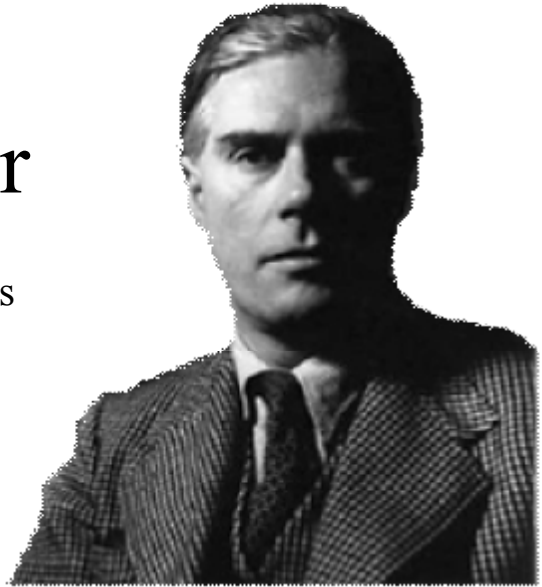


# Restraint and Order

The comic and dramatic designs  
of Novelist Anthony Powell



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*Submitted to the Department of English of Amherst College in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Distinction*

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8 April 2005

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## Acknowledgements

Thanks to

**The Amherst College Library** for providing so quickly all the books I requested

**The Anthony Powell Society** for their lively discussion and luncheon parties

**Dr Nicholas Birns** for his research guidance and kind support

**Dean Call** and the Dean of Faculty's office for a generous summer research fellowship

**Miss Katherine Mooney** for reminding me that I am *américaine* and should spell accordingly

**My parents** for raising me to find humor in morbid things

**Professor Townsend** for teaching me about realism and Modernism one afternoon

**Professor Parker** for showing me that all linguistics isn't all that bad

**Professor Pritchard** for seeing me through Pound and Lewis to Powell; for his tough-love advising

## Bibliographic Foreword

I am especially indebted to Michael Barber's biography and Hilary Spurling's guide to *A Dance to the Music of Time*; I neglect to mark each instance of their use, however, as the facts those books organize so neatly are readily available elsewhere.

I cite Powell's memoirs as both *To Keep the Ball Rolling*, which refers to their abridged American edition, and as *Infants of the Spring*, *Messengers of Day*, *Faces in My Time*, and *The Strangers Are All Gone*, which are the four volumes of the unabridged English edition, also called *To Keep the Ball Rolling*. The American edition was happier to travel.

*Style and structure are the essence of a book; great ideas are hogwash.*

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

## Introduction

When I began reading Anthony Powell last October I had not the least interest in narrative subtlety, and certainly didn't plan to tackle a twelve-volume *roman-fleuve* that has a title as portentous as *A Dance to the Music of Time*. I had spent the summer reading the prose of Ezra Pound, and that truculent "village explainer" led to my interest in Wyndham Lewis, whose novel *Tarr* offers a hero who displays social terror, intensely subjective perspectives, and megalomaniacal tendencies. This paranoia, it seemed to me, applied to many poor, intellectually rich artist-snobs in other novels, and I set to studying Lewis within a wider set of second-generation Modernists (Huxley, Waugh, Powell), planning to define the way "paranoid snob" protagonists function in their various novels.

With undergraduate surprise, I realized that to characterize the face of a literary generation is a tall order, and concentrated the project on Powell, the only author on the list I hadn't previously known and whose novel *Afternoon Men* I found curious. Suddenly a project inspired by the dynamism of hero was faced with this book's sluggish William Atwater, who is merely Powell's puppet, his prism that projects and refracts action, humor, and melancholy. Ezra Pound instructs us to "get at the thing," and I attempted to get at Powell's thing: a technique of composition measured to achieve

maximum effect with minimal noise, that is to say, to move the reader without letting him hear any gears grind. In *Afternoon Men* and in the novels that came later, the elegance of Powell's performance is remarkable—each subtle comic or dramatic intrigue depends on whole narrative landscapes, while every vivid description requires remarkably few words. Why hadn't I heard of this author before?

Anthony Powell was in fact well known to serious novel readers in America from 1951 to 1975, during the serial appearance of his most important work, *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Reviews of each new volume appeared in all the major book media; even *Time* and *Newsweek* paid attention. One now comes upon horrid old Popular Library paperbacks that look as if their marketing target was a supermarket aisle—this is the face of commercial success. But today “Anthony Powell” means little in this country.<sup>1</sup> His staying power has been overwhelmed in competition with exciting American novelists—his career is concurrent with those of Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck; of Nabokov and Salinger; of Updike and Pynchon—and this is a limited list. This is also not to mention such English authors as Huxley, Orwell, and Evelyn Waugh, whose comic and dystopian novels continue to be snapped up in bookstores while Powell's fall softly in and out of print.

Powell is not an artistic revolutionary, not politically subversive, not obscene, and not obviously funny: he is a gentleman whose writing is most notable for its subtlety, a quality that hasn't much celebrity appeal. The quiet Englishman's new readers tend to be either enchanted or bored, these latter misfortunates taking his “seriousness,” as it

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<sup>1</sup> Powell remains more widely appreciated in England.

were, too seriously.<sup>2</sup> Longish obituaries appeared uniformly across the country when Powell died in March 2000, but the attention was cursory and the content was syndicated—some articles recklessly label any of Powell’s colleagues “close friends” and even misname the lead character of *A Dance to the Music of Time*.

Let us start from the beginning. Anthony Dymoke Powell (pronounced “pole”) was born in 1905 as the only child of a middle to upper middle-class lieutenant-colonel’s family, and lived a migrant, solitary childhood before enrolling at Eton in 1919. His classmates at Eton included Cyril Connolly, George Orwell, and Graham Greene, but his own memories of school do not recall the horrors that Connolly and Orwell famously recorded. In his memoirs Powell notes, “I do not wish to appear less competent than my contemporaries in making creep the flesh of the epicure of sadomasochist school-remembrance,” and recounts a wrongful lashing, but the account hasn’t nearly the conviction of Orwell’s stomach-turning “Such, Such Were the Joys”: Powell’s writing is suited to social, not sensuous, horror. His facility with human character seems to have grown from a life spent as an observer: a report from Powell’s housemaster describes his discreet nature:

He is a little different from the other boys and I feel that his quiet reserve and dignity may prevent him having any strong influence upon others when he gets to the top of the house... I sometimes fear that they may regard him as superior and coldly critical. That is only an impression that may prove wrong... he is the sort of boy that grown up people, as I know, find an attractive companion. (83)

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<sup>2</sup> In a 1953 article about James Thurber, Amis wrote that Powell is a “serious writer who is also funny” (while Thurber boasts merely the latter). (From Amis’ *Memoirs*.)

Powell had also noted his suitability to a social sphere more mature than his own: regarding his arrival at Eton, he records, “I felt at last I was among men”—this to describe the sentiment of a fourteen-year-old. The initial thrill of school wore off quickly, however, and even after going up to Balliol College, Oxford to read history, he remained an impartial, if disenchanted, student. Again, it is puzzling that Powell’s reaction to the institution was so different than that of such contemporaries as Evelyn Waugh, John Betjeman, and Maurice Bowra, who found the University exceedingly stimulating. Biographer Michael Barber explains—with rather Powellian smartness—, “he was neither rich nor queer” (33). Powell was “straight” in many ways: he drank only moderately, he barely spoke to women,<sup>3</sup> and he disapproved of flattery. Just as Nicholas Jenkins, Powell’s narrator and alter ego in *Dance*, criticized the charade of fireside teas with a sycophantic don and his opportunistic protégés, so Powell looked forward to better days: “I’m glad I went. It was useful to me in all sorts of ways. But I don’t look back on it as a golden period in my life.”

Upon leaving Oxford in 1926, Powell landed a publishing job with Gerald Duckworth in London where he worked as a reader and clerk. He lived in a room that came with breakfasts in Shepherd Market, and remembers the place with a bachelor’s smirky optimism: “*garçonnière*,” “seedy chic,” “partially draught-proof.” Though Powell stayed there for only about a year and a half, he would produce a vivid portrait of the neighborhood in the novel *A Buyer’s Market* twenty-five years later. His second

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<sup>3</sup> Women were scarce at Oxford, and the few “undergradettes” deemed undesirable (Barber 40).

cheap flat was a basement apartment at Tavistock Square, where he began planning to write a novel, with Hemingway, ee cummings, Wyndham Lewis, and Conrad on his mind. Duckworth published *Afternoon Men* in 1931, which was closely followed by *Venusberg* (1932) and *From a View to a Death* (1933). The revenue from these novels wasn't lavish enough for Powell to abandon his day job, but he did move to a new top-floor flat at Brunswick Square, directly above the apartment of E.M. Forster. The books garnered favorable reviews from those attentive enough to read them: the novelist and critic L.P. Hartley wrote of *Afternoon Men*, "if his little group of English Bohemians encountered Mr Hemingway's cosmopolitan Americans they would find themselves speaking the same language and thinking the same thoughts." Later, when Powell switched from third- to first-person narrative, his tone would become more akin to F. Scott Fitzgerald's.

Powell's living situation improved appreciably only after meeting his future wife, Lady Violet Pakenham, in early 1934 and marrying her at the end of that year. They had fallen in love quickly, over summer holiday at Lady Violet's brother's estate in Ireland, and made their first home on Great Ormond Street before leasing a modest house at Chester Gate (near Regent's Park) in anticipation of raising a family. (Powell liked the prestige of Violet's title, though marriage to her ladyship didn't guarantee financial security, and the couple saw hard times during World War Two.) A year and a half later, Powell was working for a London subsidiary of Warner Brothers as a scriptwriter for the Quota—second-rate British films required to accompany imported pictures—and decided to travel with Violet to California, where he hoped to write for Hollywood. The plot-

stitching work was dull, however, and after several months the Powells returned to London, though before Powell left he met and lunched with F. Scott Fitzgerald at MGM Studios. “Talk began to flow at once,” Powell remembered: Fitzgerald asked him whether English schoolboys would say “shiner” for black eye (Fitzgerald was writing *A Yank at Oxford* without having been one), and several days later Fitzgerald wrote Powell a chummy letter joking about Violet’s ladyship:

When I cracked wise about Dukes I didn’t know Mrs. Powell was a Duke. I love Dukes—Duke of Dorset, The Marquis Steyne, Freddie Bartholomew’s grandfather the old Earl of Treacle. When you come back, I will be in a position to have you made an assistant to some producer or Vice President, which is the equivalent to a Barony. (477)

Upon returning to England, Powell became a regular book reviewer for *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Spectator*, until he was commissioned in 1939 to the same Welsh battalion in which his father had served (Powell traces his ancestry to Rhys ap Gruffydd, who ruled South Wales during the High Middle Ages). After seven months of difficult labor, he was promoted to Assistant Commandant in Belfast, and then to Assistant Secretary at the Cabinet Office in London before finishing his military career with the Intelligence Corps.

When the war ended, Powell rejoined Violet and a five-year-old son, Tristram (a year later a second son, John, was born), where they resettled at Chester Gate—Violet and Tristram had been transferred to various rural lodgings during the bombardment of London. In 1947 Powell became a fiction editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* and found a publisher for his original study of the seventeenth-century author John Aubrey. Finally, at age forty-three, after a fifteen-year, war-torn hiatus from writing novels,

Powell began work on the first volume of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, looking back over a quarter of a century to describe Nick Jenkins' memories from a school just like Eton. The popularity of the series came quickly and lasted through the novel's last volume, which was published in 1975.

I divide this essay into three sections; the final two are devoted to *A Dance to the Music of Time* while the first addresses Powell's early fiction with a reading of *Afternoon Men*. My priority is to describe Powell's nuanced form in a manner that illustrates it rather than talks around it: in the first essay, for example, I use swatches of *Afternoon Men* to describe the way in which Powell prompts the reader to visualize considerably complex action with minimal narrative cues. Powell's subtlety, I will emphasize, is what most distinguishes him from his contemporaries (though I avoid extended comparison to any particular author): rather than furnishing brassy comedy or easy drama, Powell obscures his narrative schemes—now comic, now dramatic—until they bloom, for one lambent moment, before slipping back into rhythm with his disarmingly mimetic worlds.

## 1. Atwater ate chips

*Cumulative design of comic and dramatic mimesis in Afternoon Men*

Everybody drank. Atwater did not spit it out because he was used to drinking nasty drinks, and because he had only sipped it, and also he would have tried not to do so even if he had taken more than a sip, out of consideration for Mrs Race's feelings.

