Let the Dance Resume: Echoes Of Anthony Powell in the Fiction of DJ Taylor
by Jeffrey A Manley

Anyone familiar with the literary journalism and criticism of DJ Taylor will be well aware of his admiration for the works of Anthony Powell. For example, Taylor has described Powell as "the greatest English novelist of the 20th century" (Independent on Sunday, 4 July 2004). In addition, Taylor has also written a considerable body of fiction, and it is perhaps less well known that he finds numerous methods for expressing his admiration of Powell in his fiction as well.

The Novels
Between 1992 and 2001 Taylor wrote four novels which may be said to represent his attempt to describe how it was to live in England during the 1970-89 period. The concept of this cycle seems to have been formed in a series of essays published in 1989 as A Vain Conceit: British Fiction in the 1980s. In those essays Taylor took English writers of serious fiction to task for failing, or not wishing, to perceive ... the powerful forces at work in society which really influence the way in which we think and act: America, television, the global money marketplace, and especially language, the constantly reviving, endlessly self-renewing language of transatlantic and transcontinental culture. (Ibid. p15-16)

From the Secretary's Desk
Although being a voracious reader, my father never showed any great interest in Powell. Some years ago I gave him a couple of volumes of Dance to try, although if he ever read them, he never discussed them with me. But clearing out his papers after his death earlier in the year I found half a dozen book reviews by Powell which my father had culled from the Daily Telegraph between 1966 and 1976. They were reviews of books on diverse topics in English history, ranging from King Arthur to the 17th century Interregnum. No surprise at Powell having written such reviews (he did read History at Oxford) nor really that my father had kept the reviews, having as he had an interest in the nooks and crannies of English history. What was however slightly surprising, on reading the reviews, were some of Powell's unexpected insights into English history. Decades on these insights may be common-place to historians today, but had not previously occurred to me. Often in almost throw-away lines, Powell gives us clues about the iniquities of Ship Money, the Normans in Italy, riots by apprentices against the Puritans for their suppression of Christmas celebrations, the major occupants of castles being not the aristocrats (who owned them) but lowly knights (who were paid to look after them) and the homosexuality of Edward II. On the Normans Powell says:

The Normans were, in general, good at fighting, but many of their greatest successes were due rather to administrative ferocity and cunning, together with an excellent propaganda machine (for instance, the Bayeux Tapestry). [Daily Telegraph, 18 March 1976]
He cites the previous generation of English novelists (including Powell, Waugh and Orwell) as well as the Victorians such as Trollope, Thackeray, and Gissing as having taken on this task of writing what he describes as books that seek to “cope with their own vast, chaotic canvas” or books reflecting social comment or the condition of England. (Ibid. p38).  

Without any apparent announcement of his intentions in the books themselves, he seems to have picked up his own challenge with the cycle of four novels beginning in 1992 with Real Life. It is not my intention here to assess the extent to which Taylor may have succeeded but rather to describe how he used elements of Powell’s style and content from Dance in his own cycle of novels. In a Spectator article entitled “Dukes, Debs and Democrats” (4 July 2004) Taylor described Dance as the work which “more than any other work of fiction, tells you what it was like to have been alive in England between the years 1920 to 1970”. Since Taylor seems to be attempting a similar task in his own novels covering a period that begins about the time that Dance concludes, this may explain his frequent allusions to Powell.

While Taylor’s novels, unlike the sequence of twelve written by Powell, are not linked by character and plot lines they are linked by theme. The novels describe events in England during the 1970s and 1980s. In the first, Real Life (1992), the narrator from Norwich and educated at a cathedral-affiliated school in that city and Goldsmith’s College, London, achieves some success, roughly speaking, as scriptwriter in the pornography industry centered in Soho during the 1970 boom years, only to return to Norwich when that business (or at least his firm) collapses.

English Settlement (1996) has an American narrator from West Virginia who becomes a management consultant in a London accounting firm and is farmed out to a mid-division football team in West London where he discovers irregularities in its business. The team has a “run” in one of the football cups and begins to generate positive cash flows but then collapses as the cup final approaches.

Trespass (1998) is narrated by another Norwich native who is raised and educated in a working class district of that city, migrates to London where he studies accounting and becomes involved with an uncle in a sort of Ponzi scheme investment fund. This fund achieves a success for a time as repository for the investments of ordinary people but eventually collapses, and the narrator returns to East Anglia, where he is contracted by a publishing firm to tell his side of the story six years after the collapse.

The last of this series, The Comedy Man (2001), is narrated by a former member of a two-man comedy team which attains popular success on national TV and related venues in the 1970s. This novel traces the economic collapse of the narrator’s small shopkeeper family in Great Yarmouth, follows him through the glory years of popularity resulting from national TV exposure and ends with his rather bleak existence in South London eking out a living by appearing in retirement homes and working men’s clubs. The Comedy Man is darker than the other novels and, perhaps as a consequence, has fewer Powellian elements.

Narrative Structure

The narrators of the novels bear little social resemblance to Powell’s Nick Jenkins. None received his education at a major public school, nor do they have any connection with upper class friends or acquaintances comparable to those of Jenkins. On the other hand, many characters other than the narrators would fall well within the parameters of the Bohemian world of London populated by the characters of Powell’s novels. Like Jenkins, Taylor’s narrators are describing events in which they were not the prime movers but rather peripheral or secondary actors. This enables them to adopt a certain degree of detachment in their narratives similar to that used by Powell for Jenkins. They do not pronounce judgment on the characters whose actions cause the debacles which are the theme of each story but rather describe the events and participants in seemingly objective but ironic voices, allowing the actions and the resultant failures to speak for themselves.

