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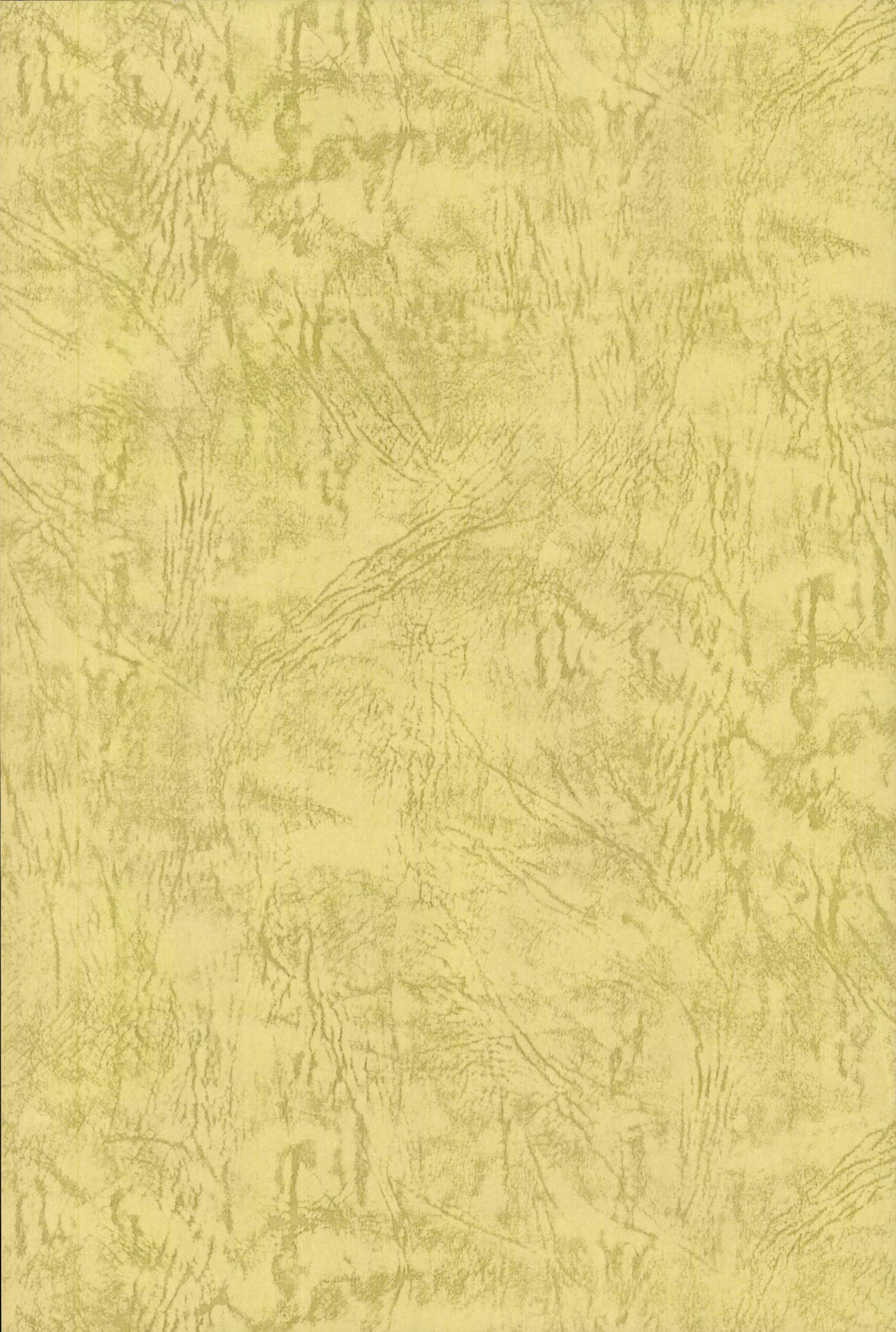
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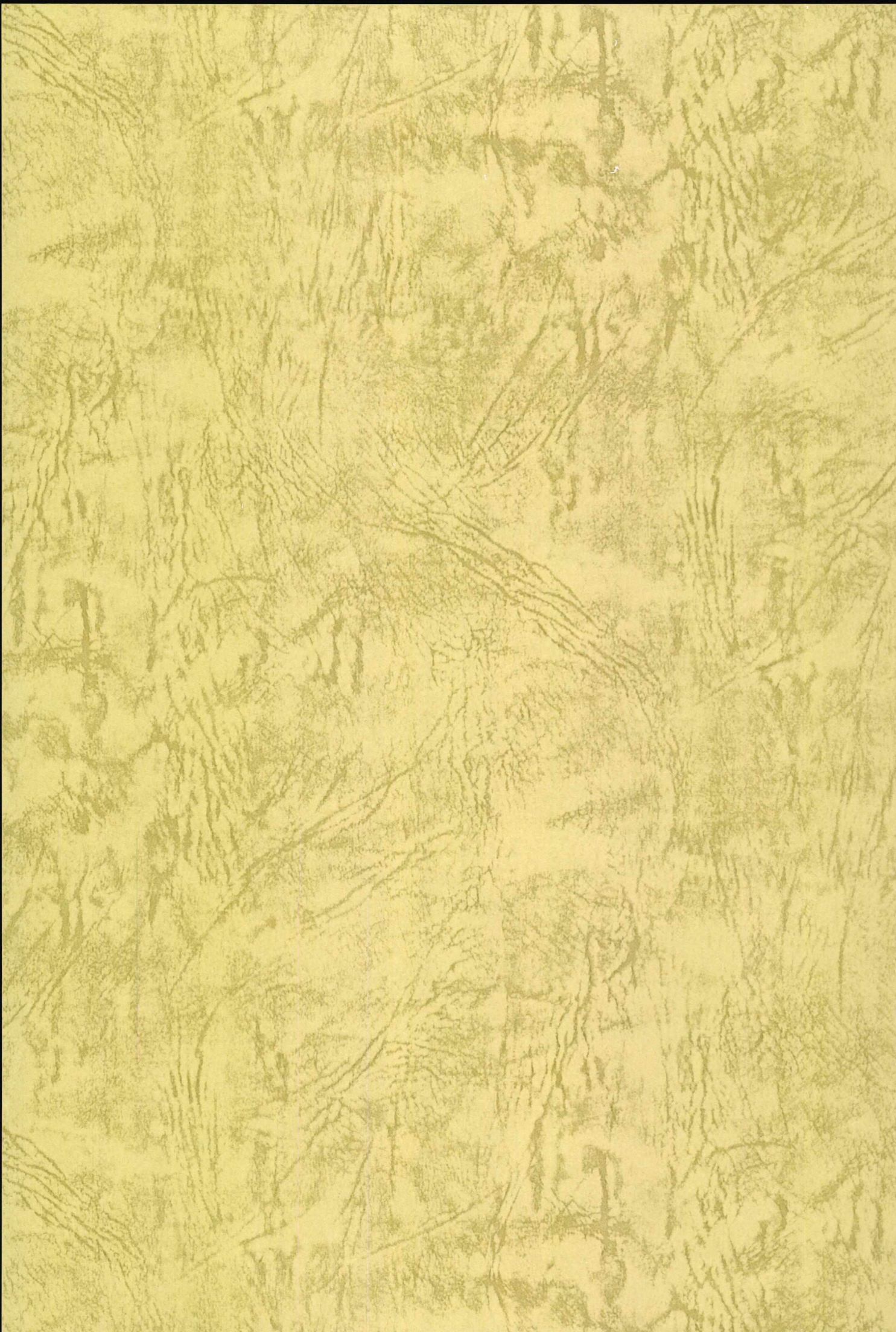
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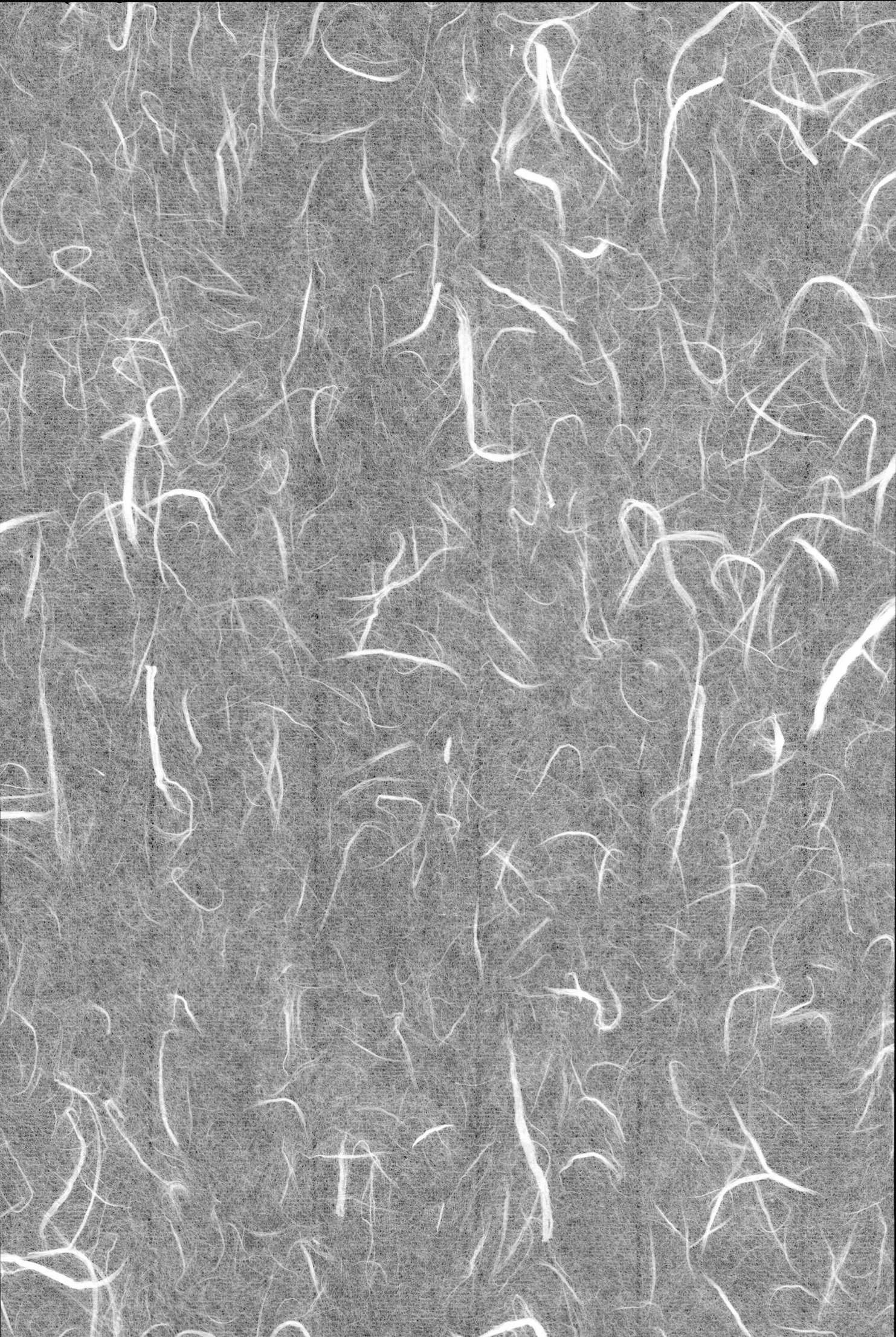


