "repetition with variation" (Hutcheon 4).

Most specific references to canonised and popular texts are used for the creation of humorous dialogues and scenes. Frequent repetitions of the same quoted material, however, turn it into a part of 'Wooster's world' and achieve monologic textual closure, whereas at the same time creating a productive ground for comparative readings – at least for scholarly reading communities. Hence, both subversion and containment, predominating elements of comedy, are created by those reinscriptions. Furthermore, Wodehouse has often been criticised for cannibalising his own works and in fact not only developed a 'saga habit', but also adapted some of his novels as musical comedies and vice versa (cf. e.g. McCrum 80f.), which accounts for the many theatrical and visual scenes in the 'Jeeves and Wooster' novels.

This predominance of visuality is, more than anything else in Wodehouse, a sign of his twentieth-century belongings in contrast to his seemingly "anomalous" position in the previous century (cf. Mooneyham 114). Having been written during the time of the most rapid social, political, historical and economic changes, his fiction consistently deals with the stories of an Edwardian upper class, their butlers and aristocratic homes. He wrote his novels about a world and a society that had vanished after the world wars, but transformed it into something timeless (cf. McCrum 418), so that the narratives not only take place in an Edwardian setting, but also present a comic, rather ahistorical Arcadian world (cf. among others Mooneyham 133) of "pure play"

10 Because of his weak eyesight, Wodehouse did not fight in the British Armed Forces in World War I (cf. e.g. Voorhees 1966, 28). This might be a biographical explanation for the absence of any direct references to World War I or traces of shell shock.

(Mooneyham 133).[11] Although this might seem 'anomalous' with respect to his modernist contemporaries, the novels' intertextual links to e.g. Agatha Christie's classic detective novels show that his response to the inter- and post-war world is far from singular.

The lightness, playfulness and "Bertie's wonderful innocence" (McCrum 149) were and still are chief attractions to the reading public skimming the market for humorous and escapist literature, but also explain the continuous exclusion of P.G. Wodehouse from literary histories and the canon. His works have mostly been praised for their mastery of style (cf. among others Thompson 1992, 3) and they definitely belong to a class of their own, but comedy has always been a discredited genre, especially 'light comedy'. The fact that Wodehouse makes the reader laugh about almost everything and everyone who seems to take himself too seriously – dictators and communists, patriarchs and matriarchs, masters and servants alike – creates an indeterminacy as to what or if his novels criticise anything at all; it is more a laughter for laughter's sake that is achieved. The object that is to be laughed at could be compared to the dead body in the classic detective novel; it serves a function. Jasen calls it the "humour of geniality, of kindheartedness" (Jasen xi) and for him Wodehouse's

> popularity was gained not by caricaturing the real world or by holding up a mirror, but by taking universal traits and easily recognizable habits and making us see ourselves through his make-believe people in perfectly constructed, yet enormously complicated make-believe situations. (Jasen xi)

Although the novels are far from being subversive socio-critical and/or satirical texts, "the duality enabled in joking and comic scenarios opposes any univocal interpretation of the world" (Stott 14), and this 'duality' sometimes makes it hard to determine if Wodehouse is politically conservative or if and to what extent he criticises society/politics. If there is an element of criticism, this is surely minimal; the Edwardian-Arcadian world presented in the novels creates an escapist space for readers. The characters' problems resemble more those of school boys than adults – punctured hot water bottles or the fear of authorities – whereas 'adult problems' are simply left out or playfully dealt with: sex does not exist and class is used for comic inversion, but is otherwise rather nostalgically portrayed. This 'infantilisation of culture, society and politics', the kind of humour that does not hurt anyone by picking at everyone in a light way and always combines subversion with containment, could be criticised. In not taking a tangible political stance, Wodehouse merely creates an escapist world.

Nevertheless, the discrediting of comedy and its continual exclusion from serious analysis misses a vital aspect of human experience and in this case, a vital aspect of the English literary imagination and cultural memory. With its "sweet, melancholy nostalgia for an England of innocent laughter and song" (McCrum 418), the Wode-

11 As Voorhees puts it with reference to World War II: "Not that the war brought about any change in the novels, for when the war was over, Wodehouse went right on writing the same sort of books that he had always written. Indeed during the war, when he was interned and imprisoned, he never stopped writing them." (Voorhees 1966, "Preface")