The narrative structures of Taylor’s novels are quite like those of Powell’s. While the plots are not linked chronologically nor do the characters reappear, the novels which all take place in the Thatcher Years seem intended to form a cycle with some vague linkage to Powell’s Dance. This much is established, at least by implication, in A Vain Conceit, as noted above. Any doubt on that score is allayed by the epigraphs to all but one of these novels, the only exception being Trespass. By starting with these epigraphs, Taylor makes no secret of

1 An earlier novel, Great Eastern Land (1986), appeared before Taylor laid down his challenge in Vain Conceit. It is an “Oxbridge” novel, describing the narrator’s education and entry into the job market. It contains fewer obvious references to Powell, although there is a character (Mr Mortimer) who exhibits some distinctly Powellian traits.

2 For these purposes the 1970’s are considered as included in the Thatcher Years, as the political and economic malaise of that decade gave rise to Mrs Thatcher’s ascendency, or so Taylor seems to believe, and few would dispute that belief.
Anthony Powell novels in the sitting room” of their house in West Virginia, through which the narrator spent years “riffling” (Ibid. p39). Two of the younger employees of the London management consultant/accounting firm where the narrator is employed are named Sillery and Blanchflower (Ibid. p41) providing a link to both Powell and Waugh characters as well as to the narrator’s observation a few pages earlier that airplanes bound for England “are full of college students reading novels by Evelyn Waugh and Anthony Powell” (Ibid. p28).

Trespass is similarly laden with such overt citations to Powell and his works. A reference to Huntercombe Holdings is noted by the narrator in a newspaper article and reminds him of incidents relating to his uncle’s investment trust (Ibid. p17). A hotel proprietor is then overheard singing the melody Mountain Greenery which is the same song that is overheard by attendees at the Huntercombe’s dinner dance in A Buyer’s Market (p63). Some of the barristers’ chambers at which the narrator conducts audits have “iron stanchions by the door where, it was suggested to visitors, the linkmen of two centuries before had hung their torches…” (Trespass; p103). Compare with A Question of Upbrinbring (p55) where similar stanchions are described as located outside the house of Stringham’s mother. There is also an accountant named Jenkins who was a member of a group of six “Chaffington Irregulars” noteworthy for “evening excursions to odd pubs and wine bars between Fleet Street and the river, or [for] quasi-official celebrations of completed audits known as ‘drink-ups’…” (Ibid. p106). Another accountant, known as “Old Powell”, is employed at the lower echelon accounting firm to which the narrator is ultimately relegated. Old Powell had once worked in a more respected firm and, when the younger accountants grew boisterous, would “occasionally remonstrate that ‘it wasn’t quite the thing’” (Ibid. p134).

**Powellian Language**

Finally, there are those narratives in which the voice of Nick Jenkins/Anthony Powell seem to appear. These are not frequent, occurring hardly at all in The Comedy Man and only rarely in the other novels. These passages are really sustained only in the Prologue (entitled “Pretzel Logic”) to English Settlement where the narrator describes his and his family’s background in the US. A more isolated example occurs in Real Life at a party described as “suggesting a Connolly/Horizon gathering along the lines parodied by Evelyn Waugh” where nearly all the main characters are present and one of them starts a fracas as a result of an unsuccessful attempt at picking up a girl:

The music had stopped. From beyond the doorway came the clamour of raised voices. Moving into the room, several clues as to what had happened swiftly presented themselves, the suggest a tableau that might have been captioned ‘Wounded Dignity’ or ‘Honour Spurned’, a tumult of activity frozen suddenly into sharp relief by our own arrival on to the scene. Terry Chimes stood in the centre of a group of people which included Morty and Jerry, nursing his right hand and glaring stonily at a second group made up of several other guests, whose leader seemed to be the girl whom Terry Chimes had previously tried to pick up. In the middle of this assembly sat, or rather half-stood, supported by the girl, a man whom I had not seen before, clutching his fingers over the upper part of his face. Fragments of a bottle, Terry Chimes’ bottle of whiskey judging by the label, formed an odd symbolic barrier on the floor between these apparently opposed forces. (Ibid. pp190,199)

My favorite occurs in Trespass where there is a Powell-esque description of a seaside hotel in which the narrator has taken refuge following the financial collapse of his uncle’s investment fund. Indeed, this hotel, the Caradon, is a source of considerable amusement of a vaguely Powellian sort which might be associated with Nick Jenkins’ attitude toward Uncle Giles’ residences at the Ufford and the Belleview. Here, for example, is the introductory description of the Caradon (Mr Archer is the hotel’s proprietor and is himself throughout the novel a source of considerable comedy very much in the style of Powell):

Long-standing residents sometimes said that the Caradon looked at its best in the early morning. The front lobby, reached ten minutes later – you could never be sure of hot water at that hour – bore this out. Sunk in grey light, which bobbed and glinted off odd protrusions of glass and chrome, it looked vaguely welcoming; austere, maybe, but not despicable. Standing on the lower stairs, at the point furthest away from the reception area, it scarcely resembled a hotel – more an exceptionally badly

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1 Charlotte or Ella’s family name was Froshibish. But she brings to mind Betty Taylor or Porter who was Peter Templar’s unfortunate second wife. Taylor or Porter was the name of her first husband. (Hilary Spurling, Invitation to the Dance, p162)
furnished domestic house or antechamber to some public room. Nearer at hand the place’s true identity was revealed in a high, formica-covered reception desk, a green baize square set into the wall and pinned with notices, and a blackboard covered with unclaimed envelopes. As I stood looking at all this – a scene inspected twenty times before but forever fascinating in its seediness – a light went on in the office behind reception and there was a curious scrabbling noise: boxes being thrown about, heavy feet wandering. Eventually Mr Archer’s face and upper body appeared from behind the hatch.