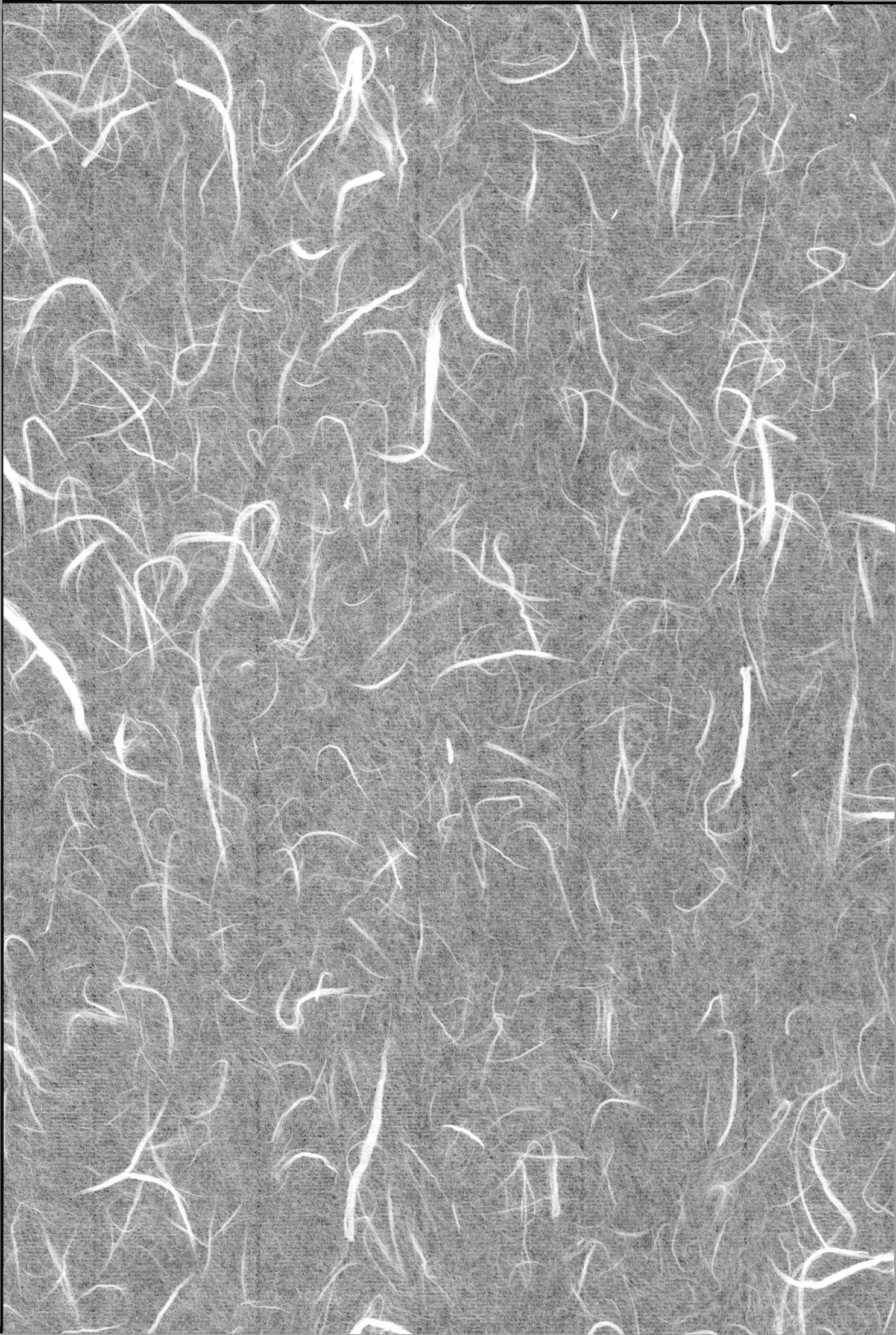
Summary

This dissertation is an attempt to re-evaluate Anthony Powell, a unique author of comic fiction, and to save him from the relative neglect he seems to have fallen into. It purports to provide a summary of Powell's long, productive novelistic career; in particular, it aims to keep in view the relationship between comedy and realistic representation of life, and how the relationship grows and changes in Powell's novels.

