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Different Speeds, Same Furies

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Anthony Powell: Dancing to the Music of Time by Hilary Spurling
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Are there any appropriate dimensions to literary biography as a form? The stature of a writer, and length of life, might be expected to provide some co-ordinates. Yet even among modern masters there is little consistency. James died in his early seventies, Musil in his early sixties: Leon Edel and Karl Corino awarded them each two thousand pages. Kafka, who barely reached the age of forty, yielded only five hundred fewer from Reiner Stach. Froust, expiring at 51, got just under a thousand apiece from Jean-Yves Tadié and William Carter; Joyce, at 59, eight hundred from Richard Ellmann. Moving down the scale to medium or lightweights, there is little reduction in size. If we confine ourselves to Britain, Martin Stannard produced a thousand pages on Evelyn Waugh, who died when he was 62; Graham Greene, who survived him by a quarter of a century, received two thousand from Norman Sherry. These are huge tomes. Even such a minuscule figure as Kingsley Amis has been encased in an obese 995 pages from Zachary Leader.

Hilary Spurling’s Life of Anthony Powell breaks with this pattern. The longest-lived of all significant novelists of the last century, his 94 years are covered in fewer than 450 pages of text. In part, that’s because she confines the final quarter of his life to the briefest of postscripts. Yet his memoirs, which run to nearly double the length of her biography, stop at much the same cut-off point. Did they cover so much ground that little was to be gained by treading it again? By no means. In the four volumes of To Keep the Ball Rolling, scintillating portraits of his contemporaries screen notable discretion about himself. Nor has Spurling’s own practice as a biographer in the past been so succinct. Her double-decker biographies of Compton-Burnett and Matisse, each of them outstanding, are considerably longer than her Life of Powell. Would the difference be due to her relationship with the subject, a close friend whom for many years she knew and admired – Christopher Sykes on Waugh is the nearest parallel? In such cases, affection can shape the compass of a biography, personal knowledge lighting up but also limiting what can be said. Perhaps there are traces of that here; but, on the whole, in the warmth and grace of Spurling’s account there is a natural tact but little sign of inhibition. Perhaps simple consideration of sales was a factor: over a certain length, publishers rarely break even. Aesthetically speaking, at all events, the economy of her study is not out of keeping with its subject: Powell, a disciplined writer with a laconic streak of his own, would have appreciated it.

What does Spurling add to the story outlined in Powell’s memoirs and projected in his fiction: military father, excruciating prep school; happiness at Eton, depression at Oxford; job in publishing, deadpan early novels, marriage into the Pakenhams; war service in Northern Ireland and Allied Liaison; postwar triumph with A Dance to the Music of Time? The most striking revelations come where he said least, of his
childhood and his loves. The finest thing in Spurling’s book is her delicate portrait of the extraordinary union that produced Powell and shaped his infancy. Though both parents came from gentry families, their marriage defied convention, since his mother was 15 years older than his father, who wed at the age of 22 – an age gap frowned on enough in civilian life, but virtually unheard of in the army. Breaking a still greater taboo, before they were married she travelled on her own to South Africa to join him during his service in the Boer War. Sadly, however, the price of such daring was thereafter, in Spurling’s surmise, her all but complete withdrawal from society out of timidity at being taken for a cradle-snatcher, which Powell’s father – her opposite in temperament – did little to offset, given his own volcanic temper with the world at large. Within the nuclear cell, the marriage itself was a success, though the social isolation of the family was compounded by the uprooted, nomadic character of army life. As to its consequences for the future author, Spurling opens her book: ‘Small, inquisitive and solitary, the only child of an only son, growing up in rented lodgings or hotel rooms, constantly on the move as a boy, Anthony Powell needed an energetic imagination to people a sadly underpopulated world from a child’s point of view.’

Such, at the outset, was his external environment. Within the family, the extreme contrast between his parents – his father ‘a champion grudge-bearer, liable to resort at the smallest real or imagined slight in public or private to hysterical rage’, his ‘calm, generous and open’ mother ‘a born peacemaker’ – left a two-fold mark on him: on the one hand, acquiring as a baby ‘the rock-bottom security that came from being unconditionally loved by his mother’, who bore him when she was 38; on the other, learning as a boy from the spectacle of his father the need for ‘strategies of discipline and restraint’. Arrival at the age of 13 at Eton, a year after the Great War had come an end, brought him in Spurling’s view the underlying stability and continuity that came from a sense he had never known before of belonging to a community that accepted him, the nearest thing to a place where he felt at home. The school became from now on a kind of virtual extended family whose members – however rebarbative, reluctant or remote – stood in all his life for the actual relatives he hadn’t got.

Fortunate in finding himself in a house ‘with a poor reputation and no standards to keep up’, presided over by an easy-going master, he flourished as a member of the school’s Arts Society, did well academically, and emerged more polished and confident socially.

Oxford was an abrupt reversal: depressed and inchoate, he got little out of the university, and left with a poor degree. Remarking that his subsequent accounts of his time there were ‘both vague and characteristically harsh’, Spurling conjectures that with ingenuous good looks, he may have suffered from unwanted advances in a setting where homosexuality was not unusual. Certainly his main later complaint was the impossibility of any relation with girls, under vigilant bar by the authorities. There was also his lack of money for the lavish living affected by smart undergraduates, and his relative modesty of background – an absence of snobbish connections Spurling takes to have left him lonely and disoriented, his social life ‘arid, sometimes non-existent’ in London on going down.

Reacting against standard images of Powell as the consummate denizen of an aristocratic beau monde, more than one reviewer of Spurling has bent the stick in the opposite direction, depicting him as by her account an outsider who eventually made his way, through literary achievement and likeability, from social disadvantage to exalted company. This notion is only a little more accurate than the received version. One third of the boys in Powell’s house at Eton came from titled families; at Oxford he was a member of the Hypocrites Club, haunt of iconoclast high-rollers; in London, he was shoehorned by a former staff captain of his father’s, without even applying for it, into a job with a publisher with authors like James, Strindberg, Ford and Belloc historically on its list. As Michael Barber, an earlier biographer of Powell, without access to his archives, remarked, it was a period where a little privilege went a long way. There is no reason to doubt that at least in his first year in the capital, Powell felt at sea in London, of limited means, liable to be snubbed or dropped. Flexible though each may have been, there were different levels in the upper social hierarchy of the time. Still, a certain worldly success came early. Powell reached London when he was 21. At 25 he had published his first novel, Afternoon Men, well received by critics across the board, and sufficiently popular with readers for a fan letter to yield him a
fashionable mistress in Chelsea, after an earlier affair with Nina Hamnett, model for Modigliani and his route into bohemia.

Powell was reticent about these matters in his memoirs, leaving readers to deduce the possible significance or otherwise of the women featuring in them prior to his marriage in 1934. Spurling offers a sequence of vivid silhouettes, panels in a period fresco, of what he omitted: failures with the débutante Adelaide Biddulph and the model Enid Firminger; passages with Nina Hamnett and Dorothy Varda, another model, both of them self-destructive; a fling with the artist Juliet O’Rourke, wife of a modernist architect; a tumble in the afternoon with the Irish writer Mary Manning; a ‘great passion’ for Marion Coates, wife of another architect, before his wedding to Violet Pakenham, sixth daughter of a Longford earl. All these set in an interwar landscape where bohemia and la bonne société – hostesses, adventurers, artists, intellectuals – overlapped as in the first half of A Dance to the Music of Time. Marriage extended rather than altered this, Powell acquiring many an in-law from an Anglo-Irish background to which he was allergic, while his wife ‘slipped effortlessly’ into ‘a shabby, rootless urban world unlike any she had known before’. Spurling’s portrait of Violet Powell – another part of his life, as he often said, that he could never describe – is the second great virtue of her book. Written with an underlying entre femmes warmth and understanding, its stress falls on ‘her extraordinary openness to experience, her voracious hunger for life and the energy she put into it’. High-spirited and quick-witted, becoming in due course a fluent writer herself, she proved a temperamental and intellectual partner rare in that generation, whose impact on Powell’s postwar fiction was no small one: in their son Tristram’s words, her memory ‘was, as it were, the right arm of my father’s imagination’.

With the onset of the Second World War, A Dance becomes more closely autobiographical, his memoirs moving in parallel, and once the novel sequence itself started to be published, at the turn of the 1950s, it naturally dominated his life. Across this stretch of time, there is – with one exception – less that is new in Spurling’s narrative, which contracts accordingly: three-quarters of it covering the first 45 years of his life, a quarter the subsequent 25. She is also the author of a comprehensive handbook to the series, published shortly after it was completed, and her commentary on it here is always to the point, if tilted towards identification of characters with real persons, a regular tendency in critics whose oversimplifications Powell himself often warned against, if occasionally also allowed. Spurling’s principal trophy is pinning the original of his most celebrated creation, Widmerpool, on the colonel who hired and fired him in the wartime Cabinet Office, Denis Capel-Dunn, an ‘undistinguished’ lawyer in civil life who perished on a flight back from the founding conference of the UN in San Francisco, to no great distress on Powell’s part. With the completion of Hearing Secret Harmonies, the last volume of A Dance, Spurling effectively brings her biography to a close. Its brief postscript describes her friendship with him, his subsequent brace of novels, the honours and travails of old age, his final infirmity. Though tight-lipped, it makes a moving conclusion.