‘Up early?’
‘That’s right.’
‘Off to get a newspaper?’
‘Probably.’
‘We can get them delivered, you know.’

People going out to buy newspapers was an old grievance of Mr Archer’s... Thinking perhaps that it was bad policy to criticize a guest at such an early hour of the morning, he said in a more conciliatory way:

‘Another ashtray went last night.’
‘Did it?’
‘That’s right. Seven in this last fortnight. I shall have to start chaining them to the tables if this goes on.’ (Trespass; pp14-15)

These passages from Taylor call to mind no specific sections of Powell’s novels. But they are an obvious allusion to Powell’s language, one of the topics cited as important to the writing of the 1980s in Vain Conceit. They are not so much a parody of Powell (although Taylor has also been known to engage in that as well) as an attempt to use Powell’s language, one of the topics cited as important to the writing of the 1980s in Vain Conceit. They are not so much a parody of Powell (although Taylor has also been known to engage in that as well) as a salute to his works by another writer seeking to accomplish a similar description of English time in a series of novels.

**Conclusions**

It is fairly evident that DJ Taylor has used his fiction as well as his criticism to pay homage to Anthony Powell. But that is in itself any reason for other Powell admirers to read Taylor’s fiction? Perhaps not. But there is much else going on in Taylor’s work that warrants attention. He has recycled and updated the Powellian style and incorporated it into his own work, especially in the four-novel cycle devoted to the Thatcher Years.

These novels are clearly linked, but in a way that is different from the Dance cycle. The settings – Soho, East Anglia and the City – provide one linkage. The aspects of society that form the focus of one novel reappear briefly in another. For example in English Settlement the owner of Walham Town FC made the money he invested in the football club in pornography, although he was not mentioned in Real Life. In The Comedy Man, there is a back story of a financial fraud but not the one described in Trespass. And one of the perpetrators of that fraud is said also to have been prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act. In Real Life there is a football theme but based on supporters of a real team, Norwich City, not the fictional Walham Town. Accountancy firms play an important role in both Trespass and English Settlement and the narrator’s father in Real Life was a chartered accountant. But Taylor decided not to follow Powell’s structure of using the same characters in each novel to reinforce these linkages.

A further linkage is noted by Taylor himself as the common theme of characters who leave their provincial homes for London only to return and find them changed “beyond recognition”. Taylor describes these books as “the same book rewritten in a variety of different ways”. Powell, on the other hand, kept his novels flowing forward over the years they covered. It was not so much the same events occurring to different characters as it was the same characters reacting to different events.

Finally, Taylor uses a first person narrator with a detached point of view. But he uses different narrators instead of linking the novels with a single narrator. The novels are not sequential in time but overlap each other to a large extent in the Thatcher Years, so that using the same characters (particularly the same narrator) may not have recommended itself as a realistic option. Moreover, unlike the sequential Dance cycle, there is considerable time shifting in Taylor’s narratives, with action taking place in the narrators’ present times as well as the actions described by those narrators in the past. This could well have made a sequential novel such as Dance impractical.

On the whole, however, Taylor is writing these novels very much in the tradition of Powell and other writers of social novels describing life in England. They are not a Dance to the Music of Mrs Thatcher’s Time but are probably about as close as one would care to get. For Powell fans, looking to move on from endless rereadings of Dance, these novels certainly recommend themselves.

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4 See for example Taylor’s report in the Independent (28 April 2001) of his attendance at the first of the Society’s conferences at Eton in 2001 which is written entirely in Powell-speak.

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New Critical Work on Powell

**The Novels of Anthony Powell: a Critical Study**

by Koyama Taichi

pub Hokuseido Publishing, Tokyo, September 2006

Koyama Taichi (then a graduate student at University of Kent) spoke at the Eton conference and this book is the result of his successful doctoral thesis. Koyama is now a university English academic back in his native Japan, hence the publication of this book in Tokyo.

The book will be available via Amazon.jp, and we hope other country Amazon sites as well. In view of the likely availability from Japan we are also hoping to be able to sell copies through the Society – watch this space!
Internal evidence suggests that Widmerpool maintained offices within the Cabinet War Rooms complex in Whitehall, and certainly attended meetings there. The following first hand account will shortly be published in The Hot Seat, the military and political memoirs of James Allason.

“The Cabinet War Rooms, to which I was frequently summoned to give briefings, attend meetings and amend plans, occupied the fortified basement of the steel-framed Office of Works building in Storey’s Gate opposite St James’s Park, the strongest structure in Whitehall. Known simply as “George Street” or “Storey’s Gate”, it was protected by a raft of concrete several feet thick strengthened with tram rails that had been designed to resist a direct hit, an engineering calculation fortunately never put to the test. Works had started in June 1938, the War Room becoming operational on 27 August 1939, just a week before the declaration of war following the German invasion of Poland. Fifty feet below ground, it was designed to house – and sleep – a permanent staff of 270, with additional offices for regular visitors like my own team, in some 150 rooms. A sub-basement with low ceilings housed cramped dormitories crammed with bunk beds. The complex was huge, with six acres of floor space and a mile of corridors, but only chemical toilets. Gas masks were required to be carried at all times, and a torch was a sensible accessory. While hardly comfortable the atmosphere was purposeful; few of the visitors escorted in by the Royal Marine guards were left in any doubt that this was the hub of the war effort and centre of decision-making.

