

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

---

## Anthony Powell and His Critics

ANTHONY POWELL DIED IN MARCH OF 2000, months short of what would have been his ninety-fifth birthday in December. Since a fall some years previously, he had largely been confined to his home at The Chantry in Somerset. The last of his volumes of journals, covering the years 1990–1992 and published in 1997, marked the close of his writing career, although a volume of pithy jottings from a notebook appeared posthumously. Valedictory tributes were to be expected, after such a long and productive life; yet there have since been some snipings at his reputation, admiration for the man and his work being something less than universal. His old editor at the *Daily Telegraph*, Sir Max Hastings, recently described him as “priggish, pretentious, and pompous,” while pointing out that Powell is little read among the under-forties crowd (whom *does* that crowd read?). In return the Anthony Powell Society bestowed upon Sir Max their annual Widmerpool Award, given to commemorate “petty abuse of power.” It is unlikely that reasoned debate about Powell’s place in the lists of twentieth-century English novelists is going to occur in these terms, and perhaps not at all, since it seems you’re either for or against.

I have always been very much for, and on a recent rereading of most of Powell’s work, my estimate of his place in the literature of the last century, and particularly with regard to *A Dance to the Music of Time*, is a high one indeed. The rereading was spurred by the appearance of two books on Powell, one by an Englishman, one by an American.<sup>1</sup> The Englishman, Michael Barber, had produced the first biography of Powell, an extremely readable, good-humored account stringing together what mainly we knew already from his memoirs, journals and fiction. That Mr. Barber’s is very much an interim report he acknowledges in the preface, noting that the Powell estate had “someone else in mind for the job.” (Powell’s close friend Hilary Spurling, an accomplished biographer, is at work on the “official” version.) So the archive at Heinemann, Powell’s long-time publisher, was interdicted, and surviving members of the family (Lady Violet Powell died in 2002, leaving two sons and some grandchildren) did not make themselves available for interviews. At one moment, Barber confesses his dilemma to us—“I

<sup>1</sup> ANTHONY POWELL: A Life, by *Michael Barber*. Duckworth Overlook. \$29.95. UNDERSTANDING ANTHONY POWELL, by *Nicholas Birns*. University of South Carolina Press. \$39.95.

should like to say more about Powell's marriage, but I can't." This has been seized upon by some reviewers as demonstrating the biographer's inadequacy to his task: he just didn't know much about his subject's internal and domestic life.

There might well be another way to look at Barber's confession of inability to give us the facts on what the Powell marriage was *really* like. In the third volume of Powell's memoirs, *Faces in My Time*, occurs the following reflection on the married state:

Even in marriage at least twenty or thirty years are required to test the implications of a given partner; both parties, in the nature of human beings, changing in the Hegelian manner all the time. On this delicate question it might be added that, by the age of close on twenty-nine, I had never asked another woman to marry me—and, after nearer fifty than forty years, to speak unequivocally, have never wished to be married to another woman. In consequence, taking a risk in the matter seems something not always to be condemned.

After the superb, deeply playful pretense that, having looked gravely at his own marriage, it "seems something not always to be condemned" (not always, mind you), does the curious reader really want the low-down on Powell and Lady Violet? With all due respect to the biographical enterprise, isn't this an instance where the subject has spoken so measuredly and finally that there is really little more to say? With all due respect for the talents of Hilary Spurling, one doubts that she will manage—or try—to say it.

One of the appealing things about Barber as biographer is that he never proposes to know things about his subject that the poor subject never knew about himself. Granted that this "knowing" might be called the only justification for writing biography, still the opportunities for misconduct are legion. Early on Barber identifies, with reference to Powell's speech (he had interviewed the novelist years previously), its "extraordinary mixture of overstatement and understatement." This immediately puts its finger on Powell's distinctive wit and suggests why the narrative voice of *Dance* is so engaging, as are lucubrations like the above one about marriage. What strikes one first and last about Barber is how much he truly likes the man and writer he's engaged with, and how his aim is no more nor less than to put events in orderly compass so as to share with readers the story of an original life and sensibility.

Barber's idiom has been objected to as inappropriate to a serious biography, and I admit to not having previously encountered "clapped out" (with reference to *Dance's* St John Clarke, the Edwardian novelist no longer read by literati in the 1920s), or "far below the salt" as designating a less than significant place at an officer's mess. A reference to Powell's 1961 trip to America as "crossing the pond" provoked especial contempt in reviewers, although I took it in stride. It is perhaps going a bit far to refer, as Barber does, to the superman hero of Powell's

*From a View to a Death*, Arthur Zouch, as “undoubtedly a shit,” even if Zouch undoubtedly was. And to speak of a lover of Powell before his marriage, Nina Hamnett, as “not exactly a ‘free poke,’” borrows, rather cheekily, officer Borrit’s memorable phrase from *The Military Philosophers*. Borrit, whose “relations with the opposite sex took an exclusively commercial form,” confided to Nick that “I’ve never had a free poke in my life . . . Subject doesn’t seem to arise when you’re talking to a respectable woman.” At any rate, my defense of Barber’s diction, if it needs one, is that not being graced or burdened with the role of authorized biographer, he may have felt authorized to employ unofficial, slangy locutions. To me they gave the book zest, something few academic biographers, especially American ones, manage to achieve.