POWELL *Afternoon Men*

Anthony Powell wrote five novels while in his late twenties and early thirties: *Afternoon Men* (1931), *Venusberg* (1932), *From a View to a Death* (1933), *Agents and Patients* (1936) and *What's Become of Waring* (1939). The near book-a-year pace is remarkable, and it seems unbelievable that Powell suppressed his creative flow during the decade that separates these novels and *A Dance to the Music of Time*—one wonders what might have existed on the backs of scrap paper at the Cabinet Office, though Powell only admits to working hard fourteen-hour days there. When Powell published the first volume of *Dance* in 1951, a consistent rate of production began anew: the *Dance* novels came out about every two years, and upon finishing the last one in 1975 he launched four volumes of punctilious memoirs that appeared at the same pace, on the heels of which came two more novels and his *Journals*, whose three parts were published in 1995, 1996 and 1997. Powell's diligence recalls the tradition of such Victorians as John Stuart Mill or Thomas Carlyle, whose autobiographical *Apologia* and *Sartor Resartus* respectively are enormous. One reads Powell's work—fiction and non-fiction—for pleasure, however, whereas Mill and Carlyle's books are bookshelf stalwarts to be consulted with a purpose.

As Powell's autobiographical work defies the dryness sometimes characteristic of a writer's later work, so does his *Afternoon Men* escape the usual problems of an author's first book. For example, some of his contemporaries' first novels—*Tarr* (1918) by Wyndham Lewis, *Decline and Fall* (1929) by Evelyn Waugh, and *Crome Yellow* (1920) by Aldous Huxley—seem full of ideas without succeeding in pinning any of them down. Powell's debut hasn't the precocious affect of these others: on the contrary, *Afternoon Men* seems reluctant to impress the reader, offering only the spineless William Atwater as its hero.

He was a weedy-looking young man with straw-coloured hair and rather long legs, who had failed twice for the Foreign Office. He sometimes wore tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles to correct a slight squint, and through influence he had recently got a job in a museum. (12)

The plot is no more enticing: we follow Atwater through the week as he goes to work, attends dull parties, and visits a friend's weekend cottage, while seeing him through a bitter tercet of romantic failures, none of which boast either the high drama or fervent details that tend to accompany romances. For example, when Atwater visits his desultory lover Lola, she talks and talks of things he doesn't want to know. Then he makes some seductive action toward her that Powell describes with the mere sound of a couch:

And then [she talked about] art. Or, alternatively, literature. Atwater smoked.

'Who was the man you introduced me to at that private view?'

'Hector Barlow?'

'He's so attractive.'

'Is he?'

'Don't you think?'

The divan creaked. Lola said:

'No, dear, no.'

'Yes.'

‘Draw the curtains then.’ (152)

The absolute lack of narrative mediation—the establishment of the couch’s existence, some hint of Atwater’s feelings, any illustration of how he’s coming on to her—can leave one disoriented, for it is up to us to imagine Atwater leaning toward Lola and initiating some sort of embrace (or grope), and to imagine Lola’s reluctance and acquiescence. To create such a tense moment on one’s own is captivating—often an author not only gives the action, but also uses narrative detail to show the reader how she is supposed to feel about it. Powell resists making Lola a victim with a pastel dress, or a harlot with fishnet stockings.

But there aren’t such hints in *Afternoon Men* and no symbolism, either. We must decide for ourselves, using only bland dialogue and Atwater’s bland response, that Lola is a hanger-on who fancies herself a sophisticate, like the Gloria Morin character from Fellini’s *8 ½*, except frumpy rather than lithe. In this way, each setting in the novel exists in a vacuum of quality and form, and the reader constructs all that is necessary for her own experience with the narrative. When Atwater visits Lola’s apartment, “the room had bits of stuff pinned up round the walls”; on the way up to another flat “quite a lot of things had been left on the stairs and they fell over some of them,” and when the characters dine they eat “food,” which, at one of the restaurants, was “good.” It is up to the reader to build upon these foundations of setting—for example Lola’s apartment is, for me, a dingy studio—, but the imagined places are not decadent. Powell learned how to use simple language and dialogue from Hemingway, whose *The Sun Also Rises* he read

“about every year or so.” In this excerpt it is clear that Hemingway’s style is a slight degree more explicit than Powell’s:

We did not lose money on the wine, and the girl was shy but nice about bringing it. The old woman looked in once and counted the empty bottles. After supper we went up-stairs and smoked and read in bed to keep warm. Once in the night I woke and heard the wind blowing. It felt good to be warm in bed. (68)

Hemingway’s qualifiers are simply “nice,” “shy,” “old,” “empty,” “good,” and “warm.” Though ornamental description certainly plays a useful role within some narrative styles, its absence in *Afternoon Men* or *The Sun Also Rises* is fundamental: by obscuring the atmosphere around the characters, their interaction comes into deeper focus. Henry James would have described how the girl looked in such a passage as this one, and his reader would focus on his image of dark eyes or a scarred lip rather than imagining her modesty toward the narrator; their inexplicit interaction.

Social interaction (and by corollary individual character) is Powell’s specialty. At the beginning of one scene, Atwater eats chips as he waits for the woman he thinks he loves, Susan Nunnery, and though Susan isn’t there his action is dependent on her—that is, his inaction is a result of her absence. Though Powell uses only the dullest language and the most banal device, repetition, the passage is evocative by grace of its sharp form. In the second paragraph, we have again, “Atwater ate chips.” Whereas Wyndham Lewis would have added a lurch of anger, Huxley would have seen the opportunity for musing philosophical, and Waugh never would have allowed the stasis to last, Powell simply wrote, “Atwater ate chips.” In the next substantial paragraph “Atwater ate chips” once more, with minimal interruption from a lonely fellow patron and unassuming barman. To

have mentioned Atwater's lips getting dry, or the chips running out, or the barman getting annoyed, or Atwater wishing there were something else to eat would have interrupted the simple declaration: Atwater ate chips, Atwater ate chips, Atwater ate chips. None of the alternatives offer the simple, mimetic poignancy of Atwater's precise boredom.

Yet *Afternoon Men* is not boring—it is in fact one of the best comic novels I've read. The effect of Powell's humor depends on subtle irony (usually in dialogue) or, like his drama, on a cumulative structure. Both of these modes remain preoccupied with social interaction. Powell's humor is difficult to characterize, but two unlikely sources of the same sort of wit are good starting points, the first of which is Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, from which Powell borrowed the title "Afternoon Men."<sup>4</sup> It is a taxonomic study of melancholia inspired by the author's experience with it—not what one would expect to be a springboard for comedy. I certainly didn't expect to find humor as I lifted the decaying book from its shelf, but I was laughing within minutes. Burton, whose depression was real enough (he eventually hanged himself in his rooms at Oxford), creates several layers of satire by (1) using a mock-scientific tone and procedure, (2) hyperbolizing the suffering of man, and (3) allowing the project to expand into nine hundred pages,<sup>5</sup> effectively highlighting the vanity at the root of his problem. (It reminds me of Nabokov's annotated translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, which he made over five times the length of the original—about 1300 pages—in order to make

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<sup>4</sup> The epigraph contextualizes: "as if they had heard that enchanted horn or Astolpho, that English duke in Ariosto, which never sounded but all his auditors were mad, and for fear ready to make always with themselves... they are a company of giddy-heads, afternoon men...." (7)

<sup>5</sup> Original 1621 edition.

a point about the impossibility of translation.) In the article “Diseases in Generall,”

Burton writes:

Great travail is created for all men, and an heavy Yoke on the sonnes of Adam, from the day that they goe out of their mothers wombe, unto that day they retorne to the mother of all things. Namely their thoughts, and feare of their hearts, and their imagination of things they wait for, and the day of death. (122)

This passage appears at the beginning of *Melancholy*. When I first read its opening sentence I thought little of its weighty language—“great travail,” “heavy Yoke,” “the mother of all things”—I was reading detachedly, and assigned the melodrama, along with Germanic capitalization and unconventional spelling, to seventeenth-century English style. But at the second sentence (“Namely their thoughts...”), I felt a twinge of satire and bashfully realized I hadn’t been giving Burton enough credit. The juxtaposition of such Old Testament-type burden as “great travail” and “heavy Yoke” with bourgeois complaints—notably “imagination of things they wait for”—turns Burton’s grandiosity on its head, and makes the reader feel a fool for having accepted it literally.

There is a parallel passage in the first chapter of *Afternoon Men*, and though Powell plays an even less explicit game with the reader, he has a more pointed target. In this scene, Atwater is having after-dinner drinks with his painter friends Raymond Pringle and Hector Barlow at a club<sup>6</sup> of which Atwater and Barlow are members, and the narrator has just finished a paragraph detailing Barlow’s serious financial crisis:

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<sup>6</sup> Gentleman’s clubs are foreign to me, though I’m told that they still flourish in American cities. Julian Allason of the Anthony Powell Society reports that women were not, and in most cases are still not, admitted; the frequency of a member’s visits is four times a week (“one retreats to the country on Fridays,” Allason explains) to annually. The agenda is

Barlow sat down on the chair next to Atwater. Atwater said:  
‘What’s your life been like?’  
‘Hard,’ said Barlow, ‘hard. I had to get up early this morning.’  
‘To paint the ambassadress?’  
‘Absolutely.’  
‘Why should I join this club?’ said Pringle.  
Atwater said: ‘It will be cheaper for you in the long run.’ He said to  
Barlow’s brother: ‘You get your gin cheap in the navy, don’t you?’ (18)

Just as Burton lulls his reader with allusions to suffering, so Powell introduces this dialogue with a discussion of Barlow’s bankruptcy: Barlow’s pompous indolence, then, is a surprise, not to mention a succinct caricature of the hedonism of artists, or even men in general. The addition of an ambassadress fortifies the idea of these people as social parasites (for ambassadors rank among the best-fed civil servants), and Pringle’s interruption emphasizes the trope of self-centered painters, as his question has nothing to do with the other men’s talk and everything to do with his pleasure. Besides producing irony, then, the dialogue makes a concise social point—about bourgeois laziness—as

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“Lunch, Bridge in afternoon, tea, cocktails (actually just malt whisky, G&T or Champagne), dinner, more Bridge. And the wittiest, sometimes cruellest gossip of course.”

In the foreword of his *The Gentlemen’s Clubs of London* (Dorset Press 1984), Anthony Lejeune writes, “The best clubs cannot afford to change too much or they would lose their *raison d’être*. They must provide at least a semblance of exclusivity. A club, after all, is a place where a man goes to be among his own kind. A good club is much more than a mere eating establishment. It should be a refuge from the vulgarity of the outside world, a reassuringly fixed point, the echo of a more civilized way of living, a place where (as was once said of an Oxford college) people still prefer a silver saltcellar which doesn’t pour to a plastic one which does.”

In the introduction of that book the Duke of Devonshire adds, “You can, to a very considerable extent, judge a man’s tastes, possibly even his character, by the club to which he belongs.”

well as a good character portrait of Barlow's insouciant approach to life. Powell's narrative is economical, often functioning several ways at once.

To be sure, *Afternoon Men* has better comic moments, but Powell's wit, like Burton's, is consistently as subtle as it is here, not unlike the flash of a shooting star, brilliant for such a short instant that one wonders whether it ever existed at all. Stargazers twinkle with pride upon spotting one of those dying suns, and likewise Powell's readers love catching his quiet jokes. But this is humor that demands patience, and is not for everyone. If this exclusivity in readership is what Powell's critics mean when they call him a snob, then so be it. Powell never had impressive means; he finished with a third-class honors at Oxford,<sup>7</sup> and he spent much of his young adulthood amid an undistinguished arty crowd, like those in *Afternoon Men* or in the middle novels of *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Orchestrating humor that one must be patient and observant to appreciate has nothing to do with *class* snobbery, but it could be the sort of snobbery that accompanies artistic integrity. Just as Powell keeps his text free of licentious action (only to inspire it in his readers' minds), so he refuses to disturb his books' delicacy for the sake of an easy laugh.

If a comparison to Burton's wit and an example of Powell's making fun of a dated personality (the *Gitane*-stained, cubist-wannabe painter of 1920s London) are not compelling arguments for Powell's humor, let us consider a more modern breed of human sloth displayed in my second analogy, a contemporary sitcom which exemplifies

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<sup>7</sup> Performance in a set of final exams determines whether students receive first-, second-, or third-class "honours." Powell had expected to finish higher than third.