Yet there is undeniably an element of paradox in its upshot. What more sense do we gain of Powell himself as a person, once launched on adult life? Spurling observes of the biography he produced after the war, John Aubrey and His Friends, that ‘for all the author’s evident respect and affection, its subject never comes to life as Aubrey makes his own subjects do.’ How far can the same be said of her account of him? Good-natured, amusing, affable, to many he also seemed inscrutable. ‘Nobody could get the wrong impression of you,’ a woman friend once told him, ‘because you don’t give them anything to go on.’ To interviewers he would deflect questions about himself with the disarming claim: ‘I never feel strongly myself what my own character is like.’ ‘I have absolutely no picture of myself. Never have had.’ Spurling knew him well, but he was in his sixties by the time she met him, when such defences were long in place. By the time she came to write his biography, he had outlived every one of his contemporaries who might have had unexpected perceptions or memories of him: the lack of third-party insight or witness in the story is striking. There was nothing to be done about that.

Still, signs of considerable inner turbulence beneath the unruffled surface Powell presented to the world were there. He suffered from nearly permanent insomnia (‘In my early days I never slept a wink’), late on installing a camp bed by his desk so as not to keep his wife awake too. Prey not only to bouts of paralysing accidie, ‘the feeling that nothing’s worth doing’, but to spells of black depression – after an unsuccessful sortie
to Hollywood in 1937, and in still more acute form, on returning to civilian life again after the war, when ‘every morning he wished he were dead’ – in his memoirs he implied a rather different explanation for having nothing to say when asked about his character, observing that ‘not everyone can stand the strain of gazing down too long into the personal crater, with its scene of Hieronymus Bosch activities taking place in the depths.’ Spurling, tacitly treating his depressions as discrete episodes, without much bearing on what he may have been like at some deeper level, does not recall this graphic image. Reluctance to venture much psychological surmise after Powell landed in London is visible in other ways. Reporting his claim never to have raised his voice again after leaving Eton, she later shows he was not so imperturbable: ‘rage and frustration’ at the tedium and inanity of life in the army ‘drove him to the kind of explosion he had witnessed as a child from his father’; he ‘lost control’ after Graham Greene’s obstruction of his book on Aubrey; he was hopelessly drunk with ‘unguarded anger, bitterness and shock’ on dismissal as literary editor at Punch; he severed his long-standing ties with the Daily Telegraph in ‘grief and rage’ at infantile barbs from the junior Waugh. Some of the materials for a more complex, in all probability no less sympathetic, portrait of Powell lie plain in the pages of this biography. But by choice, certainly not inability, they are denied synthesis.

The one arresting novelty in the latter half of Spurling’s narrative is that Violet Powell had an affair during the war with someone she described to Sonia Orwell as the love of her life, without identifying the lover. Spurling writes with typical understanding of the conditions making for such an affair, and attributes Powell’s postwar depression to his discovery of it. In the most startling single passage of her book, she argues that the famous scene in which Powell’s narrator, Nick Jenkins, takes Jean Templer in his arms – in the back of a car, speeding through night and snow along the Great West Road, past the neon sign where a bathing belle ‘dives eternally through the petrol-tainted air’: the opening embrace of the principal romance of the series – mingles the lightning suddenness of Powell’s courtship of Violet with the beauty and marital circumstances of her predecessor Marion Coates, on whom Jean was modelled, transferring the pain of Violet’s infidelity to the successive deceptions of Jean.

This is an ingenious reconstruction, which seems to have the authority of Violet behind it. But if it is accurate, it only shows how the extraordinary power of a creative imagination transformed particles of experience into the universe of his fiction, since there is not the least hint of the enigmatic sexual waywardness of Jean in anything represented by Spurling of either woman in real life. This is not to say there is no mystery in Powell’s affair with Marion Coates, of whose emotional and sensual straightforwardness Spurling paints an attractive picture. But it lies elsewhere. What is truly strange about the connection is the fact, which Spurling reports without any expression of surprise, that Marion, born in China and schooled in England, ‘gentle, self-contained and demure with a softness and sweetness of manner that hid a cool analytical brain and a streak of unexpected toughness’, was a lifelong communist, whose intellectual mentor was J.D. Bernal. Given his own political outlook, a more unlikely figure for Powell to fall passionately in love with is difficult to imagine.

Did he ever stray after marriage, as his wife once did? If so, his discretion has never been breached. Glamorous photographs to be found in this biography and his memoirs – of Miranda Christen, adventuress installed by Powell in Islington as stenographer for Orwell, or Georgina Ward, actress in a belated stage version of his prewar novel Afternoon Men – tell no tales. His friend Alan Ross, editor of the London Magazine, thought that surrounded by promiscuous friends, he may have simply found a vicarious pleasure, productive for his fiction, in observing them, while conducting his own marital life with the meticulous sexual correctness Jenkins whimsically fancies of the usurper Gyges in Temporary Kings. That is quite possible. Spurling says nothing either way. A protective motive is more or less implicit at the end of her book, but it is directed elsewhere. Though herself not especially distant from them, she has reasons for not wanting to dwell on Powell’s politics, which play less of a role in her story than in either his life or his art. Her concern is for his contemporary reputation, in her view diminished by a disobliging myth of them.

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There is no doubt that, as Isabelle Joyau, a French critic, has put it, the question of literary status is unusually acute in the case of Powell. It is difficult to think of another
writer where opinions diverge so widely. Readers of his work, the American scholar Nicholas Birns observes, tend to be either addicts or indifferent, to love or to hate it: ‘There is not the dutiful normative respect coupled with limited concrete enthusiasm garnered by so many canonical modern writers.’ The reasons for that, however, have in the first instance little to do with its political dimensions, significant though these certainly are. They relate to the nature of his project as a whole. In scale and design, the architecture of A Dance to the Music of Time is unique in Western literature. Scale: the novel covers a period of more than half a century, from 1914 to 1971. Design: it forms a sequence of 12 self-standing but completely interconnected works. Why is this combination unique? Balzac’s Comédie humaine, covering the history of society from the Revolution to the last years of the July Monarchy, is comparable in span. But its 91 volumes form no single narrative: they are separate fictions, in which characters may reappear a few times, but the stories are essentially disconnected, at best unified ex post facto by the more or less arbitrary categories of the creator’s ‘system’. The twenty volumes of Zola’s Rougon-Macquart cycle start with a prelude in the Ancien Régime, but as their subtitle, ‘The Natural and Social History of a Family under the Second Empire’, indicates, 18 of the novels are set in the two decades of Louis Napoleon’s rule, integrated only by a doctrine extraneous to them, ostensibly obeying a biological determinism. In Spain, Galdós produced 46 Episodios Nacionales, from the Battle of Trafalgar to the fall of the First Republic, but these are historical novels in the strict sense, comprising five distinct series, each with a new hero, and each recounting major political conflicts through the adventures of an individual.

The more relevant comparison, it is sometimes felt, is between Powell and Proust. There are good reasons for this. In the titles of the two novels, A la recherche du temps perdu and A Dance to the Music of Time, the dominant term is the same. Their length is very similar: 1,240,000 words in Proust, 1,130,000 in Powell. Bearing in mind that French is syntactically more prolix than English – translations of the latter into the former typically increase in size by some 15 per cent – the longer work may actually be Powell’s. In both, a unitary overall narrative encompasses successive distinct volumes. The social settings and occasions of each have much in common, aristocrats and artists, dinners and parties featuring prominently in both. The predominant focus of each is on sexual relations. Both are delivered in a high style. Both are inlaid with literary, painterly and other aesthetic references. Both are tours de force in comedy.

How far in any of these aspects was Powell, two generations younger, directly indebted to his predecessor? In his many considerations of other writers – three volumes covering English, European and American literature – none figures so frequently as Proust, a revelation to him already at Oxford. There is no question that A la recherche was one of the preconditions of A Dance, which could not have been written without the formal breakthrough it represented. But Lermontov and Fitzgerald were equally, in certain respects perhaps more, important as inspirations. Powell was no one’s epigone. When he is set beside Proust, it is not the connections between them, but the disparities in reception that are most significant. The literature on Proust is an ocean, at the latest count more than three thousand titles. On Powell, fewer than a dozen: seven studies from America, one each from France, Japan, Switzerland – and one from Britain. Figures like these have no conceivable relation to respective achievement. They call for other kinds of explanation.

Two, of course, come readily to mind. Proust transformed the parameters of the novel as a genre, in a way that only Joyce matched. That accords him a place of his own in its
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history. Then there is the fact, now a thing of the past, but central for the better part of a century, of French predominance in the world republic of letters. Neither of these tells us much, however, about the specific literary qualities of A la recherche. There is a sense, indeed, in which both have tended to obscure them. In the huge modern literature on Proust, it is noticeable how little of it is actual criticism, in any traditional meaning of the term, as distinct from documentation or devotion. That this has been a general drift across the discipline, Joseph North has argued in his recent Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History with good reason. A fortiori in the case of such an eminence as Proust. In the academy, criticism as once understood is, on the whole, at a discount. Comparison tends to fall with it. Not just as suspect for other reasons – de gustibus – but because it is inherent in judgment of any kind, which always implies a distinction or opposition within a commensurable set of values.