Powell's pre-war novels, inclining towards elegant but mentally brutal farce, depict human beings as two-dimensional, meaningless, and ultimately unworthy of being taken seriously. However, in *A Dance to the Music of Time*, Powell's twelve-volume enterprise after WWII, people's struggles in society are captured in a humanely, rather than farcically, comic light. The author accepts the fact that human beings, however incomplete and two-dimensional their existence is, cannot live without trying to build an enclosure of meaning around them for their own happy survival, and, if possible, to enlarge it to the whole society. The efforts of disparate individuals incessantly contradict each other, and are cancelled in the irresponsible movement of the world. As one of such people with a limited view of human life as a whole, Powell and *Dance's* narrator Jenkins see, not with derision but with humour, numerous people's deluded but serious struggles to give a meaning to their lives, and try to find, rather than impose, a 'choreography' in which they can be connected synchronically and diachronically.

The main questions to be answered in this dissertation are: (a) whether Powell's changing comic vision succeeds in displaying a convincing image of society and human life and, (b) if it does, how and to what extent.





The Novels of Anthony Powell

A Critical Study

A Thesis

Presented to

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University of Kent

In Fulfillment

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by

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A Note on the Texts

Abbreviations of novels quoted

<i>AM</i>	<i>Afternoon Men</i>
<i>V</i>	<i>Venusberg</i>
<i>FVD</i>	<i>From a View to a Death</i>
<i>A & P</i>	<i>Agents and Patients</i>
<i>WBW</i>	<i>What's Become of Waring</i>
<i>Dance</i>	<i>A Dance to the Music of Time</i> series
<i>QU</i>	<i>A Question of Upbringing</i>
<i>BM</i>	<i>A Buyer's Market</i>
<i>AW</i>	<i>The Acceptance World</i>
<i>LM</i>	<i>At Lady Molly's</i>
<i>CCR</i>	<i>Casanova's Chinese Restaurant</i>
<i>KO</i>	<i>The Kindly Ones</i>
<i>VB</i>	<i>The Valley of Bones</i>
<i>SA</i>	<i>The Soldier's Art</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>The Military Philosophers</i>
<i>BDFR</i>	<i>Books Do Furnish a Room</i>
<i>TK</i>	<i>Temporary Kings</i>
<i>HSB</i>	<i>Hearing Secret Harmonies</i>
<i>HWBI</i>	<i>O, How the Wheel Becomes It!</i>
<i>FK</i>	<i>The Fisher King</i>

Hilary Spurling's *Invitation to the Dance* (Heinemann 1977; Mandarin Paperbacks 1992) provides wonderful indices of characters, books, paintings and places that appear in *Dance*, as well as a synopsis and chronology of the twelve volumes. Nothing more thorough or more accurate can possibly be thought of. That is why I don't offer any makeshift who's who or summary of the plot of *Dance*, as does James Tucker's *The Novels of Anthony Powell*, which was published before Spurling's book came out.

The page references follow the MLA format. However, the bibliography is divided into such sections as 'Works by Anthony Powell', 'Interviews' and 'Secondary Sources', for the convenience of those readers who use it as a full data-base on Powell.

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Introduction

2005 is the centenary year of Anthony Powell's birth. But no full-length monograph on him has appeared since his death in March 2000. Indeed, only nine have so far been published in all.¹ The fact that no new book has been published for ten years, and that most of his pre-war and post-*Dance* works have been out of print for some time, shows the relative neglect into which this author has fallen. An attempt at re-evaluation is necessary, if he is to be rescued from the scholastic Valley of Lost Things (as he would have called it).

This dissertation sets out to provide a summary of Anthony Powell's long, productive novelistic career. In particular, it aims to keep in view the relationship between comedy and realistic representation, and how the relationship grows and changes in Powell's novels.

Throughout more than fifty years of his career, starting with *AM* in 1930 and concluding with *FK* in 1986, Anthony Powell was always deeply concerned with the elements of the comic in life. Readers' responses to Powellian comedies, especially *Dance*, have a wide range. At one extreme, there is Evelyn Waugh, who complains in his review of *CCR* that he has been denied the 'annual treat' of Widmerpool and 'one of his great catastrophes' (919): to put the case in bare terms, he seems to have read *Dance* as a kind of comic series in which the predictable but preposterous pratfalls of particular characters are repeatedly offered for the amusement of readers. At the other extreme, the poet Alan Brownjohn claims in his 1957 essay that *Dance* is a comedy derived from looking at quite ordinary human habits and postures, with the result that the trivial is rendered sublimely funny (13). This seems to accord with Powell's own opinion on the subject:

I think it important that people should get clear in their minds that satire and comedy are quite different things. Sometimes authors will write some rather distorted picture of how people behave in order to prove people ought to be behaving in quite a different way – in order that they

¹ *The Novels of Anthony Powell* by Robert K. Morris (1968), *Anthony Powell: a Quintet, Sextet and War* by John Russell (1970), *Anthony Powell* by Neil Brennan (1974, revised 1995), *The Novels of Anthony Powell* by James Tucker (1976), *Anthony Powell's Music of Time as a Cyclic of Novel of Generations* by Rudolf Bader (1980), *Reminiscent Scrutinies* by Laurie Adams Frost (1990), *Time and Anthony Powell* by Robert L. Selig (1991), *Anthony Powell* by Neil McEwan (1991), *Investigating Powell's A Dance to the Music of Time* by Isabelle Joyau (1994).

should hold different political views, or be more moral, or do something or other. But, if you are writing simply to show how grotesque in any circumstances human beings are, that is not, strictly speaking, satire. It's perhaps comedy...I think that quite often I could reasonably be described as writing comedy, although again I would say, speaking generally, it's simply how people behave. But I don't set out to write satire. (1970 interview by *Summary*, 132-133)

His firm belief that he is not writing satire has, I think, much to do with the problem of comic detachment, for which Powell has always been praised and criticized. Some people admire Powell's sharpness of observation and cool appraisal of the incongruities of the world. In 1971, the American critic Frederick R. Karl even labelled Jenkins 'a hip cat'; a choice of appellation that reflects the trend of the time when the review was written, but now seems quite injudicious, if amusing. Others frown at Powell's petit bourgeois, timid irresponsibility that tacitly excludes the author himself – and perhaps appreciative readers – from the absurdities of the world. Certainly, *Dance* would have become quite a different thing if Jenkins, the transparent observer and Powell's mouthpiece, had been more openly involved in the system of value and the movements of the world he inhabits (perhaps producing a comic effect akin to that of Grossmith's *Diary of Nobody*). Instead, Jenkins's personality is as carefully concealed as those of the anonymous narrators of the pre-war novels, save only in a few rare moments when awkwardness, obtuseness or weakness is momentarily revealed, as in the dreary sex with Gypsy Jones and the scene in which Bob Duport tells him about Jean's conduct.