Powell's cumulative, socially dependent comic patterns. "The Office," a 2001 BBC comedy that was a hit both in Britain and the States,<sup>8</sup> poses as a documentary of staff life at a paper manufacturing plant. Its hero, Tim Canterbury, is a thirty-year-old sales manager who lives with his parents, and the majority of the program's screen time depicts him staring at his computer, staring at papers, staring at nothing at all, and during livelier moments raising his eyebrows at the camera—all to a numbing soundtrack of stapler clicks and whirring PCs. Tim hasn't any ambition except to win the affection of Dawn, the receptionist, and she never capitulates.

The show is uproariously funny in a tight-lipped sort of way. Like *Afternoon Men*, or the Rob Reiner film *This is Spinal Tap*, it locates the unlikely nexus of the comic and the horrible in a setting at once poignant and drab. The settings of these deadpan tragi-comedies are straight reproductions of real places: a cubieled office, a cramped party, crummy greenrooms. The unpretentious set designs function much like Powell's lack of detail—without a dramatic backdrop, the subject more naturally translates to the audience's reality, so to be touching it mustn't overlay. The humor of *Afternoon Men* and "The Office" works the same way: it depends on the audience's familiarity with the nuances of everyday people. Indeed, bothering at all to articulate such trivial characters seems comic. It may be even more difficult to describe a filmic moment from "The Office" than it is to articulate Powell's wit, but let us consider one of the program's most effortlessly funny scenes. This single, stationary take is shot through Venetian blinds into the office lounge, where Tim sits on the left frame of the foreground, reading a book

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<sup>8</sup> It won six BAFTAS in Britain and Best Sitcom at the 2003 Golden Globes.

in profile, while Keith, a corpulent, goateed coworker, sits further back facing the camera and staring blankly, until he sneaks a few sideways glances at Tim. Keith is the sort of “regular” person that the directors of the show assume we all know:

KEITH: Just looking at a book at the moment?

It should be noted that the excess flesh of Keith’s face creates slurpy smacking sounds when he opens his mouth, similar to those a dog makes while licking his chops. Keith has eczema, works in “Accounts,” and chews gum outside mealtimes. Tim lifts his eyes, but not toward Keith: he makes no movement to encourage conversation.

TIM: Yeah.

KEITH: What’d you watch on the telly last night?

TIM: I didn’t watch the telly; I watched a video.

KEITH: I watched that ‘Pick Practice.’

TIM: Yeah? I’ve never seen it.

Tim is tolerant, though he looks impatient. He shifts his weight and kneads his chin.

Keith is like a boulder, moving only his eyes.

KEITH: Bloody repeat.

TIM: Mmm, annoying, innit?

Tim continues trying to read while Keith stares at him.

KEITH: Not for me, I hadn’t seen it.

Tim looks up in disbelief but says nothing.

KEITH: Boring, isn’t it, just stayin’ in watching ‘Pick Practice’ with your life?

Tim sighs, rubbing his chin, exasperated.

TIM: Mmm, yeah.

KEITH: Not for me, I like it.

Keith lifts a Scotch egg<sup>9</sup> into view and takes a hearty bite from it as the take cuts to a new scene. Tim has done nearly nothing, but his role, like Atwater's, is essential as a sort of subjective filter: instead of responding directly to Keith's action we consider how Tim feels about it. Tim makes only slight gestural reactions (just as Atwater hardly describes any feeling in dialogue), but we think we know exactly how he feels, for we all have been similarly annoyed. First Keith interrupts Tim's reading (during an ever-too-short lunch break), then brings up television, then solicits pity he claims he doesn't need, and tops it off by putting a large sausage-ball into his mouth. The simple correspondence of sympathy between Tim and the viewer, no matter Tim's minimal response, is captivating and funny.

The scene resembles one in *Afternoon Men* in which Atwater and his fellow curator Nosworth tolerate one another's company at work:

Nosworth said:

'Good morning, Atwater. You're looking pale.'

'I had some lobster last night. I may have poisoned myself.'

'I'm not feeling particularly well myself,' said Nosworth. 'Those shooting pains in my back have returned.'

'Yes?'

'Yes,' said Nosworth. He was approaching fifty, and very tall and yellow. He was a good archeologist, so they said, and he wore a hard, turned-down collar a size or more large for him. His face stood out yellow against the buff distemper. He stood there without moving or speaking, with several heavy books under his arm, as if petrified, or like something out of the Chamber of Horrors. Atwater said:

'I need a revolving chair. Do you think you could mention it?'

'I'll do my best. It took nine years to get mine. However, I'll try. It is the overheating and the underheating of the rooms that makes work here so difficult in my view.'

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<sup>9</sup> A Scotch egg is a repulsive, obviously British, snack: a hard-boiled egg wrapped in sausage and deep-fried. Keith enjoys one every lunchtime.

‘It must tilt back.’

‘That kind all do,’ said Nosworth. He sat down beside Atwater’s desk and began to make notes in a pocket diary. Atwater continued to read:

[...]

Nosworth said: ‘I first began to feel those pains about five years ago. I was on a walking tour in the Lake District with a man from King’s.’ (50)

I understand why some unlucky readers find such a passage tedious: nothing “happens,” and if the reader doesn’t imagine herself in Atwater’s place, it is hopelessly banal. It seems to me quite natural, however, to assume Atwater’s position and imagine how he responds to Nosworth’s relentless hypochondria—I imagine, for example, that he is becoming immensely annoyed with Nosworth, but he could just as well be tuning him out completely. Not only must one construct the comic tension, one must be patient enough to allow it to build and finally snap, without much fanfare. This passage isn’t more than two pages, but other comic moments take whole chapters to contain their ebb and flow: Powell’s humor is a cumulative effort. (Here, Nosworth shifts the conversation to his own physical comfort three times before it is funny.) The comedy and the pleasure of this novel may be likened to the adage “misery loves company”: a bit perversely, readers adore finding Atwater in the same sort of sticky jams and awkward moments that they have themselves experienced.

What about Nosworth’s “I was on a walking tour in the Lake District with a man from King’s”? The combination of Nosworth’s chronic “pains” with Wordsworth’s idyllic Lakes and an exclusive college (King’s College belongs to Cambridge University) emphasizes and pokes fun at the indulgence of Nosworth’s complaints. The humor in *Afternoon Men* is much less subtle in other places—a fat American publisher named

Scheigan passes out at a party and “people treading on his face rouse him at last.” This more physical style can be fairly attributed to the influence of Evelyn Waugh. Since Powell and Waugh wrote at the same time about the same society and were well acquainted,<sup>10</sup> a comparison between the two authors is an unremitting favorite of reviewers, but Waugh doesn’t exist in the world of Powell beyond the rougher comic aspects of his pre-war novels. In any case, Powell was the first to admit Waugh’s presence in *Afternoon Men*, as he makes a direct reference to Waugh’s *Vile Bodies* in its opening scene.<sup>11</sup> But Powell’s farce, however delightful, is not an especially distinguishing characteristic.<sup>12</sup>

So far I have presented some of Powell’s more distinctive stylistic traits: his nearly imperceptible description of action (Lola and Atwater on the couch), and his delicately cumulative expression of drama (“Atwater ate chips”) and comedy (through satiric dialogue and Atwater’s subjective filter). Considering the passages I cited to highlight these characteristics, we can now address the last, perhaps most significant aspect of Powell’s narrative design. In all of those citations, Atwater is sluggish and bored—even his making love to Lola seems routine. Powell breaks Atwater’s emotional torpor with passages of turbulent feeling, which provide essential counterpoint to those

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, as a reader for Duckworth Publishers Powell helped discover Waugh’s talent in 1927. (Barber 59)

<sup>11</sup> “He read a newspaper that someone had left on the table. He read the comic strip and later the column headed ‘Titled Woman in Motor Tragedy.’” (12)

<sup>12</sup> Powell’s farce is interesting, however, for its correspondence with the farce in Wyndham Lewis’ *Tarr* (1918) and in Kingsley Amis’ *Lucky Jim* (1954). These books have more in common (social satire, character) with Powell’s third novel, *From a View to a Death* (1933) than with *Afternoon Men*, and I regret that this essay cannot accommodate further analysis of the matter.

tired spells, just as negative space supplies contrast and framing in fine artistic composition. Since the narrative frame is so bare, Powell isn't obligated to overstate his drama—I mentioned this with "Atwater ate chips" and Hemingway—and the cool expression of Atwater's rising emotion is unexpected and moving. Such a moment appears at the end of a dreadful house party (where Scheigan's face is trod on), after the gramophone has broken and several girls have fainted in the bathroom. Atwater notices Susan Nunnery enter the room:

She was not tall and she had big eyes that made her seem as if she were all at once amused and surprised and at the same time disappointed. It was as if it had been just what she had expected and yet it had come as a shock to her when she saw what human beings were really like. Also she had not the appearance of belonging to the room at all. She was separate. Her entrance into the room made her the immediate object of perception. It was the effect of a portrait painted against an imaginary background, an imaginary landscape even, where the values are those of two different pictures and the figure seems to have been superimposed. Atwater watched her. (37)

While the language remains unspectacular—and a bit blurred by Atwater's cocktails—the syntactic shift from short sentences ("Atwater ate chips") to long ones, and an uncharacteristic consideration of the otherworldly ("an imaginary landscape") contribute to an incisive narrative contrast. Powell's characterization of Atwater's attraction to Susan ("She was separate") is pointedly anti-lyrical, and his operation of restraint prevents Atwater from taking Susan out for dinner until nearly a hundred pages later.

This idea of point and counterpoint, of balancing the narrative with opposing themes (here, comedy and melancholy; disinterest and melodrama), leads nicely into the next section. Before moving on, however, let us enjoy the salacious glimpse that Powell

offers of Atwater's coming romance with Susan. Just before Atwater leaves the party, Susan, who isn't acquainted with him, pulls a cigarette from his lips in order to light her own. Note how the narration remains strictly objective:

Susan Nunnery looked at Atwater. She said: 'Give me a light off yours.'  
She said: 'No. I can reach it,' as he moved his arm from behind Lola.  
Pringle said: 'You can't do that, Susan.'  
'I must for once.' (39)

The moment ends here; if the reader doesn't register the action immediately it is lost.

Powell never even mentioned that Atwater was smoking—his cunning is thrilling. A passage like the one riddled with "Atwater ate chips" might imply that reading *Afternoon Men* is an easy subliminal exercise, but on the contrary, Powell demands much from his reader, relying on him to assemble entire atmospheres using only sparse dialogue and the barest description. While Powell is more generous with illustration in *A Dance to the Music of Time*, he works on a much larger canvas, which lends all the more sophistication to a long-sweeping narrative design.

## 2. The Novelist is a God

*Anti-romantic and melodramatic tension in the series A Dance to the Music of Time*

People think because a novel's invented, it isn't true. Exactly the reverse is the case. Because a novel's invented, it is true. Biography and memoirs can never be wholly true, since they can't include every conceivable circumstance of what happened. The novel can do that. The novelist himself lays it down. His decision is binding. The biographer, even at his highest and best, can be only tentative, empirical. The autobiographer, for his part, is imprisoned in his own egotism. He must always be suspect. In contrast with the other two, the novelist is a god, creating his man, making him breathe and walk.