The American book about Powell (one in Matthew Bruccoli’s series, *Understanding Contemporary British Literature*) is an almost 400-page trip through the work that is not merely a Reader’s Guide introduction to the various novels, their plots and characters, but also a work of passionate advocacy. Nicholas Birns, who teaches Humanities at N.Y.U., is as steeped in his subject as is possible for a guide to be, and he marches us through not only the novels—the five prewar ones, *Dance*, and the two late ones (*O How the Wheel Becomes It!* and *The Fisher King*)—but also the four volumes of memoirs and, in an especially interesting chapter, the three of journals—the latter not yet and probably never to be published in this country. Mr. Birns’s treatment is the opposite of selective (the volume on Kingsley Amis in the same series is less than half as long), but he brings an informed and lively responsiveness to the material. His book includes an annotated bibliography of significant critical items about Powell, as well as reference to other “resources” like the Powell collection at Eton College and the Anthony Powell Society of which he was a founder. Birns is interesting on Powell’s fiction from the 1930s, noting that those novels “in many ways . . . seem to come out of nowhere”; he finds that their “sense of freshness” goes along with “a kind of resigned and mordant, yet not pessimistic, exhaustion.”

Although Powell’s early books don’t quite come out of nowhere—the influences on his prose of Hemingway and of Wyndham Lewis were pointed out long ago (in 1939) by G. U. Ellis in his remarkable survey of post-First World War English fiction, *Twilight on Parnassus*—Birns nevertheless has a point. By contrast with Evelyn Waugh, whose early novels’ debt to Ronald Firbank is notable, Powell’s first novel, *Afternoon Men*, feels detached even from its own characters. In this odd urban pastoral, people wander about London, have lunch, try to make assignments (and usually fail), wake up with hangovers and never get anywhere. The novel’s epigraph from Robert Burton’s *Anatomy* (“they are a company of giddy-heads, afternoon men”) is misleading insofar as it suggests that the book’s atmosphere is “giddy.” While that word might with justice be applied to Waugh’s *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies* (both appeared just before *Afternoon Men*), Powell’s novel contains very little of the madcap highjinks exploited in Waugh’s violent farces. In Powell’s cooler ele-

ment, no Lord Tangent (*Decline and Fall*) will mistakenly be shot in the foot and die of gangrene, and no Agatha Runcible (*Vile Bodies*) will casually flip a match in the direction of a gas tank in a pit stop at the racetrack. A typical Powell sentence collapses upon itself in a burst of inanity: “Quite a lot of things had been left on the stairs and they fell over some of them,” we are informed about the staircase leading to Susan Nunnery’s flat in *Afternoon Men*. You might say that, as with the declaration about marriage quoted earlier (“seems something not always to be condemned”), Powell’s way of declaring is so circumspect or humorously self-cancelling that something original results. Those who think that result nothing but trivial (some of my best friends fall into this category) will scarcely be convinced by what Messrs. Birns or Barber or myself have to say by way of recommending it.<sup>2</sup>

But however satisfying it is to reread these early novels, they assume a minor place in Powell’s fictional achievement when compared with the twelve volumes of *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Birns thinks that F. Scott Fitzgerald, whom Powell had lunch with during his brief more or less unproductive time as a scriptwriter in Hollywood in the 1930s, was a “crucial influence” on Powell’s major work, and he spends some pages in his discussion of *The Acceptance World*, third in *Dance*’s sequence, eliciting a parallel between Fitzgerald’s portrayal in *The Great Gatsby* of the roadside sign of T. J. Eckelberg’s enormous eyes, and the sign near London’s Hammersmith flyover, of the girl in the Jantzen bathing suit in the proximity of which Nick first kisses Jean Templer. Further, Birns detects a similarity between *Gatsby*’s narrator, Nick Carraway, and the Nick Jenkins of *Dance*, in their skeptical yet open-minded attitude toward life, their penchant for irony and disdain of platitudinous pronouncements. Maybe so, but I don’t think the comparison takes one far in assessing the riches of *Dance*, although there’s no doubt that Powell admired Fitzgerald—at least *Gatsby*, which he said, in a journal entry, he must have read at least fifty times.