Such preventions are superstitions. Without critical comparison, reading is intellectually and aesthetically blind. Where two writers are at once as similar and dissimilar as Proust and Powell, they invite interrelated judgments. A starting point, as good as any, is offered by background. The contiguity in the ambience of their novels, appreciable but far from complete, was not a product of common origins. Powell’s family were not particularly well off, but belonged to what historically was regarded as the nobilitas minor – rural gentry without titles. Proust came from an extremely rich bourgeois household in Paris, closely connected to the highest circles of power in the Third Republic. His maternal grandmother was a niece of Adolphe Crémieux, author of a famous decree according French citizenship to the Jews of Algeria during the Second Empire, and after its fall minister of justice in the republican government of national defence of 1871. His father was a friend of Félix Faure, president of the Third Republic in the last years of the 19th century, who expired in one of its most famous scandals, in the course – his pompe funèbre, as it was widely dubbed – of fellation by his mistress. The foreign minister Gabriel Hanotaux, champion of colonial expansion in Africa, was a guest at his dinner table. This was a republican elite of distinctly roturier origins: Faure had been a tanner, Hanotaux’s father was a provincial lawyer. When Proust’s mother followed his father to the grave, he inherited at the age of 34 a fortune of about $5 million. He never earned a centime or had to do a day’s work in his life. If Powell was in one writer’s words ‘liminal’ to a socially fashionable world, it was a boundary he would cross quite easily, without being overly impressed by the other side. Proust arrived much earlier in smart society, from the age of 17 dandled for his good looks and wit in aristocratic salons. Dazzled by the ci-devant world of a class which, cut off – unlike its counterparts in England, Germany, Austria or Russia – from power, compensated for political impotence with extravagant social pretensions and mannerisms, Proust settled in to a lifelong frequentation of it, if modulated over time by illness and reclusion.

Out of his exceptional gifts and this crucible came the revolutionary achievement of A la recherche as a novel. Technically speaking, that lay in its combination of two attributes, each without precedent: monumentality of narrative scale and intensity of elaborate introspection – a fictional universe teeming with characters, steeped in an unremitting interiority, made one in an intricate poetry of complex syntax and imagery. Thematically speaking, too, this was the first sustained representation of same-sex attributes, each without precedent: monumentality of narrative scale and intensity of elaborate introspection – a fictional universe teeming with characters, steeped in an unremitting interiority, made one in an intricate poetry of complex syntax and imagery. Moving fluently across comic and tragic registers, the grandeur of A la recherche was immediately recognised by contemporaries: ‘one of the great minds and imaginations of our day’, Edmund Wilson wrote in the 1920s, ‘absolutely comparable’ to ‘the Nietzsches, the Tolstoys, the Wagners and the Ibsens of a previous generation’.

All literary magnitudes are finite. In the case of great writers, it is understandable that their vices should attract so much less attention, not infrequently to vanishing point, than their virtues; but not defensible. For all its gifts, Proust’s work has conspicuous shortcomings, regularly ignored in the cult of it. Time – the grandiloquent leitmotif of the novel – is handled erratically at the episodic level of the narrative, in ways that cannot be explained by the vagaries of the narrator’s memory. Proust, who rarely dated his letters, blurred temporality by avoidance of any specifications of age, and frequent resort to the iterative form of the past imperfect (‘Aunt Léonie would ... ’), but lapses of control are obvious enough. Odette’s visit as a courtesan to Uncle Adolphe when the narrator is plainly older than when she figures for him as Swann’s wife; references to historical events impossible at the time of fictional episodes – Edward VII’s state visit to Paris (1903), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), the death of the Swedish king Oscar
II (1907), all at an early stage of talk about the Dreyfus Affair (1898) etc: the external
and internal chronologies of the novel do not fit. More significant is the stasis of the
society depicted in the arc of the narrative as a whole. Between the 1870s, when the
story of Swann hypothetically begins, and the aftermath of the First World War, when
the novel ends, virtually the only area of change is technological. Electrical lights
replace gas lamps, motor cars replace coaches, telephones and aeroplanes appear:
otherwise, all remains essentially as it was. Even the war alters only fashions in dress,
and the guests at the same receptions. History, for Proust, was romantic imaginings of
a medieval or Renaissance past – ‘the distant gules of kingly France’. It had little or no
meaning for him in the present. The passage of time is purely existential, the slide
towards decrepitude and death. The mystique of involuntary memory he erected
around it was essentially defensive. In his remarkable Proust among the Stars, the one
study of À la recherche equal to its splendours, Malcolm Bowie observed with justice
that while Time in this mode is ‘a “big” controlling theme’, calling forth ‘an impressive
philosophical diction’, it ‘levitates too obligingly above the restless detail of Proust’s
writing’ in ways that can be ‘intimidating and coercive’, the strengths in his handling of
it lying elsewhere. ‘It is down among Proust’s intricate propositional structures with
their outrageous embeddings, suspensions and redundancies that his boldest pieces of
temporal architecture are to be found.’

Like capitalised time, characters are another overdone feature in standard encomia of
the novel. For the most part, these have plenty of life, but lack any depth. Where they
are most vivid, Proust’s portraits belong to the art of caricature. They depend on
repetition and exaggeration, resembling the garish dummies that are a feature of
Dickens more than anything in prior French fiction. There is a range here: at the lower
dead, the dullards of the Verdurin salon, Cottard, Brichot, Saniette and the rest
declaiming their tag-lines, the poseur Bloch with his ludicrous affectations, the
hypocritical snob Legrandin: grotesques pure and simple. A notch up, the sententious
diplomat Norpois and his one-time mistress Madame de Villeparisis. Beyond these, the
bluff Duc de Guermantes and the ineffable Verdurin couple themselves. At the heights,
his most famous creation, where pathos transfigures a comic monster into something
closer to, if never altogether becoming, a credible human being, the Baron de Charlus.
This gallery does not, of course, exhaust the population of the novel. But characters
who escape such treatment pay a penalty: they remain curiously blank. Famously so in
the vacant mystery of Albertine, but in large measure true also of Swann and Odette,
figures memorable more for their repertoires and accessories, and the stylised roles
they play, than for their indistinct persons; of Gilberte, given little more than the red
hair and freckles of her childhood; or even, after his initial scenes, monocle dancing in
front of him like a butterfly, Saint-Loup. These are not caricatured, but they too lack
complexity.

What replaces it in Proust is mutability. In some cases (Swann) infatuation works the
change; in others, more often (Odette, Bloch, Madame Verdurin), the shifting tides of
snobbery or fashion. In others again, the most striking, it is an abrupt characterological
capsizal, lacking any motivation at all: the odious Morel, cowardly deserter one day,
gallant patriot the next; the golf-bag ninny Octave late magicked into a distinguished
writer; the vicious lesbian lover of Mlle Vinteuil, co-defiler of her father’s image,
transformed into the devoted posthumous saviour of his compositions; Saint-Loup,
long the impassioned lover of the actress Rachel, overnight a brutish pursuer of men.
Most ubiquitous of all is the pattern of which Saint-Loup is the type: the unstoppable
revelation of such a high proportion of the dramatis personae of the novel, men and
women alike, as addicts of their own sex. ‘Inversion’, as Proust calls it, sweeps through
the ranks of his characters, warping all credibility before it.

Though no admirer of the term realism, Proust was not a fantasist: he was committed
to verisimilitude. The distortion it suffers in his work was a product of his own
compulsions. At the turn of the century, the upper levels of French society were not as
hypocritical or repressive as their counterparts in England. It was nevertheless a
notable act of literary courage for Proust to foreground homosexuality in his novel,
something no writer had done before. But, caring much for his standing in polite
society, he feared scandal if he was identified with it. So his representations of
homosexuality could never accord with his actual feelings about it. A sinister light had
to fall on it, its adepts depicted as a secret society under a curse, in the biblical cadences
of the exordium to its full-scale invasion of the narrative. There, Proust sought to square the circle of social stigma and personal experience, twisting rejection and explanation together in a desperate just-so story of his own: what in classical times was culturally normal had become physically pathological, repugnant if blameless. The strain is all too obvious: the pressure of emotion denied blows its rivet in the longest single sentence – three unbroken pages – of the novel. Inevitably, the bad faith of the construction becomes a filter clouding its optics. Collectively, the return of the repressed breeds the overpopulation of a supposedly medical minority. Individually, it dictates the indeterminacy of the central alter of the story: Albertine, projection of Proust’s love for a young man, obliged to acquire the image of a young woman, can never achieve resolution, remaining a vague blur, drained of substance by the prohibition Proust imposed on his creation.