POWELL *Hearing Secret Harmonies*

*A Dance to the Music of Time* (hereafter *Dance*), which came twenty years after *Afternoon Men*, consists of twelve volumes

*A Question of Upbringing* (1951)  
*A Buyer's Market* (1952)  
*The Acceptance World* (1955)  
*At Lady Molly's* (1957)  
*Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* (1960)  
*The Kindly Ones* (1962)

*The Valley of Bones* (1964)  
*The Soldier's Art* (1966)  
*The Military Philosophers* (1968)  
*Books Do Furnish a Room* (1971)  
*Temporary Kings* (1973)  
*Hearing Secret Harmonies* (1975)

which follow Nicholas Jenkins and a catalogue of acquaintances from the end of World War One to the mid-Sixties. Powell borrowed the dodecology's name from Nicolas Poussin's 1639 *Dance to the Music of Time*, a smallish, peach-toned oil painting hanging in the Wallace Collection in London.<sup>13</sup> In it, three women and one man, meant to

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<sup>13</sup> Poussin was a classicist painter of the Baroque period who never mustered popular appeal but influenced more popular artists such as Jacques-Louis David, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Paul Cézanne.

represent the “cycle of human condition,” or Poverty, Work, Pleasure and Riches,<sup>14</sup> are dancing in an outward-facing circle, presumably to the music of Time, a strapping old angel playing a lyre. I find the painting stiffly allegorical (*must* we have Aurora and Apollo overhead heaving the Sun around?), excepting perhaps for the woman representing Pleasure, who gazes knowingly toward the beholder. “*Dance to the Music of Time* is neither very well known nor particularly well liked,” the art historian Alain Mérot writes, “yet the mood of calm contemplation which pervades it makes this one of the most striking moral *poésies* of the period. The picture is polished, and makes skilful use of colour, setting patches of white, yellow, and blue against a muted background. The composition is simple, but unusual” (95). Powell referred to the figures as the Seasons, rather than modes of human condition,<sup>15</sup> yet it is easy to think of Winter as Poverty, Spring as Work, Summer as Pleasure, and Autumn as Riches—and either cyclical interpretation suits *Dance* (the novels) well, as the composition denotes not only movement from one fortune to the next but also the way in which Time forces the exchange. The choice of such a dull but technically masterful painter as Poussin emphasizes Powell’s high estimation of balance in form while remarking upon his erudite taste.

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<sup>14</sup> Beresford, Richard. *Dance to the Music of Time by Nicolas Poussin*. London: Trustees of the Wallace Collection, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Until, at least, he admitted in his memoirs that his Seasons interpretation is antiquated—though not without branding the human-condition reading as “fashionable.” (*Faces in My Time* 214)

Powell's talent as an art critic<sup>16</sup> allows him to see some poetry in Poussin's *Dance* that escapes me. No formal training is necessary to appreciate the harmony in his eponymous series, but patient reading is essential. Some readers, such as critic Elizabeth Janeway, contend that each of the twelve novels stands on its own, but I would liken the difference between reading a single novel and reading three or four in succession to the sensual abyss between smelling a simmering curry and actually tasting it.<sup>17</sup> I enjoyed *A Question of Upbringing* at once, yet as I continued with *A Buyer's Market* and *The Acceptance World*, I found that the events in *A Question of Upbringing* are not only indispensable to the later books' development, but also are enriched themselves with the progression of the narrative—similar to real life, in which certain memories gain significance retrospectively, as new correspondences are born. The cumulative process is essential to Powell's relationship with the reader, as his memories, collected and recollected, become aligned with one's own.

A synopsis of *Dance* may be useful here, though the plot is much less important

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<sup>16</sup> Powell's admiration for the fine arts was born in "The Studio," his social retreat at Eton.

<sup>17</sup> A bachelor until nearly thirty, Powell developed his own curry recipe, which can be found in Alice Boyd's 1985 cookbook called *Men's Menus*. A man of restraint, Powell explains, "This can simmer all day; I favour making a curry on, say, Thursday, to be eaten on Sunday." (The home-bound cookbook hasn't a publisher: I found the recipe among the pages of the Anthony Powell Society Online.)

than the series' intricate form.<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Jenkins is the son of an infantry officer—his biography is very similar to Powell's—who works in publishing after university, serves in the Second World War, experiences a period of financial uncertainty before his novels become successful, and tends to keep his personal affairs private. Though Jenkins' own life accounts for some of the most profoundly touching points in the series, the bulk of the intrigue lies in his observation of the shifting fortunes of his acquaintances—to make use of Poussin's painting, we can imagine that Jenkins is at the center of the moving circle, remarking upon the figures moving in and out of luck around him.

Over a decade passed between Powell's final novel of the 1930s (*What's Become of Waring*, 1939) and *Dance's* first novel, *A Question of Upbringing*. During the war Powell wrote no fiction except an odd, little-known short story, a satiric sequel to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*,<sup>19</sup> yet novel-writing and its challenges was on his mind, and he describes this preliminary stage through Jenkins in *The Acceptance World*:

I began to brood on the complexity of writing a novel about English life, a subject difficult enough to handle with authenticity even of a crudely naturalistic sort, even more to convey the inner truth of the things observed...Intricacies of social life make English habits unyielding to simplification, while understatement and irony—in which all classes of this island converse—upset the normal emphasis of reported speech ... Even the bare facts had an unreal, almost satirical ring when committed to paper[...]. (34)

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<sup>18</sup> "Sickert used to insist that every picture tells a story," Powell wrote, "Equally perverse reasoning might urge that every novel has a plot." (*Faces in My Time* 212.)

<sup>19</sup> "A Reference for Mellors." *The New Savoy, No. 1*. London: New Savoy Press, 1946.

These “bare facts” suit the terse descriptive mode of *Afternoon Men* (though they don’t account for the book’s fastidious composition), and it is clear that Jenkins—and Powell—wished to move beyond them. Rather counterintuitively, it seems that the war years softened Powell’s style: the ascetic, objective narration of *Afternoon Men* blossomed into first-person narration and a keenly mannered prose. It seems that Powell recovered from his creative adolescence during the Forties, for *Dance* is less edgy than his early work. While he tested some of Wyndham Lewis’s ideas and flaunted the Modernism of his fiction by imposing a creative workout on the reader in his 1930s novels, many passages in *Dance* are straightforwardly descriptive in a classical realist manner—that is, like Balzac or George Eliot—Powell is less concerned with making a stylistic statement. “Style is not something applied,” Wallace Stevens wrote, “it is something that permeates.”

The smoothness of Powell’s unobtrusive style is perhaps what makes Hilary Spurling identify Powell’s Modernist-realist hybrid as “naturalism,” however I don’t find it useful to place *Dance* in the same category as the so-called “naturalist” novels of Theodore Dreiser and Stephen Crane. Instead, this essay focuses on Powell’s method of orchestrating tension by balancing anti-romance and melodrama,<sup>20</sup> a design that is without comparison. While Jenkins describes the stories of the characters around him in

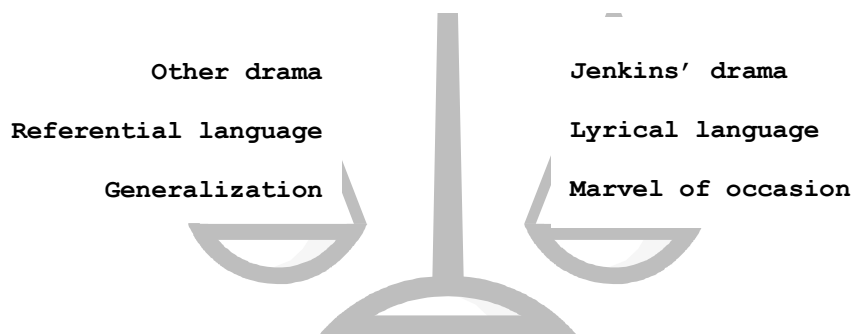
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<sup>20</sup> While “melodrama” and its connotations of excess commonly refer to poor style, Powell’s melodrama (that is, the mode that describes emotion and accordingly is meant to excite emotion in the reader) is convincing and interesting in this series because its rare occurrences are balanced with an exceedingly reserved prose.

a coincidental,<sup>21</sup> oftentimes comic manner—I will address this narrative mode in the next section—, the way in which he expresses his personal drama is highly constrained in order to produce maximal tension. When Powell builds the tension of Jenkins’ drama, he uses subtle, referential language, while during a dramatic climax he uses language that is lyrical and melodramatic. For both modes of expression, Powell deemphasizes a moment’s intimacy by generalizing it with affected platitudes or with abstract images that evince a certain emotion. This effort to obscure the focus on Jenkins, however, is counteracted by the fact that the passages describing Jenkins’ personal drama occupy only a small fraction of the narrative; each instance is a special occasion, and creates a little swell of excitement despite the coolness of his tone. We can imagine all of these characteristics as opposing elements on a balanced scale.

But rather than mulling over this unappealing design, let us illustrate the narrative

**Anti-romance  
Melodrama**



<sup>21</sup> Christopher Hitchens writes, “Characters appear and disappear and then reappear, as do certain events and objects (a practical joke here, a painting there). People die in one book and are encountered afresh in a later one. But as the sequence takes hold of the reader, the separate melodies become slowly subordinate to the basic one, and strive for a harmonic whole.”

balance with an analysis of Jenkins' relations with Jean Templer in the first four volumes (*A Question of Upbringing*, *A Buyer's Market*, *The Acceptance World*, *At Lady Molly's*) of the series.

Before launching a close study of the affair with Jean, however, it is necessary to properly introduce Jenkins, whose discreet character helps make Powell's structure seem "natural." He is an aesthete; goodnatured and intelligent, and his narrative voice seems a blend of James Boswell, Nick Carraway, late Henry James, and Anthony Powell—Powell's special subtlety earns him a place on the list. This amalgam of literary figures corresponds with the narrative's co-dominant realist and Modernist styles. Jenkins is oftentimes a melancholic character, though he hasn't the dyspepsia or fatalism of William Atwater about him, and he rarely expresses outright his antagonism toward the other characters (instead he discreetly pokes fun at their idiosyncrasies, which I discuss in the next section). When he pauses his descriptive narration to express his own opinion, he nearly always accompanies the comment with such tags as "it had to be agreed," "that was undeniable," "that could not be denied," and "that was a contingency to be borne in mind." While these careful qualifications are a result of Jenkins' discreet nature, they also serve literarily to discourage the reader from making his own unequivocal opinions. Powell envisioned *Dance* as a story told by an engaging dinner companion,<sup>22</sup> and accordingly Jenkins' story respects the boundaries of appropriate table conversation, merely alluding to undignified matters and declining to take us, so to speak, into the

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<sup>22</sup> "A *Dance to the Music of Time* is told, so to speak, over the dinner-table, rather than as recorded history." From Powell's introduction to Hilary Spurling's *Invitation to the Dance*.

smoking-room. Powell's use of a discreet narrator to tell a discreet story<sup>23</sup> creates a harmony within the narrative, so when the dinner-table prose breaks into more stylized language it seems "natural." Since Jenkins is a writer, it is easy to imagine his affected, oftentimes abstract, musings in passages of dramatic climax.

"Abstract" is a relative term, and Powell's abstract is extreme. After the point at which Jenkins meets Jean Templer in *A Question of Upbringing*, for example, I had to re-read a sentence before realizing that "this largely unexplored country" refers to *women* ("Peter" is Jenkins' schoolmate and Jean's brother, who has recently slept with an older woman):

At the same time—as in another and earlier of Peter's adventures of this kind—his enterprise was displayed: confirming my conception of him as a kind of pioneer in this increasingly familiar, though as yet still largely unexplored, country. (101)

The obscurity with which Jenkins describes his sexual awakening is such that I suspect he is mocking his young naïveté, a conceit to distance the reader from his "real" emotions yet further. Jenkins sterilizes the moment with metaphorical generalization, but since it is the first instance that young Jenkins directly—this *is* direct for Jenkins—addresses the opposite sex, and the reader can sense his discomfort with the subject, this plain-looking prose is quite exciting.

As I extract Jenkins' reports on Jean Templer, it is important to remember that they occupy a clear minority of the narrative, and are separated by passages of accumulating tension. Jenkins first meets Jean when her brother Peter invites him for a

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<sup>23</sup> Hawthorne or Melville stories provide good examples of discreet stories with indiscreet narrators, that is, "unreliable" narrators who have a motivated "story."

weekend at their family's country retreat, and using Powell's intermittent supply of dates we suppose that Jean is sixteen or seventeen while Jenkins is about a year older. During his narration of the visit, Jenkins exchanges only a few words with Jean, who treats him coldly, and his detached commentary on her only concerns some unknown future event—he says the weekend “crystallised” his feelings about her (93), but we have not yet been told what these feelings are. Jenkins builds this sense of anticipation with a shy allusion to women (“largely unexplored country”), which is equally vague. Then, following Jenkins' departure from the Templers', he abruptly professes love:

Being in love is a complicated matter; although anyone who is prepared to pretend that love is a simple, straightforward business is always in a strong position for making conquests. In general, things are apt to turn out unsatisfactorily for at least one of the parties concerned; and in due course only its most determined devotees remain unwilling to admit that an intimate and affectionate relationship is not necessarily a simple one: while such persistent enthusiasts have usually brought their own meaning of the word to something far different from what it conveys to most people in early life. At that period love's manifestations are less easily explicable than they become later: often they do not bear that complexion of being a kind of game, or contest, which, at a later stage, they may assume. Accordingly, when I used to consider the case of Jean Templer, with whom I had decided I was in love, analysis of the situation brought no relief from uneasy, almost obsessive thoughts that filled my mind after leaving the Templers' house. Most of all I thought of her while the train travelled across France toward Touraine. (106)

Seems a bit much, doesn't it, in response to a weekend's admiration of an unreceptive sixteen-year-old? Since Jenkins tells his story with at least twenty years' remove,<sup>24</sup> grand philosophical passages like this one tend to address not only the event that has just

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<sup>24</sup> Rather than imagining Jenkins as recounting the 1920s through the 1960s from a fixed point in the mid-Seventies, as many critics do, Mr. John Gould suggests that Jenkins ages during his narration of the story. I sympathize, and imagine that Jenkins remembers his story progressively from the later 1940s to the 1970s.

occurred, but also those that will follow,<sup>25</sup> and in this way Powell stretches tension among the volumes, not just within them. A reader of *A Question of Upbringing* does not know that Jenkins' speech here addresses his relations with Jean through the next three novels, yet a passage regarding the complications of love seems appropriate because one feels a bit confused regarding what, in fact, happened between him and Jean. Nothing?