In a sense, *Dance*'s comic detachment is more mannered than that of *AM*, *V*, *FVD* and *A & P*, in which the accepted rules of traditional third-person narration protect the author against the charge of facile exclusion of himself from the laughable sordidness of the world he depicts. Powell's pre-war novels concentrate on the sometimes obsessively eccentric, sometimes absurdly purposeless behaviour of the inhabitants of what Wyndham Lewis would have called the bourgeois-bohemian milieu of society, and treat them with elegant, non-committal sharpness of observation. Even the first-person narrative of *WBW*, clearly a preparation for Nicholas Jenkins's voice in *Dance*, is pervaded with the feeling of helpless irresponsibility towards the meanness, power-hunger and self-deception of the characters described. Nonetheless, these early attempts of Powell show an inclination to depart from the traditional mode of fictional comedy: while continuing to deal with folly, conceit, delusion and petty social struggles, they openly acknowledge an

inability to demonstrate any absolute standard of judgment as to what is laughable and what is not. In the ceaseless power-struggle of the world, a self-promoting 'agent' can easily become a laughably helpless 'patient', and vice versa. Geoffrey Ellis, a contemporary critic, noted this quality of Powell's pre-war novels:

The only elements... that could have misled critics into accepting such work [as *AM*] as satire are that irresistible sense of amusing incongruities of experience... and a highly subtle use of irony. The incongruities were not used, as they were so often by Evelyn Waugh, to heighten the effect of social stupidities...his incongruities have an iconoclastic aim, are less incongruities than deliberate anachronisms, introduced, one suspects, so that the emotional categories, which in the Victorian and Edwardian novel were always kept separate and inviolable, may be deliberately shuffled together to enhance the general impression of indeterminateness and inconclusiveness. (379)

However, it is undeniable that Powell's pre-war novels generally treated human beings as little more than devices for the sharp representation of the laughable incoherence of existence in a particular quarter of modern life. *Dance*, while retaining the bourgeois bohemian social milieu of the pre-war novels as one of its main stages, widens the field of view into more sober quarters of the upper-middle class and into the army life during the Second World War. The method of representing the comic also changes. The rapid short sketches of the pre-war novels trace the absurdity and futility of modern life with calculated throwaway casualness that reduces all the events concerned into two-dimensionality: things are funny because they are denied three-dimensional repletion of meaning and subjected to the irrelevance and meaninglessness that dominate the entire stage. But the comic antics of the more variegated characters of *Dance* are examined with deeper reflection and even a kind of guarded compassion.

Take, for example, Jenkins's Uncle Giles, that eternally grumbling family member hovering about in the periphery of genteel society. If he had been featured in the pre-war novels, it would merely have been for a moment's laughter at his eccentricities, before he was consigned to oblivion. In the disdainful treatment of the laughable sordidness of life, no one – including the author – would have taken this minor character seriously. In *Dance*, Giles's social irrelevance and fixated world outlook (obsessed with small sums of money, reducing everything to the principle of 'influence') offer much food for Jenkins's reflection. The unique humour, and even

humanity, of the disjointed existence of Giles are adumbrated. Powell's comic representation of this person, who is leading a very trivial life indeed, gropes toward three-dimensionality by way of a new realization that he is a serious enough person to himself, who is sweating day after day in the midst of everyone's petty but intense social power-struggles to defend his or her own position. V. S. Pritchett's opinion on this point in his 1965 essay is worth listening to:

They [*QU*, *BM* and *AW*] caught and played with that ineradicable core of boredom that has been the resource as well as the blight of upper-class English life, a boredom produced by the inherited genius of ironing out feelings, and doggedly covering the loss with bouts of dottiness, alcohol, adultery and class-consciousness... What are the characteristics of this masculine tradition in our comedy? It is intelligent rather than sensitive; it is prosaic rather than poetic; it is sane rather than extravagant. It is egocentric and not a little bullying. It has manner, and that manner is ruthless and unkind. To stand up to the best manners of English society one has to be rude, exclusive and tough. One must be interested in behaviour, not in emotions; in the degree to which people hold their forts – and how much money the forts cost – not in what human beings are. The tradition begins with Fielding; it is there, minus the animal spirits, in Jane Austen. (172)

I agree with Pritchett's point that *Dance* is in the tradition of English comic fiction that deals with the social battle of wills. However, while Fielding's and Austen's comedies succeeded in demonstrating to readers a desirable model of bourgeois survival, however formalistic it is, by concluding their novels with the attainment of worldly happiness (usually in the form of a suitable marriage), *Dance* eternally moves along with the ups and downs of people's serious but ultimately futile social struggle. Each character cherishes his or her own incomplete, but to himself or herself serious and coherent enough, outlook on the purpose of life and attempts to persuade or force other members of society to obey such a design. The battle that ensues is comic because of the incompleteness of the world view that sustains people's will; the struggle can never reach a point of conclusion due to the absence of a valid system of value controlling society as a whole. The uniqueness of *Dance* in the tradition of realistic comic fiction lies in the fact that it refuses to compromise with the worldly need for a guidelines on social behaviour, concentrating rather on the linguistic representation of the eternal comic process of the formation and

dissolution of the individual's incomplete designs on life.

But the problem of Powell's 'comic detachment', which excludes Jenkins from the comedy of the world, remains to be answered: is it a necessary condition of the balanced comic representation of life, or a sign of Powell's secret desire to keep his own upper-middle-class values closed to interrogation? If the latter is the case, doesn't it undermine the comic realism of *Dance*? Patrick Swinden's doubt on this point in his book published in 1984 is harshly put, but needs to be answered sincerely:

English critics have emulated Powell's metropolitan detachment and conferred on his novels an almost unanimous accolade. It was left to an American, Edmund Wilson, to sound a cautionary note... 'He [Powell]'s just entertaining enough to read in bed late at night in summer.' That was a frivolous remark, but a useful corrective none the less. As an American, Wilson felt no need to be uplifted into an English class from which the style and tone of the prose extend such a seductive invitation. He did not see the need to dignify accounts of life as it is lived socially, however amusingly and at whatever great lengths... My point is that Powell has been taken at more than his word by critics who have noticed the felicities of his detached comic method whilst remaining blind to the exclusive tone through which so much of it is irradiated. ([2] 128-129)

Reading this passage, I cannot suppress a somewhat disturbing reflection. Some readers may wonder why I, a scholar from a country in the 'Far East', am so interested in a writer whose writings are very deeply rooted in the social context of British upper-middle-class life at a particular period, especially the protocols of social life and class-consciousness. I can immediately offer the preliminary answer that Powell's novels interest me as an example of the problems of writing in the tradition of realism, more specifically in the tradition of comic representation of the world in the realistic mode. Quite true; but can I absolutely deny that Powell's novels fascinate me also because I live in a society as full of artificiality, protocols and polite evasion of radical questions of existence as the one Powell deals with? Japan is where *The Makioka Sisters* – Tanizaki's huge novel that delves into the nature of social artifice and customs, deception, decay, and the mental power-struggle fought under the serene surface of bourgeois society, but does not offer any element of judgment on such aspects of life – was conceived and put into words. In the case of

Powell's comic novels, too, the charge of tacit connivance with upper-middle-class snobbery is a problem that cannot be sidestepped. Probably, I am attracted by Powell's novels because certain deeper psychological strata of his superficially detached narration that meticulously traces the details of people's behaviour in society, often absurdly futile and seldom replete with coherent meaning, have a remote affinity with the elements of snobbery – the desire to formalistically defend one's social fort, and to stick to the right kind of social persona – that have always been working, whether one likes it or not, in Japanese life high and low, past and present.

However, Japanese novels have no tradition of the comic representation of such social artifice: novelists have, almost without exception, taken the matter in a way far removed from laughter. The main reason I take up Powell is that he is an interesting – and rather bizarre – example of the British novelistic tradition of seeing the artifice of society with a comic eye. My question is where that inclination towards the comic elements of life comes from, and how it affects the author's approach. Powell's is an extraordinary case, because he tried to continue, and at the same time renew, the tradition by creating an almost interminable narrative that defies the conventional notion of plot – a technique which makes the study of his work particularly interesting to me.