Birns describes well the style of *Dance*: “ruminative, Latinate, polished but often eccentric” (Powell is not above dangling a participle), and also “curiously unpretentious,” a finding I would second with approval. But as noted previously, there are those who find *Dance* not only pretentious but find the sensibility in charge (Powell’s) elitist, snobbish, High Tory (are there any Low Tories?), blimpish and generally reactionary. These charges among others are marshaled against the writer in John Carey’s recent blast (the *Sunday Times*, London, July 4, 2004) at both Powell and his biographer. From this totally disparaging account I quote a few phrases: “incapable of conveying deep feeling”; “had no ideas”; “Waugh minus the wit”; “a colossal snob and not very

<sup>2</sup> Neither Barber nor Birns seems to me sufficiently to distinguish Powell’s third novel, *From a View to a Death*, from his others in the thirties. I have made a case for why this exquisitely paced, darkly humorous book survives numerous rereadings, emerging always fresh and exhilarating. (“Pure Literature: Anthony Powell’s *View*,” in *Playing It by Ear*, Amherst, 1994, pp. 140–146.)

bright”; “a bit of a duffer”—and one could go on. One remembers that Carey, a fine seventeenth-century scholar critic and a veteran reviewer of contemporary fiction, is also the author of *The Intellectuals and the Masses* in which modernist writers are brought to the bar for their contempt for “the masses,” and that his essays include one (“Down with Dons”) excoriating Oxbridge academics for laziness and arrogance. So the assault on Powell as an upholder of privilege comes as no surprise. Rather than attempt to defend him from Carey’s charges, some of which are so excessive and unmoderated as to seem a parody of serious criticism, I will mention two recent essays, by Christopher Hitchens and Brooke Allen, that expertly make the case for *Dance*.<sup>3</sup>

Hitchens’ essay is especially interesting for its comparison of Powell to his friend George Orwell (Powell was the only Tory Orwell liked, said Orwell). He also quotes the Marxist critic Perry Anderson, on the face of it an unlikely admirer of *Dance*.

There is no other work in the annals of European fiction that attempts meticulously to recreate half a century of history, decade by decade, with anything like the emotional precision or details of [these] twelve volumes.

Anderson does not exclude Balzac, Zola, or Proust, and he says also that the elegance of Powell’s artifice is “only compatible with comedy.”

Here I will inject a personal note testifying that reading *Dance* aloud, as I currently am with my spouse, one comes across numerous manifestations of the comic that were missed, or forgotten about, in reading to oneself. To give but one example, I hadn’t until reading aloud registered how interesting a talker Nick’s roommate at school, Peter Templer, can be. We remember him mainly from the opening volume, *A Question of Upbringing*, in which he arrives back late at school after a successful encounter in London with a “tart.” In *The Acceptance World*, Templer and Nick meet up by chance at the Ritz, where Nick is waiting for Mark Members, a literary acquaintance, to show up, and we get the following banter between Templer and Nick:

“I suppose you are waiting for someone, Nick,” he said, drawing up a chair. “Some ripe little piece?”

“You’re very wide of the mark.”

“Then a dowager is going to buy you dinner—after which she will make you an offer.”

“No such luck.”

“What then?”

<sup>3</sup> Hitchens’ essay, “Powell’s Way,” may be found in his *Unacknowledged Legislators* (New York, 2000, pp. 187–203). Allen’s “The Unauthorized Anthony Powell” is in *The New Criterion*, September 2004, pp. 10–17. I have written about *Dance* in “Anthony Powell’s Serious Comedy” (*Talking Back to Emily Dickinson*, Amherst, 1998, pp. 192–206).

“I’m waiting for a man.”

“I say, old boy, sorry to have been so inquisitive. Things have come to that, have they?”

“You couldn’t know.”

“I should have guessed.”

“Have a drink anyway.”

Waugh without the wit? Not at all, since in Waugh we could never have missed the (probably) loud joke first time through. By contrast, “Things have come to that, have they?” is so quiet and uninflected as to be almost undetectable—or so it was to me in previous readings.

Brooke Allen testifies to how the larger effects of *Dance* on a reader take time to manifest themselves:

I first read *Dance* when I was in my twenties, and though I loved and treasured it, it now seems clear that I couldn’t have understood half of it. Though it is a book that appeals to the young, it is not a young person’s book. One has to be middle-aged to have experienced the almost arbitrary dissolution of love and friendship, the almost arbitrary apotheosis of some and dissolution of others, to understand that Powell was not being gratuitously cruel to his characters but simply realistic.