Nearly nothing—it seems Jenkins' affection for Jean is no more significant than a young man's rather general imaginative lust, because in the following episode Jenkins expresses the same feelings for Suzette, a girl he meets at a Loire Valley *résidence* where he is trying to learn French. He even equates the feelings he has for the two girls upon meeting Suzette:

Suzette was small and fair, not a beauty, but dispensing instantaneously, and generously, emotional forces that at once aroused in me recollections of Jean Templer; causing an abrupt renewal—so powerful that it seemed almost that Jean had insinuated herself into the garden—of that restless sense of something desired that had become an increasing burden upon both day and night. (113)

In any case, Jenkins fails to make progress with either Jean or Suzette, so his romantic history in *A Question of Upbringing* is simply one of low-volume frustration and ineptitude, while on the broader terms of the series this first volume establishes and begins building romantic tension; the climax is still to come.

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<sup>25</sup> It is clear Powell had the structure of *Dance* planned when he wrote *A Question of Upbringing*, for Jenkins makes remarks that predict events quite late in the series. “Years later, when I came to know Sunny Farebrother pretty well,” Jenkins begins a sentence in *A Question*, and this “years later” doesn't come until six novels later, in the last third of the sequence.

When Jenkins becomes reacquainted with Jean in the second volume, *A Buyer's Market*, he does not recognize her at first—five years have passed since their last, late-adolescent meeting—, and they exchange only a few words over a dinner given by a business magnate, Sir Magnus Donners, at his Stourwater Castle. This time around Jenkins judges himself “more sure of the maturity of [his] approach” (143), but to his deep disgust Jean is already married to a businessman named Bob Duport:

I now found, rather to my own surprise, deep vexation in the discovery that Jean was the wife of someone so unsympathetic as Bob Duport. Such emotions, sudden bursts of sexual jealousy that pursue us through life, sometimes without the smallest justification that memory or affection might provide, are like wounds, unknown and quiescent, that suddenly break out to give pain, or at least irritation, at a later season of the year, or in an unfamiliar climate. (143)

Why does Jenkins replace “pain” with “at least irritation”? Since he recounts the events of *Dance* at least twenty years after they occur, it is as if this specific event was indeed merely “irritating,” while the Jean-saga as a whole is still “painful.” I make this remark in retrospect; however, I think attentive readers take note of Jenkins’ word slip. Powell lends him a fastidious prose, so aberrations such as this one must be interpreted as deliberate and meaningful. This passage is in Jenkins’ anti-romantic, referential mode, and builds tension because, despite his “deep vexation,” he has yet to have a relationship with her.

After Jenkins talks with Jean during Sir Magnus Donners’ dinner, he expresses his opinion of the encounter with utmost discretion, though his restlessness is clear:

Even to myself I could not explain precisely why I wanted to find Jean. Various interpretations were, of course, readily available, of which the two simplest were, on the one hand, that—as I had at least imagined myself to

be when I had stayed with the Templers—I was once more ‘in love’ with her; or, on the other, that she was an unquestionably attractive girl, whom any man, without necessarily ulterior motive, might quite reasonably hope to see more of. However, neither of these definitions completely fitted the case. I had brought myself to think of earlier feelings for her as juvenile, even insipid, in the approach, while, at the same time, I was certainly not disinterested enough to be able honestly to claim the second footing. The truth was that I had become once more aware of that odd sense of uneasiness which had assailed me when we had first met, while no longer able to claim the purely romantic conceptions of that earlier impact; yet so far was this feeling remote from a simple desire to see more of her that I almost equally hoped that I might fail to find her again before we left Stourwater, while a simultaneous anxiety to search for her also tormented me. (214)

Notice Jenkins’ tendency to generalize (“any man”) his feelings here, as he did when he learned of Jean’s marriage to Duport (“Such emotions...that pursue us”). Still, this passage is melodramatic and moving. The sudden burst of “tormented” candor appears after a long spell of reticence—his “deep vexation” appears a considerable measure before it, and only hints at what he finally addresses at length here. The only moment comparable to it is Jenkins’ claim of being “in love” in *A Question of Upbringing*, which, since he is so young, is less convincing. Though this passage describes the most significant climax of the book, it is only a step of the building tension in the broader intrigue among the volumes—indeed, the love affair still has not begun. Powell allows no more meetings between Jenkins and Jean in *A Buyer’s Market* except for a quick and sterile goodbye, and the two brief references to Jean are colorless. Powell means to keep her name in the reader’s mind without inducing the dramatic tension between her and Jenkins to escalate any further.

With other novelists such a device, a premeditative insertion, would be “foreshadowing,” but Jenkins’ allusions in passing do not hint or tease—there is no suggestive nightmare or darkening sky. Instead they are so simply straightforward that they disappear within a lyrically mannered prose. This appears on the last page of *A Buyer’s Market*:

Certain stages of experience might be compared with the game of Russian billiards, played (as I used to play with Jean, when the time came) on those small green tables, within the secret recesses of which, at the termination of a given passage of time—a quarter of an hour, I think—the hidden gate goes down; after the descent of which, the white balls and the red return no longer to the slot to be replayed; and all scoring is doubled. This is perhaps an image of how we live. For reasons not always at the time explicable, there are specific occasions when events begin suddenly to take on a significance previously unsuspected, so that, before we really know where we are, life seems to have begun in earnest at last, and we ourselves, scarcely aware that any change has taken place, are careering uncontrollably down the slippery avenues of eternity. (274)

How much does one notice the nonchalant parenthesis in such a passage?<sup>26</sup> This paragraph comes immediately after Jenkins recounts an unsatisfactory dinner with his former schoolmate Widmerpool and Widmerpool’s mother, and the reader has heard nothing of Jean since Jenkins recalled a “faint pang” at learning of her pregnancy forty pages earlier. It seems a bit curious to mention Jean so casually in this passage, but it

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<sup>26</sup> The poetry of the passage, its complicated sentences and method of using image-metaphors to describe feeling, smack of Henry James. Compare, “These are the fascinations of the fabulist’s art, these lurking forces of expansion, these necessities of upspringing in the seed, these beautiful determinations, on the part of the idea entertained, to grow as tall as possible, to push it into the light and the air and thickly flower there; and, quite as much, these fine possibilities of recovering, from some good standpoint on the ground gained, the intimate history of the business—of retracing and reconstructing its steps and stages.” (From “Preface” to *Portrait of a Lady*.)

doesn't feel disturbing, and any tension between Jenkins and Jean remains as it was upon their meeting at Stourwater. What is remarkable about Powell's insertion of Jean here is that this is the last paragraph of the novel (this in part accounts for its prominent imagery and heightened tone); thus Powell succeeds in maintaining the tension between Jenkins and Jean up to the point where the next novel, *The Acceptance World*, begins, as well as adroitly slipping her name into a passage replete with anticipation.

Such is Powell's attention to form. After Jenkins hears of Jean's marriage early in *A Buyer's Market*, Powell allows his "sexual jealousy" to develop into muted desire at Stourwater, then freezes the sentiment through the rest of the novel. Nothing "happens" with Jean in *A Buyer's Market*, as nothing "happens" in *Afternoon Men*, but like the comic tension in that early novel, the dramatic tension with Jean will soon rise and snap. And so it does in *The Acceptance World*, in which Jenkins has a love affair with Jean soon after confirming her marital problems—Duport has been cheating on her. The affair begins as Peter Templer drives his wife Mona, Jean, and Jenkins to his country home, and Jenkins reaches for Jean in the back seat of the car.

The exact spot must have been a few hundred yards beyond the point where the electrically illuminated young lady in a bathing dress dives eternally through the petrol-tainted air; night and day, winter and summer, never reaching the water of the pool to which she endlessly glides. Like some image of arrested development, she returns forever, voluntarily, to the springboard from which she started her leap. A few seconds after I had seen this bathing belle journeying, as usual, imperturbably through the frozen air, I took Jean in my arms. (65)

In this stunningly poetic passage, Powell uses images to evince a precise feeling; he is deliberately abstract (there's no previous reference to the "illuminated young lady,"

which most readers would not recognize as a fluorescent advertisement for Jantzen bathing suits) in order to make the emotion more organic; if one is uncertain about the concrete thing (the advertisement), one ignores the connotations it may have (capitalism, suburban eyesores) and appreciates it for the feelings it offers—the “illuminated young lady” radiates a mysterious tone of inevitability.<sup>27</sup> Professor Pritchard remarks upon the passage’s reference to Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” which adds yet another level of stylization and gravity.

One is of course curious to know how the affair with Jean will continue, however Jenkins discloses nothing except an allusion to an after-hours visit to her bedroom, which is enough to suggest the sexual degree of the affair, and enough to build tension, but too referential (anti-romantic) to break it. The episode that follows this one focuses instead on Jenkins’ politico friend J. G. Quiggin, and the trappings of *his* affair with Templer’s wife Mona—this is an example of how Powell balances the focus on Jenkins’ intimate life with the also-interesting scenarios of the people around him.<sup>28</sup> The first real details

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<sup>27</sup> Powell’s propensity to apprehend the value of an image lends itself well to poetry, but as Michael Barber remarks, it may have been a liability during his service in the second world war: when Jenkins recalls his (analog) military career, he writes, “My own guilty feelings, on such occasions, came back to me, those sudden awarenesses at military exercises of the kind that, instead of properly concentrating on tactical features, I was musing on pictorial or historical aspects of the landscape; what the place had seen in the past; how certain painters would deal with its physical features.”

<sup>28</sup> The way in which Powell separates Jenkins’ comments on his own love life with much longer passages dealing with the affairs of his acquaintances hearkens to *The Great Gatsby*, which, along with *The Sun Also Rises*, Powell read about once a year. Nick Carraway’s love affair with Jordan Baker, however, is relegated to a minority of the text because it is a secondary theme, while Jenkins’ relationship with Jean is primary.

of Jenkins and Jean together in *The Acceptance World* appear, characteristically, later than we expect, though it is made quietly clear that an affair has continued through Jean's separation from Duport. I had supposed that Jenkins' staunch propriety would never allow any details of the time he spends with Jean, an idea that was not altogether disappointing because several other plots concerning Jenkins' school friends (dealing with women and the artistic-political world) unfurl simultaneously, and Jenkins' alternating commentary on them is absorbing. But all at once, in the third chapter,

I rang the bell of the ground-floor flat. It was in an old-fashioned red-brick block of buildings, situated somewhere beyond Rutland Gate, concealed among obscure turnings that seemed to lead nowhere. For some time there was no answer to the ring. I waited, peering through the frosted glass of the front door, feeling every second an eternity. Then the door opened a few inches and Jean looked out. I saw her face only for a moment. She was laughing.

'Come in,' she said quickly, 'It's cold.'

As I entered the hall, closing the door behind me, she ran back along the passage. I saw that she wore nothing but a pair of slippers. (137)

This is the first visit to Jean's flat that Jenkins describes, and we have nudity. Of course, the passage doesn't become lewd—next we know she's putting on her clothes again<sup>29</sup>—but “she wore nothing,” and Jenkins' exposing the nature of their rapport—fresh and affectionate—is startling after such a long spell of reticence regarding the affair.