A sexual preference can be lived in any number of ways. Under the social constraints of the time, Proust’s version restricted and displaced his range of characterisation. But there was a further handicap from which this suffered. He was a homosexual, but so far as is known – and will be known, until the diaries of the companion of his twenties, Reynaldo Hahn, are published twenty years hence – one who may have been forever unconsummated. Shortly before his death, he told Gide he had loved only men, but never enjoyed physical union with anyone. What is certain is that the only direct report he ever left of sexual pleasure was with himself. His French biographer Tadié’s view that ‘onanism was always his principal sexual activity’ is supported by testimony, grim beyond words, from the male brothel he patronised in his last years. In a novel where, as Bowie puts it, ‘sex in a precariously sublimated form’ is present throughout, ‘recklessly exceeding the requirements of the plot’ to a point where it often seems to be ‘the enveloping “category of categories”’, possessing an ‘unlimited range and warrant when it comes to explaining the order of things’, such specialisation could scarcely fail to have had consequences for the imaginary of the work. In passing, Bowie remarks that the amatory style of A la Recherche is one ‘where couples and coupling do indeed point back to a primordial narcissism, an objectless inward rapture’, without pausing to consider what this might imply for those represented in it. Intent on the ‘relentless desire-drivenness of the novel’ (the way ‘Proust’s versatile comic intelligence dwells with relish upon an outrage, a lack of proportion and right-mindedness inherent in human sexuality’), he is not concerned with its capacity for characterisation. But it was there that narcissism exacted its cost.

Flooding the narrative, total immersion in the self yielded prodigious riches of interior perception and reverie, delivered with continual energy and subtlety. At such a pitch of creative intensity, however, the egoism of Proust’s imagination permitted no more than fitful and superficial attention to others. That might have been just a limitation, of the kind to be found in any writer. Proust, however, erected it into a doctrine: the impossibility – not just in his, but in every case – of anyone ever knowing anything of others. Hence the ease with which his characters become their opposites. He once wrote that ‘Something repeated ten times is the opposite of art,’ and in the novel has his narrator disdainfully declare: ‘A work in which there are theories is like an object which still has its price-tag on it.’ Yet, of course, A la recherche is laden with theories, none more tirelessly repeated than a dogmatics of nescience, the natural epistemology of an artless narcissism. Persons are but ‘a shadow which we can never succeed in penetrating, of which there can be no such thing as direct knowledge’; ‘man is a creature that cannot emerge from himself, that knows his fellows only in himself, and if he says the contrary, lies’; ‘it is the tragedy of other people that they are to us merely showcases for the perishable collections of our mind’: ad libitum.

Obnubilating others as individuals, the doctrine does so in the name of universals. The writer should ‘listen to people only when, stupid or absurd as they may have been, they have become, by repeating like parrots what other people of similar character are saying, birds of augury, mouthpieces of a universal law. He remembers only what is general.’ As for forms of social intercourse, ‘it is superfluous to make a study of manners, since we can deduce them all from psychological laws.’ Underlying such pronouncements was a pessimism rooted in Proust’s disappointments: the aristocracy, love, friendship had all in different ways failed him. The social world he so ardently courted, and never deserted, had become, by the time he was writing A la recherche, ‘the realm of nullity’. Sexual desire had never found romantic fulfilment. So passion...
was not just necessarily unrequited, but founded on a delusion. For since it was a ‘law of nature that we live in perfect ignorance of those we love,’ the only emotion the self can actually feel is anxiety at not knowing the activities or whereabouts of the other: ‘love is what we feel for someone whose actions seem to arouse our jealousy.’ So ‘how can we have the courage to wish to live, how can we lift a finger to preserve ourselves from death, in a world in which love is provoked by falsehood, and consists merely in our need to see our sufferings appeased by the person who has made us suffer?’ Friendship fares no better. In the milieu he frequented, Proust had no real interlocutors, avoiding intellectual equals capable of contesting him. He concluded that for a writer, friendship was nothing less than an ‘abdication of the self’ that yielded nothing: ‘even conversation, which is the mode of expression of friendship, is a superficial digression which gives us no new acquisition.’ Yet one more ‘indication of the unreality of others’, friendship could only be ‘a simulacrum’ – ‘our friends being friends only in the agreeable folly that accompanies us through life, and to which we lend ourselves, but which at the deepest level we know well to be the delusion of one who talks to furniture because he believes it is alive.’ With axioms like these, the final apodictic judgment follows: ‘After failure in every quarter of the domain of life and action, it is a mental incapacity for happiness that nature creates in us. The phenomenon of happiness either fails to appear or gives way to the bitterest of reactions’; virtually its only function is to make ‘the valuable agony called unhappiness possible’.

Valuable because ‘suffering is the best thing one can encounter in life,’ since it alone gives that sight of ‘the whole law-governed immensity’ which is the condition of literature, and ‘true life, life at last laid bare and illuminated – the only life in consequence which can be said to be fully lived – is literature.’ More, if ‘sorrows are the servants, obscure and detested, against whom one struggles, beneath whose dominion one more and more completely falls, servants implacable and irreplaceable who by subterranean pathways lead us to truth and death’, it is only they who permit the final triumph of truth over death. ‘The cruel law of art is that people die and we ourselves die after exhausting every form of suffering, so that over our heads may grow the grass not of oblivion but of eternal life, the vigorous and luxuriant growth of a true work of art, and so that thither, gaily and without a thought for those who are sleeping beneath them, future generations may come to enjoy their déjeuner sur l’herbe.’ The consolations of the age had never received such magnificent expression. But such they remained. In England, by the time of Arnold, salvation by art was already the conventional intellectual substitute for faith. In France, Thibaudet would observe in 1926: ‘The 19th century began, with Chateaubriand, in the poetry of religion. It ended, with Mallarmé and his disciples, in a religion of poetry.’ Proust was at odds with both Mallarmé, for culpable obscurity, and Thibaudet, for daring to point out weaknesses in Flaubert, but the cap fitted. Chateaubriand and Nerval, as he often explained, were his primary literary inspirations, and the cadences of his novel famously resemble poetry, culminating in the most famous of all professions of the redemptive vocation of art. There, as Genette would write, it ‘parts company with the tradition of the Bildungsroman and approaches certain forms of religious literature’, for ‘the narrator does not simply know more, empirically, than the hero; he knows in the absolute sense, he understands the Truth.’ At this deepest level of his sensibility, Proust was a late Romantic.

That left its mark in the moral landscape of his novel, opinions and characters polarised into ways close, as Edmund Wilson noticed, to the good and evil valences of melodrama. In one register, there is Morel: ‘a vile nature who would not shrink from any act of meanness’ – typically so, for in that ‘he resembled the majority of mankind.’ Indeed there is scarcely anyone the narrator encounters after his childhood in Combray who is not in one fashion or another tainted or degraded: cruelty, hypocrisy, mendacity, greed, pretension, selfishness are all but universal. At its opposite, we are told, no less sweepingly, that ‘it is not good sense that is “the commonest thing in the world”, but human kindness. In the most remote, most desolate ends of the earth, we marvel to see it blossom of its own accord.’ The four pages that follow retail one disobligeing or unattractive human characteristic after another. But Proust can readily return to the charge: ‘Kindness, a simple process of maturation which in the end sweetens characters originally more acid even than that of Bloch, is as widespread as that belief in justice which, if our cause is good, makes us no more fear a hostile than a friendly judge.’ Fine words. In practice, warmth and compassion are to be found only in
the narrator’s family circle, above all his mother and grandmother – that ‘race from Combray, from which sprang human beings absolutely unspoilt’, seemingly now ‘almost extinct’. The shabbiness or villainy of the world beyond is not entire. Ethically, Proust will occasionally stitch a silver lining into his persons: Verdurin is capable of an unexpected act of charity, his wife is a genuine lover of the arts, deep down Charlus is naturally good, Bloch could sometimes be nice, and so on. But the mitigations are nominal: they have no narrative weight. Rather, like the transformations of Morel or Saint-Loup, they come from the fictional plasticine out of which Proust peopled his world. The only real changes A la recherche records come from the rotations of fashion and the talons of ageing.

The design of A Dance to the Music of Time is altogether distinct. Powell was a teenager when the First World War ended, and a student as The Waste Land, Ulysses and Scott Moncrieff’s translation of A la recherche detonated in its aftermath. The combination of moral caesura and literary revolution marked a divide that Proust, though he would contribute to it, had never known. ‘This “age-gap” of the 1920s was a chasm to make all subsequent ones of its sort seem inconsiderable,’ Powell wrote in his memoirs. A product of it, he was bound to be acutely conscious of the temporality that had so largely passed Proust by. Time in A la recherche has two registers: psychological and biological. There are references to political or cultural events, but they feature only as incidents in the perisflage of the salons, without bearing on the action; even the Dreyfus Affair simply illustrates the frivolity of the chameleons who frequent them. In A Dance too, time is existential as Proust conceived it – memory and mortality – but it is also fully historical, recording changes in outlooks, customs, institutions, alternating periods of war and peace, across half a century, each decade sharply delineated. Sarajevo, Versailles, Depression; Abdication, Spanish Civil War, Munich; Home, Western and Eastern Fronts in the Second World War; Austerity, Cold War, counterculture – these don’t just supply backdrops or atmospheres. Determining actions, entanglements, destinies, they orchestrate the narrative.