This dissertation can roughly be divided into three parts that trace the three stages of Powell's novelistic career: his pre-war works, *Dance*, and the post-*Dance* productions. The first chapter will examine Powell's pre-war novels: how they exploit the conventions of fictional comedy, and how they gradually come to depart from them. Elements that prefigured *Dance*, and ones that prevented the pre-war works from being totally innovative, will be explored, showing how Powell started as a writer of accomplished sharp observational comic novels but gradually came to feel the fetters of such a mode. Chapters two to five will analyse the successive volumes of the *Dance* sequence in its four stages: youth, maturity, the Second World War, and ageing. This may appear a pedestrian method, but it constitutes a necessary step. The apparently easy-going, peripatetic style of *Dance* does contain a coherent arrangement of episodes countering other episodes, which creates a sense of polyphonic three-dimensionality of narration: episodes have to be intensely analysed before general arguments can be proposed. The recurring patterns embedded in the appearance and disappearance of the numerous characters, and Powell's technique of narration, will be studied, throwing a light of thematic plotting on the extremely anecdotal structure of *Dance*. On the basis of the arguments on the volumes in

sequence, chapter six will discuss the general problematic of *Dance* as a novel, and its representation of the world – the way society is dealt with, the coexistence of comedy and farce, and the element of meta-novelistic experiment. The merits and drawbacks of *Dance* as a new attempt in the tradition of fictional comedy will be evaluated. Chapter seven will deal with Powell's post-*Dance* works that constitute an interesting footnote to *Dance*, while also being free-standing comic works in their own right, before we have a retrospective overview of the novelist's progress in the Conclusion.

Chapter One

The Pre-War Novels

AM, Anthony Powell's debut novel, is an interesting case of disruption between the author's intention and readers' response. In his article on the reissue of *AM* after the war ('Wauchop Agonistes'), novelist Jocelyn Brooke recollects how contemporary readers thought that the devastating satire of this 'prose version of *Sweeney Agonistes*' finished off the trend of fashionable 'party novels' ('Mr Powell had, once for all, exploded the long-cherished myth that parties were fun. Most of us, after that, realized just how bored we had really been, and got jobs in the country, or became chronically ill or went over to Rome'). On the other hand, Powell himself seemed to be (at least publicly) somewhat baffled at such a response. In the 1970 *Summary* interview, when the interviewer suggests that Powell seems to have 'become a novelist almost unobtrusively', he responds quite laconically:

I think I did, totally. When I was in my early twenties, everybody I knew was writing a novel...Like everybody else I was, and that is how it all started. I wrote a novel and took it along, and it was published. I was rather surprised really when everybody said well this is savage, bitter, etc., etc., etc. I thought it was a rather quiet little love story. (135)

There, I think, is the explanation for the awkward feeling we have when we look at Powell's pre-war novels. The author himself seems to be unaware, or refusing to be aware, of the element of revolt against the norms of fictional comedy. If we take his words at face value, all he wanted to do at the beginning was to demonstrate that he was as capable of writing 'little' comic stories as anybody else, obedient to the established norms of the genre he was writing in. And the genres are obviously there; there is nothing particularly new or outrageous about the settings of the five novels Powell wrote before the war. 'Quiet love story' with a circular plot for *AM* and *V* (in the case of *V*, with a pinch of exoticism and politics thrown in), comedy around a country house for *FVD*, fast-moving slapstick around a pair of villains and their victim for *A & P*, a dip into the lower regions of the writer's world for *WBW*. All of these are something we have already seen somewhere else, and we know the rough line along which the plot should move. At least at the level of setting up a comic environment, Powell seems to have wanted to be skilful rather than innovative.

Probably, this apparent lack of gusto was what caused these little novels to be

eclipsed by their powerful rivals in roughly the same field, namely the comic novels of Evelyn Waugh. Many of Powell's and Waugh's pre-war novels deal with similar materials – we can easily compare *Decline and Fall* with *AM* (merry-go-round comedy of manners), *Black Mischief* with *V* (comedy in a topsy-turvy foreign country), *Vile Bodies* with *A & P* (a satirical account of the contemporary London 'fast set'), *A Handful of Dust* with *FVD* ('the country house is falling down' motif), and *Scoop* with *WBW* (the laughable dinginess of the world of hacks) – but Waugh is far surer of his hand, and more unabashedly manipulative, as a writer of farcical comedies. While Waugh does not hesitate to expand the limits of reality for the purpose of laughter (see, for instance, the supernatural character of Captain Grimes in *Decline and Fall*; or the situation, in *A Handful of Dust*, in which a man is made to read Dickens aloud for life), Powell's characters are strictly chained to the stale restrictions of meaningless daily routines. Grimes is much more of an Übermensch than the pathetic Zouch or Mr Passenger; *V*'s foreign settings scarcely affect the futile, eventless everyday life of Lushington and Da Costa (even the accidental death of the latter fails to carry any weight in the overall atmosphere of inconsequence). Waugh is not afraid of ceasing to take 'reality' seriously, in the interest of creating an autonomous comic space ruled by its own laws, with little direct reference to the real world. If the settings and events seem too bizarre to be true, there is always the excuse that the novels are indeed dealing with a bizarre dream, or nightmare, world (the Lewis Carroll epigraph for *Vile Bodies* rings an appropriate note), no matter how much metaphorical connection they have with the despicable misery of the life we live. However, Powell is reluctant to let the world go; even such outlandish characters as Dr Clutch in *AM* or Gaston de la Tour d'Espagne in *A & P* are given places (awkward ones admittedly) within the boundary of the intentionally stale plot. The comedy in Waugh's pre-war novels was characteristically in wild, grotesque flight of imagination; while Powell's comedy was in the representation of the inescapable meanness of daily life in a moribund society.

However, if we pursue this line in a naïve manner, there is a danger of taking Powell's pre-war novels too seriously. It is undeniable that they have many moments when their satire of the futility of the characters' lives is piercing enough to adumbrate the dark pit of egoism beneath the barely maintained social floorboards (for instance, the haggling over the price of Pringle's life in *AM*, or Hudson's decision to reunite with a prim, power-loving woman he no longer loves in *WBW*). But at the same time, it is open to question whether Powell intends a comment on our life in general or is taking pleasure in quietly observing the farcical antics of people in the quarters of society that are particularly amenable to contemptuous laughter.

Vain, useless artists and hacks, seedy playboys and flirts who don't even 'wash much' (*AM* 149)...it is quite useless to call them 'cads' (as Pringle calls Barlow) or 'whores' (as Hugh Judkins calls Roberta Payne in *WBW*), because they all know more or less acutely that they are cads and whores (Barlow simply replies to Pringle, 'We all are': *AM* 174). A harsh critic would argue that Powell's 'satire' only proves that something meaningless is indeed meaningless: that x equals x.

Powell's pre-war novels continually fall between the two stools of serious comment on the laughable futility of modern urban and suburban life and small-scale cynical farce. This causes certain uncomfortable feelings of indeterminacy in readers' mind. Beneath the well-made surface of light comedy we see a world of ego and will that invites a darker laughter and more serious reflections. However, when we look at it in the other way round, it cannot be denied that Powell's subject-matter is too small to fully contain his attempts, conscious or subconscious, at exploring a more acerbically serious dimension of comedy through the forms of the old comedy of manners. What we will see in this chapter is how this incompatibility gradually pushed Powell's novels into an uneasy malfunction. After Powell successfully demonstrated his comic technique in *AM*, his comedy begins to split into two unbridgeable layers, each at odds with the other, cornering the novels concerned in a dead-end. The facade of well-made, comfortably predictable comedy of manners begins to crumble, but at the same time, the flippancy of a cynical farce is still there, encumbering the characters' full deepening as participants in the more serious comedy of the battle of egoism. The awkwardness of *WBW*, Powell's last novel before the war, demonstrates the case in the clearest way: the narrator's reflections on power at the ending sit quite uncomfortably in the novel as a whole, because they adumbrate the existence of something that *WBW*'s format of light comedy fails to accommodate. Powell needed a larger receptacle for the idea of the comic he was gradually drawn to (if not fully consciously developing towards) – the comically futile, but at the same time deadly serious, power-games people play perennially, everywhere in the world. ²

² Considering that these pre-war novels of Powell are not very widely read, and that the featured characters are deliberately depicted as shallow, characterless and ultimately unmemorable, it might be of help if I provide a thumbnail sketch of each volume.