“Within, the bunker was permanently lit, making it impossible to tell whether it was day or night when you looked at your watch. Winston’s bedroom was not close enough from our office to hear him snoring, so the best test was to see whether what we had prepared made any sense when typed up the next day. That composed at 4 pm was notably better than the 4 am version. The Premier’s sleeping habits were in any event an unreliable guide, as he was as likely to take an afternoon siesta as he was to keep the Chiefs-of-Staff up most of the night, often with us in attendance. (More frequently, though, he worked and slept immediately above us in the six first floor rooms of the Number 10 Annexe, the windows barred with steel shutters during the bombing.)

“Several of Winston’s most stirring broadcasts were made from the Map Room via a small BBC control room that was permanently manned. Periodically the Prime Minister would disappear into his private lavatory, which otherwise remained securely locked. And there he would remain for a considerable time, giving rise among the secretaries to a tender concern about his insides. It was a closely guarded secret that behind the door with its ‘Occupied/Vacant’ sign the PM was talking over an encrypted transatlantic radio link to the President of the United States. An early computer, located in an annexe basement of Selfridges department store in Oxford Street, was required to scramble speech securely on this the first “hot line”. The highly classified system was codenamed SIGSALY, the London terminal being X-RAY.

“At the figurative centre of the George Street complex was the Cabinet Room, in which a square had been formed of trestle tables covered in baize, with a narrow gap to allow members of the secretariat into the centre to take notes. Around the outside facing in would sit members of the War Cabinet and Chiefs-of-Staff. Whatever the hour at which I passed through the sandbagged – and securely guarded – entrance to the bunker a meeting might be in progress in the Cabinet Room. From it issued forth a stream of demands for information, some of which it was our task as planners to answer. With so many people smoking in such a confined space, not least Churchill puffing on his Romeo y Julieta No 7s, a constant fog persisted, confounding the primitive – and noisy – attempts at air conditioning. For the secretaries and aides who slept in cramped bunks in the sub-basement bronchitis was a perennial hazard. Many preferred to risk the Blitz than remain overnight.

“Next to the Prime Minister’s bedroom was the Map Room, from which he had broadcast to the nation during the dark days of 1940, and where he still met heads of state and military leaders. The walls were covered with large-scale maps of Britain, the Atlantic and Far Eastern theatres of war bearing notes of force deployments and convoys. These were kept constantly updated with the latest information. When my 80th birthday party was celebrated in the War Rooms in September 1997 the maps remained as they had been on the last day of the war – and my name appeared on the duty roster posted outside Winston’s bedroom.”
**Subscriptions**

Subscriptions were due for renewal on 1 April. The 40 or so members who have not yet renewed will recently have received final reminders. Those not renewing will cease to be members on 30 September.

We are able to accept subscription payments by Standing Order (UK members only) and recurring credit card transactions; appropriate forms will be sent with reminder notices. Payment may also be made in UK funds by cheque, Visa, Mastercard or online using PayPal.

Members who are UK taxpayers are asked to GiftAid their subscription. This enables the Society to reclaim basic rate income tax already paid on the subscription; currently this is 28p for every £1 paid to the Society.

**Local Groups**

**London Group**

Area: London & SE England  
Contact: Keith Marshall  
Email: kcm@cix.co.uk

**North East USA Group**

Area: NY & CT area, USA  
Contact: Leatrice Fountain  
Email: leatrice.fountain@gmail.com

**Great Lakes Group**

Area: Chicago area, USA  
Contact: Stephen Pyskoty-Olle  
Email: widmerpool@hotmail.com

**Swedish Group**

Area: Sweden  
Contact: Regina Rehbinder  
Email: reginarehbinder@hotmail.com

Please contact the Hon. Secretary if you wish to make contact with a group and don’t have email.

Any member wishing to start a local group should contact the Hon. Secretary who can advise on the number of local members.

**Copy Deadlines**

The deadlines for receipt of articles and advertisements for forthcoming issues of Newsletter and Secret Harmonies are:

**Secret Harmonies #1, 2006**  
Copy Deadline: 4 September 2006  
Publication Date: 28 October 2006

**Newsletter #25, Winter 2006**  
Copy Deadline: 10 November 2006  
Publication Date: 1 December 2006

**Newsletter #26, Spring 2007**  
Copy Deadline: 9 February 2007  
Publication Date: 2 March 2007

**The Life of Galileo**

Come to the theatre after the AGM  
We have tickets for the evening performance on Saturday 28 October of Bertold Brecht’s *The Life of Galileo*, at the National Theatre in London

Starring the Society’s President-Elect Simon Russell Beale, David Hare’s version of *The Life of Galileo* has received widespread critical acclaim.

“Galileo’s astonishing proof that the earth moves around the sun shatters a belief held sacred for two thousand years. Considered an enemy of humanity, he’s threatened with torture and faced with a terrible choice: integrity versus intellectual sell-out. Writing on the brink of World War II, Bertolt Brecht offers one of the greatest plays ever written about social responsibility and the conflict between reason and faith”.

Tickets are £10 each and may be obtained from our Chairman: Patric Dickinson, College of Arms, Queen Victoria Street, London, EC4V 4BT; email richmondherald@dial.pipex.com. Please make cheques payable to PL Dickinson (and not to the Society). Non-members will be welcome.

**Powell Birthday Lunch**

This year’s Powell birthday lunch will be held on Saturday 2 December at 1230hrs

As is becoming tradition we are going to an Italian restaurant which offers a variety of dishes which should suit all tastes.

This year we’re going again to Zia Teresa, 6 Hans Road, London, SW3 which is conveniently situated opposite the side door of Harrod’s (for Christmas shopping) and a short walk from the South Kensington museums (for those more culturally inclined).

The whole of Zia Teresa’s menu will be available – you order what you want; we settle the bill centrally; you pay the Hon. Secretary.