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<sup>29</sup> In a Summer 1978 interview with *The Paris Review*, Powell said, “I mean I've no strong feelings about people giving detailed descriptions of people going to bed except I never really feel it's the right way to do it. Oddly enough, when I was in London yesterday I was passing a cinema and there was a still outside of a chap sort of lying on top of a girl. And I thought, Well, really, you know, I'm not sure that I really particularly want to see him *having* her.”

We see that Jenkins' reluctance to give details of his affair was not simply his propriety, but rather Powell's deliberate suppression of touching details that he will all at once expose. Instead of a "sex scene" we have an exchange recounted with tenderness reserved for the best of memories. The passage describes Jenkins' first explicit encounter with a woman in *three novels*, so after taking in his quiet frustration from *A Question of Upbringing* and his despondent loneliness from *A Buyer's Market*, it has an overwhelming sense of gratification.

There is, after all, no pleasure like that given by a woman who really wants to see you. Here, at last, was some real escape from the world. The calculated anonymity of the surroundings somehow increased the sense of being alone with her. There was no sound except her sharp intake of breath. I knew Jean would burn with curiosity when I told her of the procession in the park. At the same time, because passion in its transcendence cannot be shared with any other element, I could not speak of what had happened until the time had come to decide where to dine. (138)

In this same scene, Jean reveals that she was having an affair with a man nearly twice her age around the time she and Jenkins first met, which complicates the way Jenkins feels about her—but there is so much about Jenkins and Jean's relationship, or Jean herself for that matter, that I cannot address here. Suffice it say that the affair contentedly continues—though Jean only appears referentially from this point forward—until Bob Duport returns to London, indicating his wish to reconcile with Jean, ostensibly for the sake of their child.

Jenkins hears news of Duport's plans from Peter Templer, who knows nothing of Jenkins' affair with his sister. Templer tells Jenkins about his plans to ask Widmerpool, a well-connected old schoolmate, to help Duport's business back on its feet.

‘I am rather hopeful things will be patched up with Jean, if Bob’s business gets into running order again,’ Templer said. ‘The whole family can’t be in a permanent state of being deserted by their husbands and wives. I gather Bob is no longer sleeping with Bijou Ardglass, which was the real cause of the trouble, I think.’

‘Prince Theodoric’s girlfriend?’ (176)

It must be difficult for Jenkins to hear Templer speak so bluntly of Duport’s affair, and to discuss Duport’s infidelity in the same breath as he encourages his reunion with Jean, whom Jenkins loves. But rather than breaking off the dialogue to comment on the situation—as he often does—Jenkins allows it to continue, simply recording his own heroically natural response: “Prince Theodoric’s girlfriend?” The boyfriend of his lover’s husband’s lover (Bijou Ardglass) surely isn’t what possesses Jenkins’ attention, nor ours, during this trying moment.

Jenkins’ omission of commentary on his response is more touching than words.<sup>30</sup>

It is the most extreme version of Powell anti-romantic narration: he doesn’t narrate the moment at all. Since we are at this point privy to Jenkins’ great affection for Jean, Templer’s tactless description of the situation is unsettling, even though it is simply the manner in which no-nonsense Templer always speaks, and to hear nothing from Jenkins about such an affecting situation is horrible. We realize the unspeakability of the surprise and force of that moment, and imagine the great effort it takes Jenkins to remain

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<sup>30</sup> It reminds me of the tragically abrupt bit in Powell’s memoirs where he recounts a day in 1939, just three months before he was “called up” to join the British military corps. His wife Violet had been pronounced pregnant, and to avoid a second miscarriage she was going to spend the length of the gestation in a hospital in Wales. Her departure was quite significant considering Powell’s intention to join the military.

Powell writes: “The call was from her doctor. He had completed the pregnancy test. She was with child. The following day Violet left for Wales. It was a sad and upsetting moment when the train steamed out at Paddington, one I don’t care to dwell on.”

composed for Templer. In the situation itself Jenkins makes no comment to Templer because he can't betray the secrecy of his affair; in Jenkins' account of the situation he says nothing again, this time because it's too painful to revisit. Like our imagination of inexplicit action or comic tension in *Afternoon Men*, here the reader is wholly responsible for creating Jenkins' personal, unspoken dread. It is "the maximum of intensity with the minimum of strain," as Henry James remarked was his goal for the drama in *Portrait of a Lady*.

*The Acceptance World* ends with Jean's confirmation of her imminent reconciliation with Duport, which signals the end of her affair with Jenkins, but true to Jenkins' elusive narration he does not describe his pain. Instead, he refers to a postcard with a drawing of lovers on it that Jean has given him, and considers himself as still a part, at least for this one moment, of that image: "Perhaps, in spite of everything, the couple of the postcard could not be dismissed so easily. It was in their world I seemed now to find myself" (214). This last passage with Jean, on the last page of *The Acceptance World*, is of course bittersweet, though its parallel placement to Jean's parenthesis on the last page of *A Buyer's Market* (within the Russian billiards passage) gives the reader a satisfying sense of this episode in Jenkins' life having come full circle.

Jenkins' affair with Jean is captivating by virtue of the way in which Powell builds and releases its tension and complements its melodrama with anti-romance, while balancing the personal intrigue with the stories of all of the other characters. Where Jenkins tends to generalize and to abstract items concerning himself, his description of

the other characters provides a richness of detail, as well as anchoring the structure and casting forth the wit of *Dance*. These latter I address in the next section.

### 3. When the Time Came

*Time, character, and wit in A Dance to the Music of Time*

If Foppa himself had grown his moustache to the same enormous length, and added an imperial to his chin, he would have looked remarkably like the *re galantuomo*; with just that same air of royal amusement that anyone could possibly take seriously—even for a moment—the preposterous world in which we are fated to have our being.

POWELL *The Acceptance World*

Despite the primacy in our minds of Jenkins' personal story, the characters that move in and around it are richly idiosyncratic, and often so vivid that it seems as if Powell modeled them from characters in our own lives. They are the vivacious foreground of Jenkins' obscured personal affairs, the anchor of theme and framing, and the ebullient source of the series' wit. In the previous section I quoted a considerable mass of text in order to describe Jenkins' subtle expression of his personal affairs; yet humor was not at play in any of them. Though wit is absent in Jenkins' momentous personal confessions, it is a regular feature elsewhere in *Dance*. This way, the novels beat with the point and counterpoint of drama and wit, much like the rhythm of melancholy and humor in *Afternoon Men*.

As Nicholas Birns remarks, *A Question of Upbringing* and *At Lady Molly's*, books one and four, are the brightest novels of the first half of *Dance*,<sup>31</sup> and accordingly

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<sup>31</sup> "In a sense, the books behave as trilogies," Birns writes, "Books two, five, eight, and eleven are all unusually dark, for instance, and all involve at least one

they boast the lion's share of wit. (I will continue to restrict my study to the first half of the series.) Though Powell does make use of the farcical humor characteristic of his early novels, the wit in *Dance* is principally based on Jenkins' ironic descriptions of character. As if Powell were a caricaturist who makes spot-on portraits, his humorous characters remain unquestionably realistic; the very realism of the stuffed shirts and deadbeats in Jenkins' society is what renders them so viscerally enjoyable. Jenkins would never describe his down-and-out Uncle Giles as "enjoyable," but Giles is the first unequivocally comic character to amble onto the scene, in *A Question of Upbringing*.

Powell invests a considerable amount of text in Uncle Giles' introduction, as he does with many of *Dance*'s minor characters, so as to set a wide playing field for his narrative maneuvers. In this passage Jenkins is in his friend Charles Stringham's room (in their house at school) having tea.

[Stringham] stopped speaking, and, picking up the paper-knife again, held it upright, raising his eyebrows, because at that moment there had been a kind of scuffling outside, followed by a knock on the door: in itself a surprising sound. A second later a wavering, infinitely sad voice from beyond said: 'May I come in?'

Obviously this was no boy: the approach sounded unlike a master's. The hinge creaked, and, as the door began to open, a face, deprecatory and enquiring, peered through the narrow space released between the door and the wall. There was an impression of a slight moustache, grey or very fair, and a well-worn, rather sporting tweed suit. I realized all at once, not without apprehension, that my Uncle Giles was attempting to enter the room. (14)

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death. Whereas books one, four, seven, and ten are all about introducing new milieus and have some of the exuberance of such an occasion, although in book seven the action is distinctly downbeat" (61).

First of all we must note that this excerpt is considerably more involved than the sections dealing with Jean Templer: such is the contrast between Jenkins' quiet story and his society's clamorous one, or between Powell's special respect for Jenkins' intrigue and his clever pasquinade elsewhere. The comic development follows Jenkins' description of extraordinarily pathetic sounds, which leads of course to his surprise that the creature who makes them is a member of his family. This farcical climax is compounded with Jenkins' wry interjections—"not without apprehension," "attempting to enter the room"—, which reveal his wary suspicion of his uncle and his uncle's defining incompetence, respectively. In addition, the passage offers elements that contribute to the illustration of Jenkins' school days: we have examples of Stringham's infinite calm and the despondent state of the house (the creaking hinge), and the fact that the boys are quite familiar with the sound of a master's "approach"—an item that conjures up a quick image of illicit behavior and of one boy listening by the door. Such details that support the general setting are not present in Jenkins' isolated descriptions of his affair with Jean.

Jenkins finds his Uncle Giles' visit immensely embarrassing, so in addition to the episode's farce we have a second, situationally based, mode of humor which recalls the manner in which social discomfort is so wickedly amusing in *Afternoon Men*. The passage that follows, which lasts about ten pages, seems at first wholly devoted to Jenkins' introduction of Uncle Giles, but the reader will find that its incident of Uncle Giles' lighting a cigarette in Stringham's room—another farce, with Giles agreeing with and expounding upon "rules" while the fag happily burns to its stub—also contributes to a broader plot. Giles' nuisance and Stringham's cool insouciance become iconic of their

characters, and Jenkins recalls the episode in many of the novels to come in order to illustrate how the men have developed or remained the same. Uncle Giles does not appear again at length until the third book, *The Acceptance World*, though he moves in and out of Jenkins' thoughts several more times in this first volume. The pattern is common to the secondary characters in *Dance*; now they vanish, and now they reappear, for continued reference or to assume more substantial roles.

Uncle Giles is also known as "Captain Jenkins"—"though he had not held a commission for at least twenty years and 'captain' was probably a more or less honorary rank, gazetted to him by himself and the better disposed of his relatives"—, about fifty, and "relegated by most of the people who knew him at all well to that limbo where nothing is expected of a person." Jenkins begrudgingly honors Uncle Giles with the respect due a senior family member, and the residual frustration of this effort appears in Jenkins' incisive irony—a third mode of humor. In this later passage, for example, he describes one of Giles' romantic conquests:

This news [of Giles' possible engagement to be married] caused my parents some anxiety; for, although Uncle Giles' doings during the passage of time that had taken place were unknown in detail, his connection with Reading [his destination] had been established, with fair certainty, to be the result of a lady who lived there: some said a manicurist: others the widow of a garage-proprietor. There was, indeed, no reason why she should not have sustained both rôles (64).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Powell often uses multiple colons within one sentence, as if to complete a sketch more swiftly by layering ideas on top of one other, with no seams between them, as he does in the second to last sentence of this passage. I think it is fair to say that colons are faster than commas, and the items that colons separate are on more equal ground—on the same plane—than those separated by commas.

Here Jenkins seems guilty of the snobbery of which many critics accuse him: his use of the French *rôles* ironically juxtaposes upper-class sensibilities with the woman's undistinguished employment. The *snobisme* is Jenkins' narrative conceit rather than his personality trait, however, and he plays more upon the suitability of a garage-manicurist to Giles' miserable character than upon the woman's occupation as such. Furthermore, Jenkins speaks from his parents' perspective, so he simultaneously parodies their gossipy class-consciousness. In any case, the quick sarcasm is an example of Powell's more subtle humor.