AM portrays the doings and love affairs of a group of young Londoners in the intellectual and artistic corner of society, through the eye of Atwater, a museum official. The group includes Hector Barlow and Raymond Pringle, painters who secretly despise each other; Harriet Twining, a writer who goes out with Pringle but ends up having an affair with Barlow and then Atwater; Lola, an artistic girl Atwater picks up at a party; Susan Nunnery, an ever-elusive girl Atwater admires; and Fotheringham, a seedy, alcoholic journalist.

V relates the journey of Lushington, a young London journalist, to a politically unstable

1. *Afternoon Men* (1931)

At the beginning of his long career, Anthony Powell was already an accomplished author. Like *X Trapnel*, whom he was going to create in a later period, Powell seems to have been obsessed with 'writing well' rather than creating something definitely 'new'. *AM* is indeed very well written in a terse prose very much in contrast with the sprawling style of *Dance*, self-contained with a neatly circular plot. The overall attitude of the author is also 'grown-up', fit for an age of elegant cynicism represented by such people as Noël Coward and (in a somewhat crazier and less comfortable way) Evelyn Waugh. In fact, when people take a casual glance at *AM*, they may take it for a novel written by an established author of mature age in a mood of light, offhand, prosperous disdain for the sordid affairs of the world. To put the point more harshly, it veers dangerously toward something people tend to write when they have secured a niche of their own in life, where they accept, with half resignation and half satisfaction, the fact that they are confined in a not wholly uncomfortable prison cell.

The young people in this novel also seem precociously mature, from Lola who looks like a 'prematurely vicious child' to Fotheringham, a seedy journalist who

Baltic country. Aboard the ship to the capital, he meets Ortrud Mavrin, the wife of a professor, and falls in love with her. He also meets two aristocrats; the self-styled 'Count' Bobel and the impoverished, ailing Count Scherbatcheff. At the legation, Da Costa, Lushington's London rival in love, is waiting. Lushington keeps meeting Ortrud, while Count Bobel picks up local women and Count Scherbatcheff's health declines until he dies. In the end, Ortrud and Da Costa are mistakenly killed in an assassination and Lushington returns to London and Lucy, his lethargic mistress.

FVD tells how Zouch, a painter of limited merit who is a self-styled 'superman', tries to marry into Passenger Court, the decaying country seat of the Passengers. While he is at it, Zouch inadvertently has an affair with Joanna Brandon, a girl bored to death by the stagnant country life. To prove to Mr Passenger, a father whose inner life is eroded by melancholy and frustration, that he is a suitable young man for his daughter Mary, Zouch takes part in a hunt and is killed in an accident.

A & P relates how Blore-Smith, an unattractive, timid but rich young man, is introduced to the seedy, international 'fast set'. The group includes Maltravers and Chipchase, who take Blore-Smith out to Paris and Berlin on the pretext of psychological treatment; Gaston de la Tour d'Espagne, a French aristocrat addicted to drugs; and Mrs Mendoza, a woman of society. After various humiliating experiences and a passing love affair with Mrs Mendoza, Blore-Smith finally succeeds in banishing Maltravers and Chipchase from his life.

WBW is a literary detective-story. In search for the elusive, supposedly demised travel writer T. T. Waring, Captain Hudson, an ardent fan of Waring and prospective author of his biography, meets Roberta Payne, a writer who claims to have slept with Waring, and begins to fancy her. Hudson's engagement with Beryl Pimley, a serious-minded daughter of a retired general, is cancelled. In the end, Roberta spurns the moneyless Hudson, and the literary search ends in a disaster. Waring turns out to be Beryl's missing brother; his writings are nothing but plagiarism from various other writers. Hudson returns to the army, disillusioned, and marries Beryl.

eternally groans over the loss of ‘the pleasant pasture of debonair insouciance’. Atwater, the characterless viewpoint character, accepts the invitation to just another party at the end of the volume, after he has gone through successive relationships with three different women and a bitter meditation on them that makes an island of stylistic disorder amid the microcosmic short sentences. That rounds off this party-going novel of petit bourgeois bohemians: he accepts the invitation, and at the same time he snugly accepts his confinement. From start to finish, there is no such thing for him as the outside of the small milieu he inhabits. And he himself is aware of that – with a young foggy’s resigned knowingness of the world. This limitedness of that world seems to constitute a *donnée* that readers are required to accept. They mustn’t ask if there is an outside existence where life is worthier, more directed and meaningful. *AM*’s accomplishment is on the brittle basis of such resignation, or ‘acceptance’ on the part of the writer and readers.

However, when we consider Powell’s progress as a novelist before the war, and its connection to the vast world of *Dance*, we can see that it might be irrelevant to disparage the lack of energy in *AM*. Powell started with the awareness that his novelistic space had already lost the vitality to give meaning to its autonomy. The inherent moral drive that guided Fielding’s or Austen’s narratives to the final solution of happy marriage had given place to lugubrious repetition. Powell’s technique of comic writing in *AM* is very accomplished and sure of itself; but it serves no moralistic or pragmatic purpose.

Nonetheless, a disturbing question arises here: if there is no coherent standard of morals, from where can the author’s offhand disdain toward the general sordidness of his characters be derived? Or is it no more than the cynical posturing of a bright young man? Powell’s writing seems to oscillate constantly between a scrupulous study of (and satire on) the meanness of the modern world: and a display of sure hand as an author of a light comedy in lower-grade ‘society’.

AM’s world is limited, but it is the only possible habitat for his characters. It is noteworthy that the novel begins in an indefinable place with a conversation on nothing in particular.³ Atwater’s opening words, ‘When do you take it?’ do not specify what ‘it’ is, and when Pringle’s answer suggests that they are talking about some medicine, we can’t see why they are talking about it (indeed, the talk about medicine comes to an end with these two lines). The place is nameless and characterless. ‘Everybody comes here’, Atwater tells Pringle (2), but we are given

³ For comparison, see *Decline and Fall*’s very descriptive opening, which clearly defines Scone College, Oxford as a site for knockabout comedy.

absolutely no idea why they are attracted to it; there is a bar in the room where they are sitting, the windows are open but look on to a well, and that's all we are told. Indeed, the stage can be any place with a bar and some windows facing a well; those who frequent it, among them Atwater and Pringle, who open the novel, can be any persons inclined to socialize in a club. On the next page, Atwater and Pringle are briefly described in terms of background, status and character. But there is nothing special about them: they are just persons hovering about in the sub-bohemian world, Pringle being slightly more unattractive than Atwater. There is not even the superhuman ordinariness of Paul Pennyfeather about them. They are not the kind of people to make a 'story'; their lives are without the backbone of a traditionally novelistic plot to give them a meaning. They are just stranded in this room without any purpose; and the place is not likely to yield any event worthy of attention.