If you want to be there please contact the Hon. Secretary (address on page 2) so we can ensure we have a large enough table. Non-members will be welcome.

Why not join us for the usual convivial time – good food, good wine, good conversation?

**New Local Groups?**

The Society has an increasing number of members in the North of England (mostly Yorkshire and the Manchester/Liverpool conurbation) and in East Anglia. If you would be interested in organising the North of England Local Group or the East Anglia Local Group, then please get in touch with the Hon. Secretary.

**Future UK Events**

The following events are being planned for 2007 ...

**An Evening of Music from Dance**  
with Paul Guinery

**Visit to the Nottinghamshire village of Widmerpool**

Further details when available from the Hon. Secretary
Saturday 16 September 2006
East Coast USA Group Meeting
Venue: Silvermine Tavern, Norwalk, CT
Time: 1230 hrs
Details from Leatrice Fountain
(leatrice.fountain@gmail.com)

Saturday 28 October 2006
Anthony Powell Society AGM
Talk: Powell’s Americans
Wynter Room, Swedenborg Society,
20-21 Bloomsbury Way, London WC1
Time: 1400 hrs. Details centre spread

Saturday 28 October 2006
The Life of Galileo
National Theatre, South Bank, London
SE1
Time: 1930hrs. Details page 11

Saturday 11 November 2006
London Group Pub Meet
The Audley, Mount Street, London, W1
Time: 1230 to 1530 hrs
Regular quarterly meeting. Good beer,
good food, good company, good
conversation in a Victorian pub AP would
have known. Members & non-members
welcome; further details from Hon. Sec.

Saturday 2 December 2006
Powell Birthday Lunch
Zia Teresa, 6 Hans Road, London, SW3
Time: 1230hrs. Details page 11

Saturday 10 February 2007
London Group Pub Meet
Details as for 11 November

Saturday 8 September 2007
Fourth Biennial Conference
University of Bath
Details to follow

2007 Conference
The Fourth Biennial Anthony Powell
Conference is provisionally booked
for Saturday 8 September 2007 at
the University of Bath.
As we have not had anyone volunteer
to take on the role of Conference
Organiser the Executive Committee
have decided to cut our cloth according
to a different pattern, a pattern we can
manage from the cloth we have.
It has been decided that we will try
something different for the 2007
conference: a one-day symposium with
perhaps half a dozen speakers each of
whom will get a longer time in which
to speak and answer questions.
Although there was hot debate about
whether this will work for us, it does
work for many other societies and has
the merit of being something which
can be managed collectively by the
Executive.
Speakers have not yet been arranged,
but we hope to attract the usual
interesting guests. In addition we
would welcome paper or session
proposals from members, so if anyone
wishes to submit a suitable proposal
for a (probably 45 minute) session,
please contact the Hon. Secretary
without delay.
This leaves the Sunday of conference
weekend free. However we hope to be
able to offer some optional extras this
day for those wishing to stay over in
Bath: perhaps a coach trip, a walking
tour of Bath or Sunday lunch.

When half the world (including some of
its leaders) appeared to be away on holiday, it
was quite cheering that ten of us came to
the August pub meet at The Audley on the
afternoon of Saturday 12 August. We also
achieved a good mix of old hands and
gerger arrivals: David Butler, Derek Miles,
Victor Spouge and Keith and Noreen
Marshall were joined by Anita Blanchard,
Sir Robin Williams, Guy Robinson and
Graham & Dorothy Davie for food, drinks
and conversation on the usual wide range
of topics (Powell related and otherwise).
And of course, the fact that half the world
was away on holiday meant that we were
able to choose our seats, spread out in
comfort and be brought our food with even
more alacrity than usual.
We gave a considerable amount of time to
the discussion of ancestral history, one of
Powell’s major interests. A number of our
members have an interest in the subject,
and have put a considerable amount of
time and effort into tracing ancestors.
Some of us even follow AP in taking an
interest in everybody else’s family history
as well.
Another major theme was that of Society
elections past, present and future. We talked
extensively about a number of current
stage productions including Trevor Nunn’s
production of Tom Stoppard’s
Rock’n’Roll, and David Hare’s staging of
Bertolt Brecht’s The Life of Galileo at the
National Theatre (which stars our
President-Elect Simon Russell Beale in the
title role). See page 11 for details of the
Society’s outing to The Life of Galileo.

London & SE England Group August Pub Meet
By Noreen Marshall

Talk of Society elections led on to the
forthcoming AGM at the Swedenborg
Society and will be followed by Joanne
and Tony Edmonds’s talk Powell’s
Americans (see centre spread).

We debated the possibility of having a
more formal occasion, giving members the
chance to dress up to match. Some of us
remembered Lunch at the Ritz in 2001: a
wonderful occasion. But despite the
advantageous price Julian Allason
negotiated for us in that instance, the cost
of such events puts them beyond the reach
of many members. And not everybody
enjoys formality. It might be possible to
have a cocktail party at some point,
perhaps – particularly likely to appeal to
those who enjoy the more elegant episodes
in AP’s fiction. (Strangely how often these
turn out to have a disreputable or seedy
element, though). But what do you think?
Would you come? How much money is
too much?
We also talked of pubs (and their loos); the
novelist and playwright Patrick Hamilton
(1904-1962), perhaps now best known for
his 1930s novel 20,000 Streets Under the
Sky; Southbank, Southwark and
Shakespeare (and Beckett crept in there
too); AP’s early work; and music. Finally,
Graham and Victor made some instant
additions to their Powell collections from
Keith’s (private) stock of Powell books
available for purchase.
Performing Nothing
by Nicholas Birns

Both Henry Green (a pseudonym of Henry Yorke; I will refer to “Green” throughout) and Anthony Powell saw their centenaries observed last year. In both cases international conferences were held at prominent venues (the University of Warwick, the Wallace Collection). Yet the hundredth birthday parties of these two writers, who knew each other at the age of eleven and are still known as members of the same literary generation, did not, as far as I know, have a single speaker in common. Powell’s constituency and Henry Green’s seem widely separated. It is telling that the writers who speak well of Green, such as Eudora Welty or John Updike, do not seem to have much time for Powell, while, equally, one cannot imagine Ian Rankin or Sarah Waters demonstrating any special interest in Green.