A fourth and more elaborate mode of wit is cumulative, which, like Powell's dramatic tension, builds to a climax. This passage details the end of Uncle Giles' military career:

There had been, in fact, two separate rows [during Giles' service in Egypt], which somehow became entangled together: somebody's wife, and somebody else's money: to say nothing of debts. At one stage, so some of his relations alleged, there had even been question of court-martial: not so much to incriminate my unfortunate uncle as to clear his name of some of the rumours that were in circulation. The court-martial, perhaps fortunately, was never convened, but the necessity for Uncle Giles to send in his papers was unquestioned. He traveled home by South Africa, arriving in Cape Town a short time before the outbreak of hostilities with the Boers. In that town he made undesirable friends—no doubt also encountering Mrs. Foxe's father—and engaged in unwise transactions regarding the marketing of diamonds: happily not involving on his part any handling of the stones themselves. This venture ended almost disastrously; and, owing to the attitude taken up by the local authorities, he was unable to settle in Port Elizabeth, where he had once thought of earning a living. However, like many untrustworthy people, Uncle Giles had the gift of inspiring confidence in a great many people with whom he came in contact. Even those who, to their cost, had known him for years, sometimes found difficulty in estimating the lengths to which he could carry his lack of reliability—and indeed sheer capacity—in matters of business. When he returned to England he was therefore

seldom out of a job, though usually, in his own words, 'starting at the bottom' on an ascent from which great things were to be expected (65).

If the comic aspect of Jenkins' use of "rôles" is difficult to detect, in passages such as this one Powell allows Jenkins' deadpan irony to appear again and again in close sequence, so that the comic effect is explicit and exhilarating. Though my excerpt is generous, the passage is economical; that is to say, every bit is working to achieve either a desired comic effect or a proper mooring to the novel. "My unfortunate uncle" is sarcastic because we know Jenkins believes Giles deserves his misfortune; Jenkins' aside "perhaps fortunately" reveals outright antagonism (of course avoiding a trial is fortunate for Giles himself); "happily not involving on his part any of the stones themselves" and "where he had once thought of earning a living" describe Giles' ineptitude, and so on. All of Jenkins' derisive comments are controlled of course with gentlemanly, if envelope-pushing, discretion.<sup>33</sup>

Jenkins' mention of Giles' visit with "Mrs. Foxe's father" links the description of Giles' military career to the plot at hand, while "a short time before the outbreak of hostilities with the Boers" situates the story with reality. Powell often includes real historical events in Jenkins' story—on the facing page of this Boer War allusion there is an event located by "about the time of the Germans' sinking of the *Lusitania*." While

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<sup>33</sup> The gentility of Powell's humor summons James Boswell, and I quote a passage of *Life of Johnson* that I've admired since finding it at the beginning of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*: "This reminds me of the ludicrous account he gave Mr. Langton, of the despicable state of a young gentleman of good family. 'Sir, when I heard of him last, he was running about town shooting cats.' And then in a sort of kindly reverie, he bethought himself of his own favorite cat, and said, "But Hodge shan't be shot: no, no, Hodge shall not be shot."

these references serve to relate the fiction's history to our own, such other events as the Spanish Civil War and the Abdication of Edward VIII help to define the characters in Jenkins' society. For example, the reader has a clearer idea of which characters are leftist and which are conservative after a politically charged discussion of the Spanish Civil War, in *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*, the fifth volume. Powell uses the same discussion to suggest the novelist St. John Clarke's waning authority when the latter predicts Republican victory—but it is necessary that the reader know that Franco's Nationalists were in fact victorious in order to appreciate the point.<sup>34</sup>

The Spanish Civil War also serves to clarify a considerably challenging pattern of time at the beginning of *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*. While Jenkins' personal intrigue (such his affair with Jean Templer) plays in linear time, Powell directs the rest of the narrative to skip back, forth, and through the timeline of his memory. *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* begins in a time setting supposed to be contemporary with Jenkins' storytelling, and definitely after 1945, for Jenkins describes the ruins of the Mortimer, a musicians' pub which was bombed during World War Two. He imagines the still-standing ladies' restroom threshold (marked "Ladies") as the entrance of some dreamy

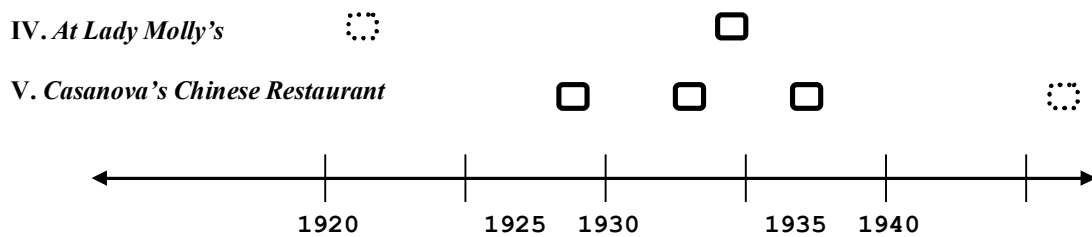
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<sup>34</sup> Powell's references are not only historical, but also literary, art-historical, and musical, and are often more challenging than this one. In *A Question of Upbringing* the humor of an entire episode relies upon one's familiarity with the poets Andrew Lang, Oscar Wilde, and Matthew Arnold; in *A Buyer's Market* a painter is described as a hybrid of Alma-Tadema and Burne-Jones; and in *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* we are expected to imagine how "Les Parfums de la Nuit" of Debussy's *Iberia* sounds while Jenkins describes the images the music evokes for him. Some critics define allusions like these as examples of Powell's snobbery, but I find them invariably pleasant: I either enjoy the felicity of the reference, or (if I haven't the background) I appreciate having a context for future investigation.

harem, and then, after a highly lyrical—and not at all clear—transition,

Then, all at once, as if such luxurious fantasy were not already enough, there came from this unexplored country the song, strong and marvellously sweet, of the blonde woman on crutches, that itinerant prima donna of the highways whose voice I had not heard since the day, years before, when Moreland and I had listened in Gerrard Street....<sup>35</sup> (1)

Jenkins recounts the details of making the composer Moreland's acquaintance at the Mortimer in the late 1920s, before the events of *At Lady Molly's*, the preceding book that closes around Autumn 1934 with Jenkins' imminent engagement to Lady Isobel Tolland.<sup>36</sup> About halfway through the first chapter Jenkins skips from the late 1920s to 1933 in order to recall the events leading to Moreland's marriage. When Chapter Two begins, however, Jenkins is describing a discussion of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) over dinner with his in-laws—*this* is how the reader learns that Jenkins is married—and with a bit of calculation we realize that the events of *At Lady Molly's* (1934) belong in between Chapters One (1933) and Two (1936) of *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*.



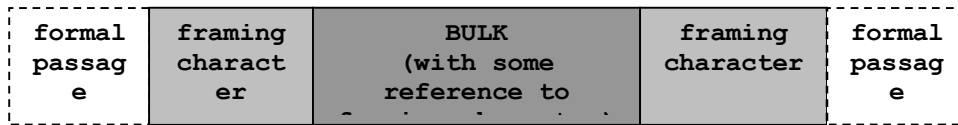
<sup>35</sup> Notice how Powell uses the same very abstract metaphor for women, “unexplored country,” here as he does in *A Question of Upbringing* (see page 28).

<sup>36</sup> In fact, this episode occurs even before the events of *A Buyer's Market* and *The Acceptance World*, the second and third volumes.

(Dotted boxes represent the estimated position of brief introductory passages.) The sophisticated construction would make sense if *Casanova's* were a self-contained novel about the friendship of Jenkins and Moreland, but this is not the case. The narrative is a shifting weave of different storylines—most importantly, Jenkins' personal drama—and its dilated time structure is calculated to introduce Moreland with a specific tone. It is important, for example, that Jenkins was about to be engaged to Isobel Tolland at the end of *At Lady Molly's*, because it precedes his account of Moreland's romantic history. When Jenkins' schoolmate Peter Templer reports his sexual conquests (*A Question of Upbringing*) or when Kenneth Widmerpool announces his engagement to be married (*At Lady Molly's*), the reader, as always, receives the news through Jenkins, whose own respective naïveté and despondency in relation to women gives his friends' romantic breakthroughs a negative accent. In *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*, however, Jenkins' description of Moreland's young loves arrives directly after his own romantic climax, so the reader doesn't associate any pathos with Moreland's good fortune. (The additional jumping around allows Jenkins to introduce Moreland with feelings of admiration and nostalgia.) Though it is not yet clear in *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* that Moreland will become Jenkins' closest friend, it is essential to the *later* books that Powell founded such a key relationship in an unambiguously positive light. The odd construction of time also serves to build the dramatic tension of Jenkins' personal drama, because the reader wonders what is going on with Jenkins and Isobel, and the restless time scheme neglects to pause for their marriage or to describe their home life.

To be sure, the temporal agility among and within the books can be disorienting,

and Powell balances this confusion by organizing each book with a distinct frame:



While in some of the novels Powell chooses to omit one or both of the formal passages in favor of abrupt introductions and conclusions, the appearance of a unique character at both ends is consistent in every book. This character serves as an overture whose theme plays and replays through the book’s conclusion, and allows us to recall certain stages of Jenkins’ life using that theme’s distinct tone. The inward construction lends a sense of independence to each novel—a fresh beginning, an ending with closure<sup>37</sup>—that is attractive during a twelve-novel stretch.

Despite the deliberate framing of each volume, each begins *in medias res*, and more so than would be natural for serial novels—rather than beginning a book where the previous one ended, there is a period of disorder, as in the introduction of *Casanova’s Chinese Restaurant*. At the beginning of each novel, then, faced with an uncertain time setting and, frequently, new characters, it can seem as if one has arrived a few courses after Powell’s imagined dinner party has begun,<sup>38</sup> and as if Jenkins tells the books’

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<sup>37</sup> That is to say, limited closure, on one plane of a multidimensional narrative.

<sup>38</sup> In a fit of impatience with his own series, *The Lampitt Chronicles*, A.N. Wilson writes: “The *fleuve* novels have to be bloody lucky to make sense. You pick up Volume Five or Volume Seven and ask yourself, ‘Who the f-ing hell *are* all these people?’ It’s like arriving at a dinner party a couple of hours late and not being introduced to the other guests and spending the whole evening picking up the fag-end of their conversations.” (Barber 168)

stories on distant evenings, which are sometimes separated by years. Powell's acrobatic time structure may make seem excessive, but the precise tone that it creates is essential for distinguishing each novel's theme. The introduction to *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*, for example, makes clear that it is a novel dealing with friendship, while *At Lady Molly's* seems focused on social fluency, *The Acceptance World* on fate, and so on. The distinct timbres of these themes blend for a time as one becomes situated with each new book, and the overlapping shift from one to the next is softly satisfying. One becomes familiar with each book's insulation from the others, and learns that Jenkins will eventually retrieve the loose ends of previous novels.

Powell frequently fortifies the tone-setting frames of the books with formal passages that use the same sort of abstract images he uses at points of dramatic climax. Powell's emphasis on tone is such that he neglects to provide basic elements of the plot until he achieves the proper pitch—at the beginning of *A Question of Upbringing*, for example, Jenkins doesn't introduce himself except obliquely, in recounted dialogue, twenty-six pages into the text. Instead, he introduces the book by addressing his exalted muse with a mannered metaphoric prose:

The image of Time brought thoughts of mortality: of human beings, facing outward like the Seasons, moving hand in hand in intricate measure: stepping slowly, methodically, sometimes a trifle awkwardly, in evolutions that take recognisable shape: or breaking into seemingly meaningless gyrations, while partners disappear only to reappear again, once more giving pattern to the spectacle: unable to control the melody, unable, perhaps, to control the steps of the dance. Classical associations made me think, too, of days at school, where so many forces, hitherto unfamiliar, had become in due course uncompromisingly clear. (2)

The formality and abstraction of this passage is nearly frustrating without a print of Poussin's painting at hand, but Powell does not intend for the reader to rush to the Wallace Collection or an art book to look the canvas up: he means to set a precise tone rather than to summon the precise image, and a too-literal reading of a passage like this one is unnecessarily complicating and distracting. Powell amplifies the tone with Jenkins' introduction of Kenneth Widmerpool, the framing character who, like Poussin's painting, we find "a trifle awkward" and ambiguous.

By this stage of the year—exercise no longer contestable five days a week—the road was empty; except for Widmerpool, in a sweater once white and a cap at least a size too small, hobbling unevenly, though with determination, on the flat heels of spiked running-shoes. Slowly but surely he loomed through the dusk towards me as I walked back—well wrapped-up, I remember—from an expedition to the High Street. (3)

Widmerpool will become the most important character in the series, except for Jenkins, but this isn't essential to *A Question of Upbringing*. Widmerpool's role in the framing of this first volume is to emphasize its sense of setting off into some unknown, yet definite future.