Like Proust, in all but the affair of Swann and Odette, Powell chose a first-person form. It is a common complaint that in doing so, he went to the opposite extreme, creating a narrator not all-engulfing, but so neutral and self-effacing, spectator rather than participant in the story, that the effect is to lower the emotional voltage of the novel. This is a misconception. The personality of Nicholas Jenkins is inseparable from its power. By no means a Lockwood or Marlow, or even – perhaps the nearest, if still quite distant, precedent – Nick Carraway, he is fully present as the actor on whom the story is centred in the first four instalments of A Dance, which form a classic Bildungsroman embedded in the larger architecture of the series: tracing his path from innocence to adulthood, through discovery of the intermittences of friendship, the pull of money and the tricks of desire, circles of society old, new and offbeat, demonstrations of the will and misadventures of the heart. The third volume is even canonically entitled The Acceptance World, though the classic resolution of the genre does not arrive till marriage in the fourth, before the fifth and sixth undo any generalisation of it, amid the wreckage of the wedded state among friends, and the revelations of death and betrayal. With the seventh, eighth and ninth volumes, the subjectivity of the narrator returns front stage, with Jenkins the soldier journeying from regimental through staff to war office experience. Only in the final three postwar volumes, which cover the period when Powell was writing the novel, does he withdraw Jenkins to the position of essentially an onlooker. Prior to these, a wide palette of feelings is at work. The narrator is scarcely a cipher. Bemused, elated, ashamed; jealous, embarrassed, lonely; desiring, priggish, maladroit; furious, in despair; in tears, in love: at one point or another he is all of these. Defining the tone of the novel, however, is the reflective cast of his mind, in certain respects recalling that of Proust’s narrator, yet also markedly different from it.

Powell thought passionate interest in oneself – not self-interest, or mere selfishness – unusual: ‘True interest in yourself is comparatively rare, sharply to be differentiated from mere egotism and selfishness; characteristics often immoderately developed in persons not in the least interested in themselves intellectually or objectively.’ It was something Proust possessed, and he lacked. He could have added that comprehensive interest in others – a fully engaged, impartial curiosity – is even rarer. That, like perhaps no other writer, he had. Precise calculations differ, but if we take Kilmartin’s Guide to Proust and Spurling’s Invitation to the Dance as benchmarks, Proust’s novel contains more than three hundred, Powell’s some four hundred characters. 3 The only work to bear artistic comparison with them, Cao Xueqin’s great Dream of the Red
Chamber, approaches five hundred. In each case, of course, a distinction has to be made between actors and extras – *figurants* who appear only once, or rate simply a mention. The ratio of the first to the second is 0.89:1 in Proust, 1.46:1 in Powell – a considerable difference. More extras than actors in *A la recherche*, more actors than extras in *A Dance*. Of the extras in Proust, nearly half are so class-marked – the lift-boy, the gardener, the laundry girl – they don’t earn so much as a name. In other words, the ‘character-space’ of the two works, to use the term coined by Alex Woloch in his pioneering study of the relationship between major and minor figures in the novel, *The One v. the Many*, is quite distinct. Powell’s is demographically much richer. If we reckon that, fictionally speaking, the critical measure is not the number of persons who cross the stage of a novel, but those who can be said to occupy it for any space of time, *A Dance* contains about twice as many main characters, on either a broad or a narrow definition, as *A la recherche*.

*Quantity is one thing, quality another. There Powell stands alone. Traditionally, masters of characterisation – Balzac, Eliot, James – were omniscient, describing their creations both from without and within: representing their thoughts and feelings as freely as their carriage or clothes, if typically according one subject-position within the novel, the hero or heroine, the central point of view on the tale, recounted in the third person. Proust took the alternative of a first-person narrative, nearly as canonical since the time of Constant or Charlotte Brontë, to lengths never attempted before, if also without overmuch coherence: the narrator not only reports Swann in the third person, but assumes on occasion an impossible omniscience in the first person. By the time Powell started to write, the interior monologue – Dujardin, Joyce, Woolf – had overtaken authorial omniscience, as superior in depth and less suspect of artifice, while Hemingway was dispensing with both, for pure exteriority of speech and action. The early, prewar Powell modelled himself on Hemingway, producing terse third-person narratives with deliberately flat characters. The enormous change he made in writing *A Dance* was to switch to a first-person narrative that retained most of the restraints of this mode – that is, no direct psychological access to the inner life of the other characters – while giving them, with unique economy, the presence and depth of figures from the expansive tradition of old, that allowed itself every facility of purchase in its portraiture.

Powell employed four principal means in bringing his characters to life, each offering an instructive contrast with Proust’s. The first was his gift of physical depiction, the classic introduction to them. Here is the way the best friend, in early days, of the two narrators are described. Saint-Loup:

*Along the central gangway leading inland from the beach to the high road I saw tall, slender, his neck uncovered, his proud head held high, a young man go past with searching eyes, whose skin was as fair and his hair as golden as if they had absorbed all the rays of the sun. Dressed in a loose, almost white apparel such as I could never have believed any man could wear ... His eyes, from which a monocle kept dropping, were the colour of the sea. Everyone looked at him with interest.*

Stringham:

*He was tall and dark, and looked a little like one of those stiff, sad young men in ruffs, whose long legs take up so much room in 16th-century portraits; or perhaps a younger – and far slighter – version of Veronese’s Alexander receiving the children of Darius after the battle of Issus: with the same high forehead and suggestion of hair thinning a bit at the temples. His features certainly seemed to belong to that epoch of painting: the faces in Elizabethan miniatures, lively, obstinate, generous, not very happy and quite relentless.*

Proust’s vision is little more than romantic schmaltz of the period: ‘golden’ (applied in due course interminably to features of the Guermantes clan as a whole), is merely a vacant signifier for glamour; ‘the colour of the sea’ is meaningless – it can be grey, blue, brown, green. Powell delivers an image of indelible precision and detail.

Conversation typically comes next as a marker. A quarter of *A la recherche* is made up of dialogue; a half of *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Speech in Proust is generally entertaining – it is where his comic gifts are concentrated – but it is a crude instrument of individuation, since it relies so much on parody. Bloch, Legrandin or Saniette speak distinctively enough, but as objects of the stylised ridicule of cartoons. Talk in the
Guermantes or other aristocratic salons, unlike the Verdurin household, is not guyed in the same way, but it is uninflected, the company maintaining much the same worldly tone, with at best some sidelong sparring between the ducal pair; Charlus alone is accorded some wonderful harangues, courting without collapsing into burlesque.

Perhaps most conspicuous is the absence of exchange where the narrator is concerned. As a critic noted in the *Nouvelle Revue française* early on, no one is truly allowed to answer him. Albertine may protest, but no real argument ensues. Françoise, essentially a stock figure of the faithful servant given to grumbling, with a strong sense of proper hierarchies, can issue a rebuke to her employer, moved by dislike for Albertine. But when she does so — an illiterate countrywoman — Proust cannot resist the parodic impulse, and has her addressing him in a sentence of high-flown Marcelesque length and orotundity:

‘To be sure, you yourself are kind, and I shall never forget the debt of gratitude I owe you, but the house has become a plague-spot now that kindness has installed trickery within it, now that intelligence protects the stupidest creature ever seen, now that refinement, good manners, wit, dignity in everything, a real and visible prince, lets vice — everything that is vulgar and low — lay down the law, hatch its plots, and humiliate me, I who have been in the service of this family for forty years.’

Powell was immune to this kind of ineptness. With an extraordinary ear for spoken language, he created defining ways of talking for character after character, across a wide gamut of diction, without any need to resort to verbal tags or inflation. Templer and Duport, Mona and Quiggin, Mrs Erdleigh and Mr Deacon, General Conyers and Lady Molly, not to speak of Widmerpool or Stringham, speak in expressive voices that, even at the more exotic end of the spectrum, never strain belief; in more vernacular idiom, the exchanges between Albert, Billson and Bracey at Stonehurst have little in common with the mannerisms of service at Combray. Dialogue here is not just illustrative, as conversation so often is in Proust, it is concomitant with action. Of that, there is very little in *A la recherche*, whose narrative proceeds for long stretches without it. Acts indicative of characters are few and far between: sometimes just minimal gestures like the careless abandon of Albertine’s opening jump over a beachcomber at Balbec, or the chivalry of Saint-Loup’s acrobatic navigation of banquettes to confer his coat on the narrator in a restaurant in Paris. For more significant scenes, we are left with incidents of a wilful childhood and episodes towards the end of the novel: Swann ditched by the Guermantes, Charlus humiliated by Morel at the instigation of the Verdurins, Albertine’s decision to decamp. There is nothing comparable to Powell’s cannonade of symptomatic actions prepared or recollected in dialogue, from the opening shots of Uncle Giles’s intrusion at Jenkins’s school and Stringham’s impersonation of Le Bas onwards: Templer showing off his roadster, Donners displaying his dungeon, Mona summoning Quiggin, Moreland’s rescue mission to Maclintick, Conyers’s handling of Billson, Duport’s dealings with Jenkins, Bithel’s choreographic turning of the tables, Stringham’s refusal of prewar connections, and so on. In a typical passage of Powell’s high comedy — far from his only register — here is Widmerpool, newly engaged, explaining what is on his mind, and Jenkins’s reactions, in a conversation preparing the dénouement of *At Lady Molly’s*. The year is 1935.

He began to speak hurriedly again, the words tumbling out as if he wished to finish with this speech as quickly as possible. ‘I should not wish to appear backward in display of affection,’ he said, developing an increased speed with every phrase, ‘and, in addition to that, I don’t see why we should delay unduly the state in which we shall have to spend the rest of our life merely because certain legal and religious formalities take time to arrange. In short, Nicholas, you will, I am sure, agree — more especially as you seem to spend a good deal of your time with artists and film-makers and people of that sort, whose morals are proverbial — that it would be permissible on my part to suppose — once the day of the wedding has been fixed — that we might — occasionally enjoy each other’s company — say over a weekend —.’