So the performance of the dramatic adaptation of Nothing at the 59 E 59th St Theater as part of the “Brits Off Broadway” festival in June 2006 was an interesting opportunity for a group of Powell fans – including myself, my mother (Margaret Boe Birns), Jonathan Koooperstein, Jeanne Reed, and Ed Bock – to gauge the similarities and differences between the two contemporaries. The play, originally staged at the Glasgow Citizens’ Theatre, was adapted by Andrea Hart. Nothing makes a natural enough transition to the stage, since the novel itself is almost entirely in dialogue. Green by this time had committed to dialogue as his main medium of creative expression, and, in his radio talk “Communication Without Speech”, had advocated the nuances and inferences latent in dialogue as providing the richest sense of lived experience available in fiction. Powell might have observed that his own trajectory was the opposite, from the dialogue-laden prewar novels to the far more discursive Dance. Powell also might have suggested that Ivy Compton-Burnett is not given sufficient credit as a predecessor in critical discussion of Green’s experimental use of dialogue.

Nothing was published in 1950, at the height of the attempt to “launch” Green in the US. Interestingly, Powell was never launched over here in the same way; he received good reviews; people enjoyed his works; but there was never a “campaign” to “import” Powell on the part of publisher Powell’s, inappropriately, less so. But Treglown’s was given much more push by the mainstream media. Nothing’s publication in 1950 came on the heels of laudatory pieces such as Philip Toynbee’s in a 1949 Partisan Review; in which, disconcertingly to present-day ears, he described Green, along with most modernist writers, as a “Terrorist” author. This was a portent, as Green’s novels were considered under the aegis of Modernism; Powell’s, inappropriately, less so. But despite Green’s relative celebrity in the US, Nothing is customarily considered a slight work, and Green’s last two novels, according to Updike (writing very recently about Green, in the unexpected context of Edward Said and “late style”, in the 7 August 2006, issue of The New Yorker), were partially “clouded by an air of corruption and defeat” and were the product of Green letting his “instincts be seduced” by “midlife affairs with younger women”.

The plot of Nothing centers on John Pomfret and Jane Wetherby, two middle-age people who once had an affair, but had ended up married to other people. Now, their two children, Philip Wetherby and Mary Pomfret, are engaged. Philip, though, is troubled by the sense that John may be his father as well as Mary’s and that he is on the verge of committing incest. There are also Liz and Richard, alternative romantic possibilities for John and Mary – they are the outsider characters, jettisoned by the main plot, who serve as comic relief and who end up with each other in a satisfying gesture of comic resolution. The pivot of the play is the reversal of destinies; the older couple end up together, the younger one separated. Some critics, such as the late John Russell, saw the older couple as blocking figures, undermining the emergence of the younger generation. In strict mechanical terms, this is true enough, but it ignores Green’s unusual positioning of the older generation, the former “Bright Young Things” now in middle age, as the lighter, more pleasure-seeking generation, and the younger generation as more earnest and pragmatic.

This differentiation, reversing the traditional values associated with the old and the young may be seen as one of the first instances of the idea of the “Young Fogey” in British culture. It also unsettles any conventional idea of the older couple as blocking the younger one as it seeks its future. The role the past relationship of John and Jane plays in the awareness of Philip and Mary as they are courting is an enigmatic one. Is the younger couple seeking simply to repair the mistakes of the older one, to make up for the lost time in other people’s lives, not their own? Perhaps the denouement liberates Philip and Mary to go their own ways, free from a fettered and ingrown past? In that way, the suggestion of incest is symbolically, if not literally, true, and it is a situation the younger couple are well out of.

Jane also has a younger daughter, Penelope, who is still a child. Penelope as a strand in the plot dynamics is well evoked by the play; she is in the book as well but Hart’s dramatic adaptation foregrounds her to such an extent as to be almost interpretative in so doing. Penelope never appears on stage, but she adds an intriguing extra element to the imagined tableau, especially as she represents a still-younger generation, the generation, in Powellian terms, of the Quiggin twins and Fiona Cutts, not of X Trapnel and Polly Duport.

The above reference to Dance characters also shows the very different generational dynamics in Powell. It is the bohemian Trapnel, not the staid Philip and Mary, who represents the generation born in the 1920s. Part of this might be attributable to Green’s son, Sebastian Yorke, having been born in 1934, six years older than Powell’s eldest son, Tristram, continuing a pattern that also saw Green marry and, indeed, publish fiction and win acclaim earlier. It also, though, speaks to Powell and Green inhabiting different worlds by this point. Green’s perspective on the younger characters is prescient, in a way, as it anticipates the greater ‘seriousness’ brought into British literature by the Angry Young Men of the 1950s.