This is tellingly said and put me in mind of a finality in *Dance*, when Nick’s friend, the composer Hugh Moreland, makes his last appearance (in *Temporary Kings*, penultimate volume of the series). Nick is visiting the dying Moreland in a South London nursing home where Moreland, surrounded by books, remembers a song from a little-read Jacobean play by John Marston, *The Dutch Courtesan*. The song—which begins “The dark is my delight / So ’tis the nightingale’s”—brings to Moreland’s mind the predacious Pamela Flitton, now married to Widmerpool. He says that, if there had been time, he might have done a setting for the song, and he imagines how it would have made his friend, the music critic Gossage, sit up:

He sighed, more exhaustedly than regretfully, I thought. That morning was the last time I saw Moreland. It was also the last time I had, with anyone, the sort of talk we used to have together. Things drawing to a close, even quite suddenly, was hardly a surprise. The look Moreland had was the one people take on when a stage has been reached quite different from being ill.

“I’ll have to think about that song,” he said.

The moment final; the prose absolutely transparent with resonant simplicity.

I mentioned earlier Nicholas Birns’s appreciative chapter on Powell’s journals, conveying as they do “the rich mental life of a knowledgeable

and perceptive elderly man.” The latter two volumes, covering the years when Powell was more and more at home, are notable for their account of books reread and opinions delivered on them of, I should say, unflinching interest. John Carey claims that they were written in Powell’s “dotage” (one looks forward to such a dotage!) and are full of “strident and outrageous opinions.” Well, as Thoreau said, speaking in praise of what he called “*extra-vagance*,” “it depends on how you are yarded.” How for example should one respond to the following thought, committed to the journals after the Fatwah issued against Salman Rushdie: “Rushdie is a tedious writer, publicity-seeking in a manner, but this seems going too far on the Ayatollah’s part.” Indeed, yes, definitely too far. After reading an abridged version of Virginia Woolf’s diaries, Powell admits to disliking the woman— “humorless, envious, spiteful . . . hating servants and ‘poor people’ while attending the Labour Party Conferences every year”—but finds the diaries “extremely good, readable, infinitely better than her novels.” To check up on this opinion he reads, or attempts to read, for the first time *The Waves*, finding it—in one of Woolf’s own favorite words—“twaddle” (a reasonable judgment in my view). There is an acute summing-up of D. H. Lawrence: Powell prefers his letters to the novels (this seems questionable) but provides a lengthy and interestingly mixed response to *Women in Love*. Contemporaries like Graham Greene and Henry Green don’t fare well: “There was always an element of deviousness, indeed humbug, about all Graham’s public utterances and behaviour”; as for Henry Green, Powell calls him his “oldest intimate friend” but finds his “behaviour to his friends, stinginess, inordinate snobberies, treatment of Dig [Green’s wife], vanity about his supreme importance as a writer” sufficient to provoke the judgment that, all things considered, Green was “rather a shit.” Among many other judgments, never less than controversial, about modern writers, are ones on Hardy, Conrad, Joyce, Ford, Barbara Pym. And then there is Shakespeare whom he likes to reread in bed. He will have none of *Much Ado about Nothing*—“a most unfavorable play of mine, in fact the only Shakespeare play I really dislike”—but warms to *Macbeth*. Although he’s not tempted to identify himself with Hamlet or Lear,

I do, however, find much fellow feeling with *Macbeth*, anyway in his ruminative moods. I am fond of Lady *Macbeth* too, an attractive woman. [Powell found Margaret Thatcher extremely attractive.] They were obviously a happily married couple. I discussed this with V. She said she was less pushy than Lady *Macbeth* (as I certainly am less pushy than *Macbeth*), but saw a slight element in telling me to get on with the job.

If you don’t think that’s funny, you *are*—as Randall Jarrell remarked in another connection—a convention of sociologists.

But not everything is played for a laugh, and if readers of *Dance* come away with an essentially serene, above-the-fray image of Nick Jenkins, his

creator could on occasion be far from a serene old gent. A journalist who came to interview Violet Powell in 1998, on leaving said she would like to meet the great man as well. Lady Violet opened the door to the library where sat her husband in a wheelchair, in pyjamas and dressing gown, reading. "What do you want?" he asks, and on being informed the interviewer wanted to meet him, replies, "Well now you've met me," and returns to his reading. "Dreadful barking," apologizes Lady Violet to the visitor. Frequently in the journals, journalists ring up and have to be put in place; one of them, a John McIndoe from the *Standard*, has called to inquire about Powell's relations with Malcolm Muggeridge, recently deceased: "McIndoe addressed me as 'Anthony'. I asked if we had met, he said no, calling me Anthony seemed 'easier.' I told him it was not easier for me."

Brooke Allen's sentence quoted above about *Dance* also has application to Powell the man in his old age—"not being gratuitously cruel to his characters but simply realistic." The following journal entry from 1988, when he was still mobile, shows that the realism is, in its most satisfying instances, comic. Powell has been running through his art books as they appear on the shelves, just looking at the pictures, and he speaks warmly of a George Grosz collection featuring Berliners in 1920. Then: "Raking molehills on the lawn, I leant on rake for moment reminding myself of Millet's peasant listening to Angelus. The rake broke and I fell down."