He came to a sudden stop, looking at me rather wildly.

‘I don’t see why not.’ It was impossible to guess what he was going to say next. This was all far from anything for which I had been prepared.

‘In fact, my fiancée — Mildred, that is — might even expect such a suggestion?’

‘Well, yes, from what you say.’

‘Might even regard it as usage du monde?’
'Quite possible.'

Then Widmerpool sniggered. For some reason, I was conscious of embarrassment, even of annoyance. The problem could be treated, as it were, clinically, or humorously; a combination of the two approaches was distasteful. I had the impression that the question of how he should behave worried him more on account of the figure he cut in the eyes of Mrs Haycock than because his passion could not be curbed.

In evoking personality, to physiognomies, declarations and actions, Powell added one of his trademarks, succinct encapsulations. Here is Sonny Farebrother, at first (1922) and then subsequent (1943) sight:

There was a suggestion of boyishness – the word 'sunny' would certainly be applicable – about his frank manner; but, in spite of this manifest desire to get along with everyone on their own terms, there was also something lonely and inaccessible about him.

He bestowed around him a sense of smoothness, ineffable, unstemmable smoothness, like oil flowing ever so gently from the spout of a vessel perfectly regulated by its pourer, soft lubricating fluid, gradually, but irresistibly, spreading; and spreading, let it be said, over an unexpectedly wide, even a vast area.

Dicky Umfraville:

Trim, horsey, perfectly at ease with himself, and everyone around him, he managed at the same time to suggest the proximity of an abyss of scandal and bankruptcy threatening at any moment to engulf himself, and anyone else unfortunate enough to be in his vicinity when the crash came. The charm he exercised over people was perhaps largely due to this ability to juggle two, contrasting, apparently contradictory attributes; the one, an underlying implication of sinister, disturbing undercurrents; the other, a soothing power to reassure and entertain. These incompatible elements were always felt to be warring with each other whenever he was present. He was like an actor who suddenly appears on stage to the accompaniment of a roll of thunder, yet who utterly captivates his audience a second later, while their nerves are still on edge, by crooning a sentimental song.

Pamela Flitton, in 1943 and 1953:

Iciness of manner remained complete. She was perhaps not altogether normal, what Borrit called ‘a bit off the beam’. There was no denying she was a striking girl to look at. Many men would find this cosmic rage with life, as it seemed to be, an added attraction.

The violent antithesis presented by their contrasted forms of existence [husband and lover], unique specimens as it were brought into collision, promised anarchic extremities of feeling of the kind at which she aimed; in which she was principally at home. She liked – to borrow a phrase from St John Clarke, to ‘try conclusions with the maelstrom’.

There are echoes of Proust in certain characters in Powell. Uncle Giles’s description of himself as ‘a bit of a radical’ is a repetition of the claim Legrandin awards himself; Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson’s letter to the Times invokes the adage beloved of M. de Norpois, ‘the dogs bark, the caravan moves on.’ The first pair are both poseurs with a grudge, the second both sententious diplomats. But as to portraits (much the same could be said of, say, Quiggin and Bloch), there is no comparison. Powell’s are much subtler, more complex. The contrast becomes still sharper in characters more central to the narrative. It is enough to match Stringham against Saint-Loup, not just at first sight, but across their respective unfolding; the enigmatic plenitude of Jean against the empty riddles of Albertine; Widmerpool against Charles as comic monsters. Characterisation here is never static, but Powell handles change in a way quite unlike Proust, not as precipitous moral volte-faces, or mere physical deliquescence, but as gradual evolution or revelation, across a carefully calibrated sequence of situations and actions. Widmerpool’s mutation as he alters from ridiculed schoolboy to humiliated suitor, capable but still absurd Streber in business and the City, ruthless wartime colonel and high-level military intriguer, Labour MP and ennobled fellow-traveller, to his downfall in the Cold War and descent into an occult netherworld, is an organic process: from the laughable to the malignant to the abject. Charles simply shrinks into himself, tel qu’en lui-même le sénilité le change.

Powell’s social range is, of course, much wider too. The aristocracy certainly provides its quota to A Dance, either by repute or in person: Bridgnorth, Huntercombe, Warminster, Aberavon, Seaford and assorted offspring, especially the Stepneys and...
Tollands. Not invested with any special aura, they are no cause for any particular disappointment. As in Proust, there are painters, writers and musicians, actors, scholars and critics, though these inhabit bohemian or academic purlieus not to be found in *A la recherche*; servants are more disturbed, truculent, melancholic in Powell; but – the critical difference – there are also businessmen, politicians, soldiers, publishers, journalists, bureaucrats, adventurers, mages and misfits: a company beyond Proustian ken. The spirit in which this landscape is treated finds famous expression in Powell’s maxim: ‘All human beings, driven as they are at different speeds by the same Furies, are at close range equally extraordinary.’ Dwelling on the even play of curiosity that followed from it, Ferdinand Mount, who has written notably well about his uncle, remarks that so far from being snobbish, as often charged, ‘his fiction is extraordinarily democratic in a way few other writers of his time could claim.’

The judgment is carefully formulated and can be upheld, with two provisos. Powell’s world is certainly larger than that of any of his contemporaries. But it has a frontier: other than miners conscripted as soldiers, represented as soldiers rather than miners, likewise bank clerks, it doesn’t contain workers or figures from the lower middle class, the majority of the population in most of the period covered by the narrative. His class background didn’t in itself preclude this – Henry Green, a close friend at Eton and Oxford, built novels around them – but his personal trajectory, with the exception of regimental service, did. No writer has ever produced a successful encyclopedia of the society in which they lived, Zola coming nearest, all experiences of life limiting imagination in one way or another. What holds good is the variety of Powell’s world, and the equity in his inventory of it: both indeed unequalled in his time, or since.

The equity is not absolute. If only by implication, Mount overstates it in one significant respect. Women, who lend as much colour to the story as men, are handled differently. Throughout, the narrator refers to all men, even close friends, by their surnames (Barnby, Moreland, Pennistone); all women of his own generation, the majority, by their first names (Barbara, Gypsy, Priscilla); those of an older generation, much fewer, by surnames distanced with honorifics (Madame Leroy, Miss Weedon, Mrs Erdleigh); only a servant features, pre-First World War style, with a surname alone: Billson. The contrast in Jenkins’s own cohort does not denote greater intimacy with the opposite sex, but the reverse. Its visual equivalent is the asymmetry with which the appearances of men and women are described. Jenkins, like most of the male characters, certainly appreciates looks in women, on which they all comment freely. But compared to the precision with which men are depicted, these remain on the whole curiously undefined, reduced to vague or generic categories; ‘willowy’, ‘fierce’, ‘striking’, ‘tolerable’, ‘a beauty’ and so forth. Here is a married couple encountered early on in Jenkins’s cursus, Buster and Amy Foxe, mother and stepfather of Stringham:

Buster was standing beside this urn, cleaning a cigarette-holder with the end of a matchstick. He was tall, and at once struck me as surprisingly young; with the slightly drawn expression that one recognises in later life as the face of a man who does himself pretty well, while not ceasing to take plenty of exercise. His turn-out was emphatically excellent, and he diffused waves of personality, strong, chilling gusts of icy air, a protective element that threatened to freeze into rigidity all who came through the door, before they could approach him nearer.

‘Hullo, you fellows,’ he said, without looking up from his cigarette-holder, at which he appeared to be sneering, as if this object was not nearly valuable enough to presume to belong to him …

A moment or two later his mother appeared. I thought her tremendously beautiful: though smaller than the photograph in Stringham’s room had suggested. Still wearing a hat, she had just come into the house.

The disproportion is in no way a reflection of the respective importance of the two in the narrative, rather the opposite: Amy effortlessly controls her husband and is of significantly more moment to the story. Even where Powell’s gifts are most engaged, characteristically mobilising the arts to his effects, when Jenkins falls in and eventually out of love with Jean Templer, the result is blurred. First sighting, 1923:

Like her legs, her face was thin and attenuated, the whole appearance given the effect of a much simplified – and somewhat self-conscious – arrangement of lines and planes: such as might be found in an Old Master drawing, Flemish or German perhaps, depicting some young and virginal saint; the racquet, held awkwardly at an angle to her body, suggesting at the same time an obscure implement associated with martyrdom. The expression of her face, though sad and a trifle ironical, was not altogether in keeping with this air of belonging to
another and better world.

Second meeting, 1928:

She still seemed slim, attenuated, perhaps not exactly a 'beauty'; but, all the same, still in some way mysterious and absorbing to me, just as she seemed when I visited the Templers after leaving school. There was perhaps a touch of the trim secretary of musical comedy.

Two or three hours later:

She reminded me of some picture. Was it Rubens and Le Chapeau de paille: his second wife or her sister? There was that same suggestion, though only for an instant, of shyness and submission.

In 1932:

Once she had reminded me of Rubens's Chapeau de paille. Now for some reason — though there was not much physical likeness between them — I thought of the woman smoking the hookah in Delacroix's Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement. Perhaps there was something of the odalisque about Jean, too. She looked pale and rather tired.