Nothing was snappily staged, with a rather ascetic set that doubled as restaurant and various domestic spaces, and which kept the attention of the audience seated in rows above the stage in a small but...
comfortable theater. Derwent Watson is broadly comic as Richard but the two male leads, Simon Dutton as John and Pete Ashmore as Philip, both showed themselves capable of projecting an underlying seriousness and melancholy. Dutton, in particular, incarnated a variety of moods while still keeping his portrayal of the role consistent – crucial because, in this play, it is what is behind the talk rather than the talk itself that defines the character. Sophie Ward was pleasantly attractive as Jane, while Candida Benson displayed an aura of winsome vulnerability as Mary. Hart, as Liz, and Tristram Wymark, as a waiter whose presence airs out the potentially claustrophobic atmosphere of the three couples, were both entertaining.

The play ends, as does the book, with the word “nothing.” In the context of John and Jane’s personal happiness, this seems more bitter than the talk itself that defines the character. Sophie Ward was pleasantly attractive as Jane, while Candida Benson displayed an aura of winsome vulnerability as Mary. Hart, as Liz, and Tristram Wymark, as a waiter whose presence airs out the potentially claustrophobic atmosphere of the three couples, were both entertaining.

All five of us enjoyed the play and shared a pre-theater meal at Bistro 60 (representative main courses: trout amandine and cheese ravioli; I lack the memory for wine consumed that Powell showed in his Journals), which was free of the logistical and gastronomic problems that had plagued previous meetings. Now if only the production of The Garden God staged at the College of Arms last December could come over to New York.

Despite the success of the film adaptations of Graham Greene’s work, drama was not a strength of the Brideshead generation (which, paradoxically, is known by this phrase only because of the television dramatization of Evelyn Waugh’s novel). Nothing, in both novel and play form, is similar to Powell’s plays. It shares the potential incest theme (and its inevitable reminiscence of Greek drama) with The Rest I’ll Whistle, the idea of monitoring parents inhibiting younger people’s romance with The Garden God. Powell’s plays, I believe, have, as their special theme, a belief in the need for people to work things out “for themselves”, as the “girls” do in Delavacquerie’s anecdote in Hearing Secret Harmonies. There is a sense both of resolution and freedom at the end of both plays – they are comedies, but without traditional ‘comic endings’ of repair and recuperation. The dramatization of Nothing also displayed just these qualities, and did so in provocative, entertaining, and winning fashion. As far apart as Powell and Green had grown personally in the 1950s and 1960s, and as divergent as their styles had become, their work still exhibited shared attributes and looked at human experience in analogous ways.

Contributions to the Newsletter are always welcome and should be sent to:
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From the APLIST
Recent Discussions on the Society’s Email Discussion Group

From Vincent Domeraski
We all know that Powell began a novel that would end twenty-some years into his future. My point is that satisfactorily tying up loose ends, given the huge cast of characters, their stories and the interest, if not always affection, that we had invested in them, within a credible plot had to be daunting. While I certainly enjoyed it, I find the last volume [Hearing Secret Harmonies] to be my least favourite. Scorp is the least believable character for me. Though, as I said, a matter primarily of taste. I think those positions can be defended in terms of composition and character development. I don’t think that anything special happened in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact it was a dull time. Boomers don’t know that.

From Doug Russell
I saw nothing wrong with the last three volumes of Dance and I find Scorp very plausible whether today or back in the 1970s. I have known/do know people like Scorp, Erdleigh and Trelawney. But then, I find all of the dramatis personae plausible in the series. I also find Eddy and Patsy from Ab Fab realistic.

Sadly though, for many people, it [the 1960s and 1970s] is looked upon as a time when they, as people not individuals, were “defined”. And they were, just not in the way they think they were. And used. It is the difference between reality and perceived reality. In the case of the protest years, the perception matters more than the reality. The Ten Years After song “I’d love to change the world” sort of sums it up for me: “I’d love to change the world, but I don’t know what to do, so I’ll leave it up to you…” Ill-conceived Idealism, wrapped in Ignorance and served on a bed of Apathy.

However, just as with God, there are certain strata of society that are equally uncomfortable with the supernatural or occult. Mainly because I think they fear by acknowledging either entity it somehow diminishes their (rather tenuous) position at the top of the supposed intellectual pecking order.

I agree with Shakespeare, there are far, far greater things in heaven and earth … For all his non-croyant-ness, I think Powell did understand the power and presence of evil and menace, manipulation and avarice. And the series is stronger for it.

From Nick Hay
I have been following this discussion with some interest as I am not one of those who finds the last novels represent a falling-off. I would not say they are favourites but they certainly represent a vital part of the cycle.

Can I just throw in a, probably ignorant, suggestion. If we accept Nick Jenkins as a credible character – a character apart from Powell – then surely his growing distance from and, indeed perhaps reduced sharpness of perception of, contemporary events are a necessary part of the character and the fiction. No-one seems to question his youthful innocence and naivety in A Question of Upbringin and A Buyer’s Market. Yet there seems to be a problem with his detachment in Hearing Secret Harmonies. It is Nick who sees and finds correspondences from his own past; who views the events of the present through his...
personal past. Surely the whole, no sorry a part, of the point about Widmerpool and Murtlock, is that Widmerpool has not in this sense “grown-up”. He is incapable of detachment. He is still dedicated to the pursuit of power without the faculties for success (whether he ever had these is a different matter). The strength of detachment is that it enables one to remain comparatively unmoved, to gain perspective. But the cost is that one becomes an outsider. It is bleak, somewhat wintry, the season we have reached. It is more intellectual ("of the will") I think the original post suggested, less emotional; it is part of Nick’s journey.

I am quite prepared for this speculation to be shot down but offer it as a case for the defence however weak.