Nevertheless, this nondescript place attracts Powell's characters and assimilates visitors of all kind to its autonomous confinement. Barlow's brother, a navy officer with apparently nothing to do with this world of seedy painters, musicians and culture administrators, is instantly made a part of the place by Barlow's cursory introduction ('You don't mind my brother, do you? He's in the navy and goes back tomorrow,' 6, which he keeps on repeating at the party that night). Pringle, new to the place, is at once forced to become a member of the club by his social and intellectual bully Barlow, with only some resigned resistance. Even the publisher Scheigan from America, an inaccessible outside place repeatedly and wistfully referred to by the characters, is quite ready to be a part of this apparently self-contained circle ('We're all humans here anyway...Let's enjoy ourselves. Let's have a good time,' 10-11). Such places (the club, the party venues, the boxing stadium, and Pringle's cottage) somehow compel people to be confined in them, but none can tell the source of this compulsion. Within this blind confinement, people collide with one another like balls on a billiard table, ruled by the law of physics rather than human emotion and reasoning (and, again as in billiards, the space outside the game table is regarded as nonexistent). *AM's* comedy is dehumanised: it's the comedy of a machine which eternally reproduces itself.⁴ *AM's* characters are nearer to slightly human automatons rather than human beings who reluctantly

⁴ See Dr Clutch, the deranged anthropologist who persecutes Atwater at the museum about the exhibition. When the Doctor asks if the exhibits are purchasable, Atwater thinks that 'the man had shown himself to be a genuine lunatic and not a border-line case who could create work for everyone on the staff' (41). In other words, Atwater thinks the Doctor's derangement puts him beyond the limitation of his own autonomous world. But the reverse is the case: the Doctor's brochure with an impossible title, the very symbol of his madness, gives him the pretext to return to the museum again and again. Deviation from human reason is not excluded from the system of comedy; it is firmly embedded there, sometimes taking it over wholesale.

follow the imposed routine. But *AM*'s comedy doesn't rectify their stiff routine movements. Powell doesn't suggest any way of re-humanizing the characters (or, when it comes to that, the reader as one of the 'bunch'; for Powell is addressing his general 'readers, the hypocrites' (to borrow Baudlaire's phrase), no matter whether they belong to the intellectual bohemian world or not). He, as the author, has here assimilated himself with the stale, awkwardly mechanized autonomy of repetitious comedy that serves no purpose and seemingly has no outside.

Slowly, but deliberately, the brooding edifice of seduction, creaking and incongruous, came into being, a vast Heath Robinson mechanism, dually controlled by them and lumbering gloomily down vistas of triteness. With a sort of heavy-fisted dexterity the mutually adapted emotions of each of them became synchronised, until the unavoidable anti-climax was at hand. (82)

This is Powell's description of the first intercourse between Atwater and Lola. The passage, another small island of winding long sentences, is to be amplified in the scene between Jenkins and Gypsy Jones in *BM*, twenty-two years later ('the impression that a long-established rite was to be enacted...with the compelling, detached formality of a nightmare...the extraordinary impression that there were three of us – perhaps even four...of whom the pair of active participants had been, as it were, projected from out of our normally unrelated selves', 256-7). Both Atwater and Jenkins are relating themselves to the procedure of seduction with detachment, from the outside. However, there is a major difference: while Jenkins conceives the process, rightly or wrongly, as a 'long-established rite' enacted since ancient times by the dancers in time, the narrator of *AM* compares it to the workings of a machine, nonsensical in concept – something severed from the perspective of time, confined in the prison cell of the here and now. More accurately, the spatial and temporal prison of 'the here and now' expands indefinitely into past and future: in *AM*, every stage of the scene is nothing more than some indefinite place people find themselves in, time is just a series of indefinite repetitions (marking, to borrow Robert K. Morris's phrase from his monograph on Powell, the characters' 'metamorphoses from afternoon men to mechanical men' [23]).

Fotheringham's alcoholic harangue (60-3), though apparently almost Joycean in its stream-of-consciousness style, is oriented by the speaker toward something quite different. In spite of his assertion that for him 'the present and the past do not exist,' he has a clear plan of past – present – future in his mind, namely the past as

'pleasant pastures of debonair insouciance,' the present when 'We are wasting our youth,' and the future as the 'grey, eerie and terrible waste lands' in which people 'would sell...their honour itself for a pint of bitter,' 'love has come to mean the most boring form of lust,' and so on and so forth. But the irony is that (a) it is doubtful if the arcadia he refers to really existed (he, though young, has been hacking for a spiritualist magazine for five consecutive years) and (b) his powerful evocation of the future in fact summarises his present situation. Fotheringham's vision functions as a small window of temporality in this novel of the here and now, but that's only to let us paradoxically realize that time is a ritual repetition of itself for the characters. We can regard his speech as a preparation for the time scheme of *Dance*, and when we do so, we see that the 'here-now' confinement of comedy in *AM* was a necessary ladder to be discarded when climbed.

Even Susan Nunnery, Atwater's 'absurdly hopeless and impossible' (214) true love, is not exempted from the determining structure of *AM*. When he first sees her, Atwater thinks:

She had not the appearance of belonging to the room at all. She was separate. Her entrance into the room made her the immediate object of perception. It was the effect of a portrait...where the values are those of two different pictures and the figure seems to have been superimposed.
(23-4)

In short, Atwater 'perceives' her as something extraneous to the world of the interminable repetition of seedy, drunken parties. But the phrase 'the immediate object of perception' suggests not only that she was somehow conspicuous, but that the 'superimposed' effect is taking place within Atwater's imagination (also see part one's title, 'Montage,' which suggests a manipulation of images). Indeed, Susan is really a woman who can find her places in this comic world with at least as much ease as do Lola and Harriet Twining. She breaks a date with Atwater and phones him from where someone puts her up; after the proclamation that she 'hate[s] being in love' (128), she chooses to be taken to New York by Verelst, a slightly shady social climber who poses as a representative of the authentic international society (we should ask, incidentally, where on earth such an 'authentic' society might be). Here, even America becomes an extension of the seedily comic party world where nothing but self-advancement matters; only, Atwater, Fotheringham, and others of that set lack the volition to be mobile, even within the boundaries of their enclosed existence.

No matter where people go, they cannot escape from the confinement of comedy. Pringle, at one moment so complacent about the relationship with his fiancée Harriet and at peace with the world surrounding him (looking at the sea with Atwater, he says, 'There's something *universal* about love,' 171, my italics), the next moment finds Harriet with Barlow in a darkened room.⁵ He tries to escape from the sordidness of the place by swimming off into the open sea, alone, stark naked and determined never to return. But his plan crumbles from the start: he is unaware that Harriet and Atwater, soon to make perfunctory love in the nearby woods, are watching him, degrading his return to nature by way of death to a farcical peep-show.⁶ And of course, he cannot carry out his plan to the end. Just 'decid[ing] not to' (197), he returns in a fisherman's clothes; his suit, the outer shell of this hollow man, having been taken away piece by piece by the rest of the party. Pringle and Harriet embrace each other with their heads down like a tableau of love, rather a touching scene in itself; but that is only 'for a few seconds' (198) of pastiche. What follows is the ugly haggling over the price of Pringle's life (in which Pringle himself tries to reduce it to a minimum), and then Pringle in his 'old form' (205). People cannot escape from the comedy of this world as long as they live, but death cannot be an escape into an external space, either: it is no more than an annihilation of all time-space structures for the one who dies. Pringle realizes that, and returns before he reaches the ultimate limit of comedy.

That is also the case with Atwater, the narrative viewpoint of *AM*. At the end of the volume, Atwater sleepwalks around London, thinking about the hollowness of love and life he has come face to face with, especially about Susan who seems to have escaped into the "other" world, freeing herself from the fashionable substitution of illusion for truth. But, as Susan is in fact firmly installed in the system of relative values intrinsic to the comic world, so Atwater cannot but be restored to that 'reality'. This is done by the hook of the umbrella always carried around unrolled by Fotheringham, the eternal, unconsciously tough survivor who thereby provides an extremely appropriate and neat rounding off to this down-to-earth account of the

⁵ 'What would you have done if you'd found yourself similarly placed with Harriet?' Barlow asks Atwater the next day (195): here, too, what matters is not love but 'development' in time and space. 'It seems unprofitable to discuss hypothetical situations of that kind,' Atwater replies, but the force of the 'situation' is not hypothetical for Atwater, either: 'similarly placed' with Harriet in the pseudo-pastoral closure of the woods, Atwater has just slept with her.