In 1945:

It was as if the mother was someone different; the daughter, the remembered Jean. About seventeen or eighteen, Polly Duport was certainly a very pretty girl; prettier, so far as that went, than her mother at the same age. Jean's attraction in those days had been other than mere prettiness.

In 1971:

She was now altogether transformed into a foreign lady of distinction. The phrase 'sad Goya duchess' did not at all overstate the case.

Each vivid enough in itself, the multiplication yields no cogent physical image: Rogier Van der Weyden, Noël Coward, Rubens, Delacroix, Goya cancel one another out. Can the sequence be justified as the impress on the narrator's perceptions of someone essentially elusive, across successive conflicting emotions and the passage of time? Perhaps. But the indeterminacy also speaks to a larger question.

In the morning after the night when Jean materialises unforeseen at the Ritz and they become lovers, Jenkins recollects an argument with Barnby about the way women are pictured in novels, in the course of which he remarks: 'No real tradition of how women behave exists in English writing.' In an interview, Powell himself went further: 'Females are very hard to do. I don't think any male writer has ever done one right.' As such, the notion makes no sense: where would James figure in it? But the view that 'women are terribly, terribly difficult' to depict well confesses a gradient in the portraits in his own novel, where few achieve the full-length treatment accorded male protagonists, requiring analytic reflection of a kind the narrator can never bring stably to bear, for example, on Jean. The principal exception is Pamela Flitton, whose sexual nihilism is examined with a sombre power transcending the conventions of the femme fatale, a type anyway a historical anachronism by the time of the narrative. That she is in this respect hors série has led some to tax Powell with an underlying misogyny. Nothing in the novel speaks to this. Both of the women who figure as the worst news for men, Audrey and Pamela (Xanthippe and Circe), achieve a kind of atonement in unexpected turns to care or sacrifice, tropes here bent out of true by the disconcerting form they take. On the other side of the gender divide, no such alleviation attaches to Widmerpool or other brutish male specimens.

In 20th-century literature, prejudicial treatment of women can take two forms, which of course may be combined. Are they disliked? Are they slighted? The first, misogyny strictly speaking, is rarer than the second, male chauvinism, and where it exists typically generates much cruder kinds of disparagement. The asymmetry in Powell's handling of the sexes is free of hostility to women. It is not their presence, but their absence that arouses vehemence of feeling: 'the excruciating boredom of exclusively male society' of which the narrator complains in the army. Arguably the warmest single portrait of anyone in A Dance to the Music of Time is of Molly Jeavons, in the disorderly kindness and disregard of convention in her cross-class household.

Marriage, a state understandably of little interest to Proust, who vouchsafes scarcely a thought about it, but still in Powell's time central to relations between the sexes, forms
one of the leading topics of *A Dance*. Few avoid misfortune there, with scenes of conjugal discord among the most wrenching pages in the novel. Significantly, it is not a man, but a woman – Moreland’s wife, Matilda, one of Powell’s most sympathetic characters – who gives most eloquent expression to what marriage is likely to mean for either sex, in an outburst rare for use of italics: ‘Is it fun to be married to anyone?’ she asks, and continues passionately: ‘I mean *married* to someone. Not to sleep with them, or talk to them, or go about with them. To be *married* to them.’

Women can be liked but all the same belittled, tacitly if not explicitly. Impossible with such variously commanding figures as Madame Leroy, Miss Weedon and Mrs Erdleigh, could it be said of the narrator’s contemporaries? For Isabelle Joyau, most of his female characters – besides such older ones, she instances six of his own generation – are ‘startlingly tough’. That may be, critics can reply, but as James Tucker, still his best English reader, remarked in *The Novels of Anthony Powell* (1976), none is shown discussing, joking, intriguing or speaking about art, politics, literature or money in the style of men. Morally and practically speaking, they give as good as they get, if not better: but professionally or intellectually? The only jobs ascribed to the prewar lot are model and actress. Postwar this alters: in the final trilogy, Ada Leintwardine, successful novelist, is capable of trumping or outmanoeuvring any of the literary figures around her; and no one else in the novel comes near the erudite firepower of Emily Brightman, sprightly historian of late antiquity. Powell was a product of his class and period, with the blindspots these imply, but changes in gender roles were not lost on him. The notion of any particular sexism doesn’t stick. Spurling’s love of his work is scarcely an eccentricity: women have been among its greatest admirers.

That this should be so is also a natural response to the structure of the work, capable of impartially attracting any reader. Rather bafflingly, Powell disavowed much skill with plot, to all appearance not out of false modesty, saying he was bad at a side of novel construction to which he has owed many fans. How in fact he planned the intricate architecture of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, with its huge cast of characters across a dozen volumes, remains something of a mystery. It is not clear if at the beginning he envisaged even more than three, and certain that he claimed not to have decided on 12 till he had reached six. Yet in the very first, Stringham says laughing of Widmerpool, ‘that boy will be the death of me,’ which he coldly becomes in the eighth; while in the same opening volume Widmerpool, peering over a hedge at the discomfiture of Le Bas engineered by Stringham, is – viewed retrospectively – in *petto* already the voyeur he turns out to be in the 11th; Sunny Farebrother, said by Jenkins to disappear from his life for twenty years after impressing him as a teenager, resurfaces punctually seven volumes later; Pamela Flitton makes her entry in the second volume as a bridesmaid of about six or seven vomiting into a baptismal font at her uncle’s wedding, before hitting assorted military careers like a meteorite in the ninth, and repeating her eructions in a large Chinese urn in the tenth.

Such precision of long-range balletics is very rare, perhaps unique. It unfolds within a structure in which each of the 12 volumes has its own self-contained plot, built of five or so episodes separated by intervals, within the overall narrative. Openings are typically meditative, passages of controlled, often ironic reverie; endings alternating between deadpan or wry deflation of previous intensities of emotion or action, and bleak registration or stoical foreboding of events and the passage of the time. In between, the dramas dominating the narrative are formed by social juxtapositions of one kind or another: visits, receptions, parties, meals, weddings, drinks, soirées, exhibitions – a much wider variety than in Proust, where dinners and receptions occupy a third of the novel, but with the same set pieces in large gatherings. Parties in *A la recherche* roll on for well over a hundred pages apiece. More concise, Powell’s certainly owe something to Proust’s example, but are closer to the art of Dostoevsky, whose *Possessed* he regarded as perhaps the greatest of all novels.

What Dostoevsky invented were scenes of polite society where antagonistic emotions explode the conventions of the occasion in comic outrage and social scandal, no less potentially tragic for that. Not simply expressive, they are performative, culminating in deeds as well as words. Such too are the set pieces in *A Dance*: the successive exits of Stringham and Mr Deacon, followed by the disparate volley of her curses, from Milly Andriadis’s party in Mayfair; the apotheosis of an alcoholic Stringham, transfixing
listeners at his mother's reception for Moreland, and his chilling captivity that ensues, followed by the suicide of one of his audience; the panic-stricken flight of Templer's second wife, soon to descend into an asylum, from a too suggestive tableau vivant after dinner at the castellar residence of Sir Magnus Donners; the climactic nocturnal confrontation between Pamela and Widmerpool, amid a throng of other interested parties, after a private performance of Il Seraglio in Regent's Park. Scenes, mutatis mutandis, all worthy of The Idiot.

A recurrent motif at these and other key moments of the novel is the role of the physical mishap as precipitant of events, one of the most distinctive features of Powell's imagination, figuring the casual emblems of contingency in life. These can function as comic slapstick: the misaimed banana that splatters on Widmerpool's face, the sugar castor that accidentally opens over his head; or more ambiguously, the untied shoe lace by a barred window on a medieval staircase that freezes the narrator into a vision of Widmerpool as a prisoner behind the grill, then as a bureaucrat glaring through his guichet, each time revealing another aspect of him. But equally as dramatic device: triggers of break-up, trailers for downfall, conditions for scandal – the jostling of a girl on a passenger's knee that causes Templer to drive his car into the ditch, severing his friendship with Stringham; the jamming of the door as Mr Deacon tries to negotiate it with bundled sheets of War Never Pays! cascading from under his arm, in ignominious exit from Milly Andriadis's party, prelude to his death from injuries sustained falling down the stairs of a seedy club not long after; a chauffeur's confusion between a Terrace, a Place and a Gate of the same name, delaying the limousine whose arrival would have averted the terminal fracas between Pamela and Widmerpool among the guests on the pavement in Regent's Park. It may even have been a bump in the asphalt that throws Jenkins and Jean into each other's arms on the Great West Road.