From Keith Marshall
In response we’ve had many conversations here and elsewhere about the validity of Powell’s perception of the 1960s and 1970s. I am one of those who find the final trilogy the weakest of the four, and Hearing Secret Harmonies the weakest book overall. This is largely because Powell does not paint the 1960s and 1970s as I experienced them (as a teenager and a student). But why should Powell’s view coincide with mine? At the time when Hearing Secret Harmonies was set I was around 19-20, whereas Powell was more like 65. So Powell and I are bound to have very different views on and perceptions of that time, even if our experiences were the same (which they weren’t). Just because Hearing Secret Harmonies is weak for me, doesn’t mean it is weak for everyone or any less valid. And Jenkins’s (and Powell’s) detachment is a consistent theme throughout the 12 volumes, just as is Widmerpool’s power craze. The former has, as Nick Hay observes, developed; the latter hasn’t. Personally I don’t find the Widmerpool of Hearing Secret Harmonies (and maybe also Temporary Kings) as credible, although I’m sure there were enough people around in late-1960s/early-1970s who did/would have acted as Widmerpool did. In this instance I feel the “fault” (if such it be) lies with the reader and not the author. After all as Trapnel observes (in paraphrase): a novel is the complete truth, the author tells us everything there is to know.

From Adam
I think the real point about Widmerpool is that he thinks that he is in control but never is. Also, as is mentioned rather frequently in the last novels (and probably before, I don’t remember), magic is ultimately an attempt to gain control over all of life by harnessing some higher power. This is a consistent aspect of Widmerpool throughout his career. He grovels in front of rugby and cricket players in school, in front of the monarchy, in front of the military, in front of Uncle Joe Stalin and the communist party, and ultimately, in front of Scorpion Murtlock, all with the aim of gaining power and influence for himself. Powell isn’t inconsistent, he just doubts that the free and happy hippies were all that free and happy.

I might mention that while some people who took prominent roles in flaky hippy movements lost their brains and ended up on the streets, a good many made millions and are now extremely respectable people. Recently an artist and professor at Sussex University in 1968 he winked at such high jinks as faculty absent demonstrating in Grosvenor Square and a student “occupation” of the library, thereby rendering work impossible for the majority of students, a number of whose university careers were wrecked in consequence. I wonder if Powell might not have had Briggs in mind, although the latter was far from alone in such connivance.

From John O’Brien
“Great one for the punishments, Lord Widmerpool,” someone remarks about Ken’s enthusiasm for Murtlock’s enforced cross country runs. That part at least has the ring of truth given Widmerpool’s personality.

From Adam
To express one more point, probably badly, if Widmerpool had actually seen “Uncle Joe” gain domination over Western Europe, he would almost certainly have been purged – possibly by being tortured and executed. Even without the abdication, he would only have been, at best, a minor hanger-on of the King. Most of his causes were to some degree self-destructive.

From David Hallett
I’m not sure (even after all this time) how I feel about Murtlock, though I have no trouble accepting Widmerpool falling under his influence. As Adam suggested, Powell makes fairly clear in Hearing Secret Harmonies that Widmerpool at first thinks the cult will be a means to more power but, in Murtlock, meets one with a stronger will.

I’m not sure what this says about me (nor how many listers will stop speaking to me when I say it!) but I don’t find Gwinnett an unbelievable character at all. His obsessive personality is pretty much my own (though we obsess over different specific things!).

Re Pamela’s demise, I’m exploring her character through Ariosto and am thinking at the moment that her death might seem forced to a naturalistically-inclined audience (ah, the heresy of naturalism!), but may be entirely in harmony with her antecedents in medieval and early Renaissance romance poetry.

I also liked Keith’s recollection of Trapnel’s take on the issue: of course it all happened this way and is utterly plausible because Powell said so.

From James
I think there may be a trans-Atlantic aspect to reactions to Gwinnett. Jenkins says that the first thing you noticed about Russell was his shoes. Speaking as an American child of the sixties, even in that era I would have noted the pencil moustache and the blue eyeglasses first.

But the Elizabethan Pamela is a very interesting question. Did she show any signs of it before meeting Gwinnett? Or was it meeting him and encountering his preoccupations that showed her a coherent way to see herself?
Some Poets, Artists and ‘A Reference for I was shocked by Mike Jay’s review of From Simon Barnes Borges, Hesse, Dostoyevsky, Homer, and many sleeping hours. Among the writers I spent time with were Flaubert, and I was, and remain, interested in literature, to the extent of having written fifteen books, anyway. In fact, in the years I was at Bristol University, literature filled most waking and many sleeping hours. Among the writers I spent time with were Flaubert, Borges, Hesse, Dostoyevsky, Homer, Basho, DT Suzuki, Dante, Vonnegut, Heller, Dylan. None of these was on the English Language and Literature syllabus: but I was more interested in literature than in marks. I wrote, all the time, but seldom essays. I was more interested in trying to make, rather than analyse literature. What Sillery says of the first year is true of the entire undergraduate experience: it is “a great period of discovery – and self-discovery too. What do you say, Vaalkiipa?” An undergraduate can, in the space of a two or three weeks, discover a new poet, a new world view, a new morality, a new way of writing, a lifelong friend and a life-changing lover. While Widmerpool, had he gone to university, would have strained and sweated for a good second, some us take thirds. The only degree worth getting is a first or a third. Admittedly, I have never heard this view echoed by someone with a first. PS. The parrot called Widmerpool should of course be taught to say “Oui, Widmerpool.”

A friend bought me the first three of this sequence [Dance] for my birthday one year. I was sceptical at first, but was soon won over by some of the most magical prose in the English language. Powell made me care about these old Etonians and titled ladies, this crew of bohemians, charlatans, whingers, malcontents and survivors. He created some of the most complex villains in all literature, and transports the reader to a fully realized world – a world I revisit whenever I can.

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