Widmerpool plays a role in setting a theme of naïve wonder to *A Question of Upbringing*, but the way in which characters help to define the themes *Dance* is better exemplified by General Conyers, the framing character of *At Lady Molly's*, who solidifies that book's theme of social fluency. The book is packed with odd juxtapositions of characters, many of which occur in the sitting-room of Lady Molly Jeavons, social navigator *extraordinaire*, whose boisterous charm attracts the old, young, rich, poor, enterprising and stagnant alike. Her husband Ted emphasizes her impressive social ease,

for he avoids her guests and goes out only for fortnightly pub crawls, while an especially memorable scene describes how two of her guests—the enterprising Mark Members and the stagnant Alfred Tolland—possess such alien social strategies that they cannot manage to speak to one another (“To describe the two of them as standing looking at one another, rather than talking, would have been nearer the truth, as each apparently found equal difficulty in contributing anything to a mutual conversation,” 175). Vignettes such as this one are fine illustrations of social fluency (and incompetence), and Jenkins of course offers more lengthy descriptions of each character, but their haphazard-seeming appearance and the sense that Jenkins is always moving from one place to another—in this book, several long conversations take place in automobiles—muddle the central theme. The collectedness of each of General Conyers’s appearances grounds it.

The reader doesn’t notice the General’s significance at once, for Jenkins first introduces him obliquely, through Uncle Giles’ war memories (“Alymer Conyers had a flair for getting on”), and later offers a characteristically long and realistic introduction:

He wore an unusually thick, dark hairy suit, the coat cut long, the trousers narrow, a high stiff collar, of which the stud was revealed by the tie, and beautifully polished boots of patent leather with grey cloth tops. He looked like an infinitely accomplished actor got up to play the part that was, in fact, his own. At the same time he managed to avoid that almost too perfect elegance of outward appearance to be found in some men of his sort, especially courtiers. The hairiness of the suit did that. (60)

Jenkins offers this description during his visit to General and Mrs. Conyers, who are friends of his parents and have been acquainted with him since his birth. While Jenkins infuses the portrait with wit, the General remains a serious character.

Just a bit later in that passage, Powell imperceptibly sets up the book's last episode, which is a key to its theme. Here General and Mrs. Conyers are interested in Jenkins' opinion of Widmerpool because he is engaged to marry Mrs. Conyers's sister, Mildred Blaides.

If Mrs. Conyers had already told her husband of my acquaintance with Widmerpool, the General had entirely forgotten about that piece of information, for it now came to him as something absolutely new, and, for some reason, excruciatingly funny, causing him to fall into an absolute paroxysm of deep, throaty guffaws, like the inextinguishable laughter to the Homeric gods on high Olympus, to whose characteristic faults and merits General Conyers's own nature probably approximated closely enough. A twinge of pain in his leg brought this laughter to an end with a fit of coughing.

'What sort of fellow is he?' he asked, speaking now more seriously.  
(61)

The image of the General's gleeful laughing evolving into grimace and choking is an especially well-wrought sample of Powell's realist humor—but more importantly, notice for now how the General's "serious" question abruptly breaks that humor: Powell means to make it memorable. As the passage continues we notice that the General's gruff-old-man qualities that Jenkins recounts so vividly<sup>39</sup> coexist with a propensity for the modern. The General asks Jenkins' opinion of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928)—Jenkins doesn't care for the novel—and then tries to consider the book from a psychoanalytic angle.

When the General next turns up, in the last episode of *At Lady Molly's*, he pulls Jenkins

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<sup>39</sup> "I spent Christmas Day cleaning out the kennels," said the General. "Went to Early Service. Then I got into my oldest clothes and had a thorough go at them. Had luncheon late and a good sleep after. Read a book all evening. One of the best Christmas Days I've ever had" (63).

away from his own engagement party (at Lady Molly's, which indicates the episode's significance), to continue their previous, all but forgotten, discussion of Widmerpool.

This time the General is not interested in his sister-in-law's well-being—indeed, he begins by reporting the details of how Mildred broke the engagement—instead he wants to share with Jenkins his consideration of Widmerpool in Freudian terms. While Christopher Hitchens remarks upon Powell's use of modern psychoanalysis to connect Jenkins to reality in a way the 1920s Modernists do not,<sup>40</sup> the importance of General Conyers's tête-à-tête with Jenkins transcends this historical cue. It is the series' first example of an absolutely sincere discussion<sup>41</sup>: the social tension with which the reader, having witnessed the bulk of the book's odd character juxtapositions, is by now familiar, is curiously absent. I do not mean to restrict "social tension" to clash and antagonism (such as the horribly awkward encounter between Mark Members and Alfred Tolland); I mean the tension that exists in even friendly exchanges, such as between a host (Lady Molly) and her guests. This tension arises simply from the inherent responsibilities of each role: the host, for example, must offer drinks and make introductions, while guests must try to get along. One can also imagine the omnipresence of social tension by

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<sup>40</sup> "Powell shows himself highly alert to the difficulty of being an antimodernist modernist, and also acutely desirous that Nick Jenkins should not be 'out of touch,' by making a series of well-timed references to Marx, to Jung, and to Virginia Woolf."

<sup>41</sup> One exception could be Gypsy Jones' impressively frank conversation with Jenkins in *A Buyer's Market*, however Gypsy's sexual potency makes this brash sincerity lean toward coyness:

'Why are you so stuck up?'" she asked, truculently.

'I'm just made that way.'

'You ought to fight it.'

'I can't see why.' (249)

considering the power exchanges between lovers (which often shift with jealousy) and friends (which tend to change if one party becomes more wealthy).

When General Conyers beckons Jenkins out of Lady Molly's sitting-room, social tension evaporates: neither of them is playing any roles. The General reports his thoughts on Widmerpool without any motivations of his own, except his curiosity. The passage is striking, and Jenkins himself remarks upon the General's uncommon objectivity:

The General said these things in a manner entirely free from any of those implied comments which might be thought inseparable from such a chronicle of events. That is to say he was neither shocked, facetious, or caustic. It was evident that the situation interested, rather than surprised him. He was complete master of himself in allowing no trace of ribaldry or ill nature to colour his narrative. For my own part, I felt a twinge of compassion for Widmerpool in his disaster, even though I was unable to rise to the General's heights of scientific detachment. (185)

When the General finishes giving Jenkins his opinion of Widmerpool, Jenkins asks about his heroic role in World War One, and the General answers with minimal fanfare. Then he advises Jenkins to keep his "introverted intuition" in check, admitting his own "slow reactive rapidity,"<sup>42</sup> and bids Jenkins farewell.

The change in his voice announced that our fantasy life together was over. We had returned to the world of everyday things. Perhaps it would be truer to say that our real life together was over, and we returned to the world of fantasy. Who can say? We went down the stairs once more, the General leading. Chips Lovell was talking to Miss Weedon, perhaps tiring of her company, because he slipped away at once when I came up to them, making for the drink-tray. Miss Weedon gave her glacial smile and congratulated me. We began to talk. Before we had progressed very far, Molly Jeavons, whose absence from the room I had not previously noticed, came hurriedly toward us.

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<sup>42</sup> Nabokovians will expect that there's some joke on psychoanalysis here, as I did, but the fact that there isn't is testament to the passage's unique solemnity.

‘Tuffy, dear,’ she said. “Do go down and see what is happening in the basement...it would be saintly of you if you could clear it all up.’ (189)

One moment Jenkins is having a sincere conversation, and the next he finds himself in a room with his friend Lovell, who pretends to be interested in a conversation he longs to escape; with Miss Weedon, who dislikes everyone except for Charles Stringham, who says “congratulations” and talks with Jenkins so inconsequentially that ‘we began to talk’ suffices as description; with Molly Jeavons, who uses petty flattery to get Miss Weedon to do a chore, while Miss Weedon pretends she doesn’t see through it.

Who can say, indeed. Lady Molly’s gallimaufry of actors and actresses playing roles is much closer to reality than Jenkins’ fantastically quiet, utopic discussion with General Conyers. The contrast between the two worlds effectively highlights the book’s theme of social fluency by showing how one must *act* when faced with certain people and situations; how one learns to read the fiction of reality.<sup>43</sup> Powell’s expression of the idea, of course, is more subtle, and less portentous than all that, but the theme will remain significant as Nick Jenkins steps in and out of the circle moving hand in hand in intricate measure around him, in the *Dance to the Music of Time*.

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<sup>43</sup> In his book *How to Do Things with Words*, the philosopher J.L. Austin describes how we regularly “quote” common phrases, rather than “mean” them: *especially* in the case of our most intimate utterances such as “I do” or “I love you,” for these are learned and recited lines rather than sincere expressions of a feeling.

## A Sort of Conclusion

To address the novels of Anthony Powell in a short essay is nearly as absurd as my original plan of writing about “the second-generation Modernists.” Limiting my focus here to the question of form has been terribly frustrating; it must be a mixed blessing that I have in fact only read the first six books of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, for I expect new modes of harmony and balance to come to light as I complete the series. For the purpose of clarity I cut two substantial sections from this paper, which would have addressed (1) social power and individual will, which clearly fascinated Powell, and (2) the relationship between Jenkins and his wife Isobel in *Casanova’s Chinese Restaurant*. In the second chapter of that book it becomes apparent, in the most obscure manner, that Isobel has suffered a miscarriage, and Jenkins’ reluctance to comment is deeply touching. In this way, what I find most exciting about Powell’s writing is what he does not write: as in *Afternoon Men* when Susan takes Atwater’s cigarette from his lips. The points at which Powell’s narrative is most moving seem to require the most deductive reasoning and creativity from the reader, and this is a matter worth further investigation.

Likewise, *Afternoon Men*’s kinship with Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* indicates Powell’s interest in melancholy, and this raises questions of an interdisciplinary

nature: what is the socioeconomic, or simply historical basis for melancholy in 1930s London? *A Dance to the Music of Time* is an equally apt candidate for a study of melancholy, especially its gloomy second volume, *A Buyer's Market*, which is also remarkable for its reeling, *Ulysses*-like<sup>44</sup> chronicle of a single evening. The way in which Powell measures the stretched-out melancholy of *A Buyer's Market* against the vibrant wit of *At Lady Molly's*—while setting *The Acceptance World* between them as a placid interlude—is a gracefully harmonic performance. It is an example of the point and counterpoint I mentioned in discussions of both *Afternoon Men* and *Dance*, however I haven't expanded the idea: rare passages of melodrama are counterpoint to Powell's referential anti-romance, comedy is counterpoint to melancholy, and in *Dance* these contrasts operate both within each volume and among them.

Powell's delicate craftsmanship, as well as his uncommon orchestration of time and use of abstract images (the "bathing beauty" advertisement in *The Acceptance World*) brings his Modernity to question. The precise division between realism and Modernism, of course, is a quagmire of its own, however it is accurate to say that Powell's hybrid of the two schools is not an example of point and counterpoint, but instead a unified timbre: while a challenging time-structure, abstract images, and a vulpine dramatic pattern are clearly beyond the style of, say, George Eliot, Powell's straightforward character portraits

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<sup>44</sup> Nicholas Birns remarks that Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot are present in *A Buyer's Market* as well: "What Powell is doing here is complex," Birns writes, "He is acknowledging his predecessors in depicting modernity and, in a book depicting the 1920s, paying homage, and allusive respect, to the seminal modernist writers, all the while making the point that Jenkins is of a generation born into modernism and the twentieth century, seeing it from ground eye's level, not Dedalus's Martello Tower" (103).

are unquestionably realist. Powell achieves synthesis with Nick Jenkins, whose natural convolutions of memory, personal discretion and dapper, lightly cynical sense of wit account for more sophisticated, or Modernist, narration.

Speaking of literary influence, I've also made cursory comments regarding Hemingway and Fitzgerald's influence on Powell: it is fascinating that Powell found these Lost-Generation Americans most inspiring while his own England saw such lively literary developments during his young adulthood. Fitzgerald's name summons the Jazz Age, and considering the rhythmic similarities his Carraway shares with Powell's Jenkins (and, just as well, Hemingway's staccatoed contribution to Powell's narration) encourages an essay to the tune of "Powell, Syncopation, and the Americans." Before embarking on such an endeavor, however, I shall return headlong to complete my reading of *A Dance to the Music of Time*.

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‘Coming down,’ he shouted. His voice sounded far away, unexpected, like a message from the firmament. He shouted ‘Coming down’ again and Atwater thought that nothing was more likely. The key, wrapped in a page of the Morning Post, sailed slowly down from the vault of stars and landed on the head of a blind man, who was tapping his way along the railings of the area. Atwater tried to explain, but it took too long, so he gave the blind man a shilling and went up the stairs.

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