The 12 plots within the plot that comprise A Dance to the Music of Time each contain a crescendo of complex feeling, typically but not invariably towards the end of the volume: Stringham's signal to the narrator of a parting of the ways in A Question of Upbringing; the narrator's dream-like intercourse with Gypsy Jones ('there was something odious about her that made her, at the same time – I had to face this – an object of desire') after Mr Deacon's funeral in A Buyer's Market; Widmerpool's assertion of authority over Stringham at his alcoholic collapse after the Old Boy dinner where Le Bas is taken ill in The Acceptance World; the narrator's coup de foudre and prevision of his marriage in At Lady Molly's; Maclintick's suicide in Casanova's Chinese Restaurant; the revelation of Jean's passions with not just one but two of the figures most despised by the narrator ('perhaps, I thought, her men are gothic too, beings carved on the niches and corbels of a medieval cathedral to arouse at once laughter and horror. In any case, I had been one of them. If they were horrifying, I too had been of their order. That had to be admitted'), with news of the Nazi-Soviet Pact the next morning announcing that war was at hand in The Kindly Ones; Gwatkin's loss of his command in The Valley of Bones; the awkward chasse-croisées at the Café Royal during the Blitz and the deaths that follow it, the punishment of Bithel and Stringham's posting to what will be his end in Singapore in The Soldier's Art; Pamela's public accusation of Widmerpool as murderer of Templer in The Military Philosophers; Trapnel's discovery of Pamela's abandonment of him and destruction of his novel in Books Do Furnish a Room; her gift of her death to Gwinnett in Temporary Kings; Widmerpool's demise in Hearing Secret Harmonies.

The issues in such episodes, when the emotional register is suddenly heightened, are humiliation, betrayal, friendship, love and death. However pointed, pathos is always kept tightly under control. Typically, Powell will put a gap between the event and the narrator, employing third-party accounts rather than direct report to describe them. These can be quite circumstantial – Jean's shuttle between lovers in South America, Trapnel's final night of inebriated glory in a pub, Widmerpool's crazed chanting to his woodland end – and in a few cases the narrator is on the spot either shortly or before or just after the event (Maclintick's turning on the gas, the bomb that hits Lady Molly's), lending it peculiar immediacy. But often tragic or lurid events – the killing of Templer by partisans in the Balkans, of Stringham in captivity in Malaya, the sacrifice of Pamela in a sordid hostelry – occur off-stage, particulars withheld. The distancing devices increase in number and effect as the narrative lengthens. In part, this is a natural consequence of the way the narrator is decentred once past the threshold of marriage. But it also corresponds to the tonal parabola of A Dance. Association of its curve with spring, summer, autumn and winter is contested by some, though its last words
certainly allude to the seasons. What is undeniable, however, and insufficiently emphasised, is the buoyant – if certainly also often ironic – sense of adventure and high spirits of the first four volumes of the sequence, in the comedy of youthful discovery of life; touches of darkening as the war approaches; with it, the coming of austerity and tragedy; final descent into the realms of the macabre. As a turn to ever more extreme actions and situations unfolds, in a shift resembling that in Proust, whose example may have licensed Powell’s imagination for it, the requirement for buffering procedures steadily mounts, till by the end nearly all is elaborate – often even, with a further twist, speculative or dubitative – oratio obliqua.

Stylistically speaking, Powell is the very unusual case of a writer who radically changed his way of writing midway through life. He himself made light of the difference between his quartet of prewar novels and the postwar sequence, preferring to present his work as a more or less continuous development, and on the whole his admirers have followed him in this. In reality, it is hard to think of any other novelist where the formal contrast is so marked. Hemingway was the principal influence on Powell’s prewar writing, along with E.E. Cummings and Wyndham Lewis: clipped sentences, terse dialogue, deadpan affect. Late in life he would dismiss Hemingway’s prose with a telling epithet – ‘muscle-bound’ – and find much of Farewell to Arms ‘terrible stuff’. But, at the time, he sought to repurpose its techniques for interwar English comedy. The results were not particularly high wattage. The verdicts of Koyama Taichi, in The Novels of Anthony Powell: A Critical Study (2006), comparing them with Waugh’s output in the same period, are brisk. Similarities abound – Decline and Fall: Afternoon Men (‘the merry-go-round of manners’); Black Mischief: Venusberg (‘topsy-turvy in a foreign land’); Vile Bodies: Agents and Patients (‘satire of the fast set’); A Handful of Dust: From a View to a Death (‘the country house is falling down’); Scoop: What’s Become of Waring? (‘the dinginess of hacks’) – but Powell lacks the gusto of Waugh’s ‘wild, grotesque flights of the imagination’, his energy-saving variants yielding no more than a ‘light, prosperous disdain for the sordid affairs of the world’. That could be thought too harsh. But Koyama is perfectly correct in pointing out the most striking feature of the early novels. They contain, virtually without exception, only flat characters.

The First World War, although it impinged on him directly very little, altered Proust’s enterprise decisively, suspension of publication after the first volume in 1913 extending what would have been a trilogy into six more volumes when it was resumed in 1919. The effect of the Second World War on Powell was more drastically transformative. He emerged from it, he said, a different person. Unable to compose any fiction in the army, he immersed himself in the writings, familiar and obscure, of the 17th century, with a view to producing the biography of John Aubrey that became his first book after the war. The impact of what he would term Aubrey’s ‘new sort of sensibility’ proved critical, with Powell taking from it both his ‘appreciation of the oddness of the individual human being’ and ‘mastery of the ideal phrase for describing people’. The lapidary side of A Dance owes quite a bit to this. At the same time, a more general steeping in 17th-century prose that – especially in generations formed before the Civil War: for Powell, conspicuously Robert Burton – was modally baroque left its mark too.

Out of this frequentation with forms of writing prior to Augustan normalisation, and a much wider range of wartime and postwar reading, not just in English literature, Powell developed a style as unlike his prewar fiction as the characters of The Acceptance World are from the matchstick figures of Afternoon Men: combining formal elegance with colloquial energy, brilliant descriptive passages with abrupt analytic reflections, elastic clauses and sparing connectives, a prose uniquely at once alembicated and taut. Powell’s sentences are nowhere near the length or complication of Proust’s, which average 35 words apiece, and his imagery, vivid enough in its own right, does not compare with the poetic and scientific range or density of Proust’s. His art is more iconoclastic. Counterintuitively, English has a more Latinate syntax than French, a single verb able to control a sequence of clauses where French requires cumbersome repetitions; it also allows participial constructions barred or reproved in French. Powell made extensive use of both possibilities, especially the latter, making an English equivalent of the Latin ablative absolute one of the trademarks of his style, with sovereign indifference to schoolroom objections to the pendant participle. English also, of course, has twice the vocabulary of French, because of its double Latin and Teutonic
roots. Powell made use of that too: contrary to expectation, words that would normally be regarded as recondite, mostly of Latin origin, are more frequent in *A Dance* than in *A la recherche*.

What Powell took most importantly from Proust was the reflective generalisation as an integral thread in the narrative. In his use of this, Proust was drawing on his own 17th-century literary resources, the maxims of the French moralists. *A la recherche* would be unimaginable without it, the title of the novel itself a promise of research to a generalisable end. But, as noted above, intellectually speaking Proust’s *obiter dicta* are too often weakened by monomania and inflation; they lack the ironic precision and control of La Rochefoucauld or La Bruyère. Far more observant about others, Powell was his superior in handling fictional generalisations about them. Flowing seamlessly through the plot, and delivered by the narrator, defining his personality, they are consistently finer-grained, and typically more striking.

They also cover a much wider span of objects. Modes: ‘fashions of one generation, moral or physical, are scarcely at all assessable in terms of another. They cannot properly be equated.’ Setbacks: a ‘law that requires most people to minimise to a superior a misfortune which, to an inferior, they would magnify’.Appearances: ‘Persons at odds with their surroundings will not infrequently suggest an earlier historical epoch.’ Rebels: ‘Nothing dates people more than the standards from which they have chosen to react.’ Digs: ‘that streak of social cruelty that few lack’. Nuptials: ‘Weddings are notoriously depressing affairs.’ Sexual success: ‘Seduction is to do and say, the banal thing in the banal way.’ Some of these are no more than high-spirited quips, others apothegms that go deeper.

Bearing directly on its themes, and moving at a level well above them, are longer reflections. Extracted from the narrative contexts that give each its particular analytic force, they inevitably lose something of their flavour, but are indicative enough.

Alterity: ‘It is not easy – perhaps not even desirable – to judge other people by a constant standard. Conduct obnoxious, even unbearable in one person, may be readily tolerated in another: apparently indispensable principles of behaviour are in practice relaxed – not always with impunity – in the interests of those whose nature seems to demand an exceptional measure.’ The second parenthesis, qualifying without cancelling the conclusion, is characteristic. Unpredictability: ‘Human relationships flourish and decay, quickly and silently, so that those concerned scarcely know how brittle, or how inflexible, the ties that bind them have become.’ Egoism: ‘Self-interest, equally unattractive in outer guise and inner essence, is, all the same, a necessity for individual survival. It should not perhaps be too much despised, if only for that reason. Despised or not, its activities are rarely far from the surface. Now at Widmerpool’s words about leaving, I was unwelcomely aware of self-interested anxieties throbbing hurriedly into operation.’ Love: ‘Although not always simultaneous in taking effect, nor necessarily at all equal in voltage, the process of love is rarely unilateral. When the moment comes, a secret attachment is often returned with interest. Some know this by instinct; others learn in a hard school.’ Generalisations spurning absolutes, each with its reservation or proviso: ‘most’ – ‘perhaps’ – ‘not infrequently’ – ‘few’ – ‘rarely’ – ‘at all’ – ‘not always’ – ‘scarcely’ – ‘all the same’ – ‘not without impunity’. Overturned, one Proustian sententia after another.