⁶ 'You both look very knowing this morning,' Barlow tells them when they return to Pringle's cottage (185). 'Knowingness' was a word Powell used to describe Lola, very probably repeated here deliberately. It's the knowingness of the inside world and the structure of its comic repetition and reduction of human conduct into a mechanical farce.

perpetual circular movement of comedy and its confining power.

Thus, everything is comically downgraded in *AM*, and Powell does it with a far surer hand than an average debut novelist: as Michael Gorra points out in his book, Powell's stylistic achievement in 'fill[ing] the novel with a cotton wadding that cushions people, events, and even sentences from each other to describe a world made of boredom' (64) is not to be ignored. But we should ask once again whether this world is really the world in general, or the sub-bohemian world as convenient locus for comedy. In this consciously small, neatly cut format, things that seriously remind us of the vanity and the egoistic struggles generated by the formal framework of 'real' social life (for example, Fotheringham's harangue; Atwater and Lola's sex scene; Atwater's stream-of-consciousness walk through London) are rather out of place.

Such a neat format is not usually appropriate for a literary debut, but in Powell's case, he had to begin his long pre-war approach run toward *Dance* with the construction of the accomplished circularity and enclosure of *AM*. The strong hold of hollow but inexorable comedy, or farce, had to be assessed before it was gradually revised by Powell's developing ideas on the personal battle of will which could be sketched only formulaically within that format.

2. *Venusberg* (1932)

A crucial question about Powell's pre-war novels concerns the extent to which they may be taken seriously. On the one hand, they have T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' or Hemingway's early short stories and *The Sun Also Rises* in their background;⁷ but on the other hand, it cannot be denied that they purport to be light farces (or that they follow the form of light farce). Readers constantly have this dilemma: while dismissing them as mere consumable cynical comedies might be letting some important elements escape, there always is the danger of over-interpretation on the part of readers.

Among the five pre-war novels, *V* is the one that is nearest to pure farce. People's personalities are utterly flattened, and elements of laughter rely very heavily on traditionally comic set pieces; so much so that one might suspect that the novel is mocking the hollowness of farce. *V* is a rehash of *AM* – and one that takes its stage in a country whose reality is on the Ruritanian level (according to the review that

⁷ For Powell's early interest in Hemingway, see his *Messengers of Day*, 110-111.

appeared in the *TLS*, the original wrapper had the very word ‘Ruritanian’ on it). Even as an extravaganza, this novel fails: it offers nothing “extravagant” – merely stale farce that cannot evoke laughter. When its stage is moved to Ruritania, the brittleness of the neatly formed world of *AM* is exposed (though, on the other hand, it cannot be denied that, even here, there is a theme common to all Powell novels – namely, the loss of a sense of the reality of the world).

Like the film Lushington and Ortrud watch in the Baltic capital, *V* is ‘neatly put together’ with a comic circular movement (London and Lucy – the Baltic capital and Ortrud – London and Lucy again); but, at the same time, it is rather ‘credible without convincing’ (84). Just as Count Scherbatcheff’s life dwindles in a mechanical sequence and is concluded with the blunt, throwaway narrative proclamation, ‘And then one day Count Scherbatcheff died’ (140) and just as Ortrud and Da Costa die redundant, uncalled-for deaths, so the lives of Lushington, Count Bobel and many others just go on with the disjointedly comic hollowness of a talkie ‘drama’ downgraded into a dumb-show.

Drama is denied in *V*: All is melodrama, and when a melodrama is looked at from the outside, it suddenly turns into burlesque. Powell makes his hero Lushington trace the form of a melodrama, reluctantly, knowing that drama is denied him and seeing what he is doing with the detachment of the audience of a burlesque (or, in the term Powell repeatedly uses in his novels, a musical comedy).

However, *V* is not, as it might have been, an account of Lushington’s venture into a burlesque country and safe return to sedate, rational London as a disenchanted but wiser man. Lushington’s return to London has the effect of expanding the burlesque to the whole of his life: the unnamed country is not an isolated island of burlesque (as Azania was in *Black Mischeif*) but an aspect of Lushington’s life as a burlesque comedy in which nothing (including love, life and death) can be taken absolutely seriously. When he comes out from the newspaper building with his mission to the Baltic country, he tries to think of a ‘joke, one of the good universal kind’ (3) to round off the article he is writing at present (apparently one on Modern Love), but can’t come upon anything. However, the joke is there in his own life; or rather, his life itself is turning into a thin joke, whether ‘good’ and ‘universal’ or not. The circumstances of his being sent to a Baltic capital where he will meet Da Costa, whom his mistress Lucy loves, are reminiscent of Lehár’s *Die Lustige Witwe* and many other good, old operettas. Indeed, as the narrator says, it has ‘the tang of a stale joke, a flavour used-up but at the same time strong and disturbing’ (4). And the characters Powell puts on stage are, almost without exception, the usual ‘musical comedy’ bunch – comic foreign noblemen, a comic professor, and even a

traditionally comic servant. However, though this comic frame is still forceful, it is at the same time 'used-up': the protagonists don't have enough comic spirit to enact the burlesque to the end. They are comic just because they are types that have been used and reused in farces. It might be possible for us to see here a postmodernistic, elegantly languid play with form, a comment on the staleness of farce (see the 'stage policemen out of a knock-about farce' who stand by Da Costa's body, 170). To borrow Neil McEwan's phrase on *A & P*, Powell might be 'consistently asking us to look thoughtfully at farce rather than just to laugh' [*Anthony Powell* 31]). But surely Powell runs the risk that his novel will implode due to the utter staleness of its material: his novel comes dangerously close to the reflexive suggestion that farce is empty because it is empty. As Geoffrey Ellis pointed out as early as 1939, 'the attempt to present the inconclusiveness of experience resulted finally in a form of presentation that was inconclusive in itself' (395).

At the opening, Powell's account of Lucy's life up till the present, describing the progress of a shabby female rake (10-11), has a flippant, superficially cynical touch ('Her father...lost his wife's money by judicious investments'; 'But his wife was a woman who looked always on the bright side, so that in later life Lucy used to say she could never remember which of her parents had contributed most towards her elopement'), which is appropriate for something like Noel Coward's tongue-in-the-cheek comic song 'Saga of Jenny', but seems rather out of place in an Anthony Powell novel, even in his lighter-weight pre-war vein. However the cynicism here is not Powell's but Lucy's (the little phrase 'Lucy used to say' suggests that here Powell is, so to speak, recording her own words, and that she is a woman who cannot account for her life in terms other than those seen in these passages. She can narrate her own life only with the cynical gestures of a seedy melodrama. And Da Costa, the only object of 'real' emotion in her life, is really even less 'serious' a person than she is. His existence is a blank space that takes up quite a bit of room, comfortably and strongly armoured in inanimate egoism. Interested in no one but himself, he cannot bear to have relationship with anyone including Lucy (although the awareness of her affection gratifies his ego), and has taken refuge in the 'purely social contacts' (7) of his position as an honorary attaché. And the ego he preserves has no substance at all: it is just there, imperturbable, unaware of the embarrassment his existence creates for others, taking slight pleasure in mentally bullying Lushington without purpose. He is a pure void: it is impossible to detect any depth whatever in his personality. Neither tragedy nor comedy in the outside world can affect him, but he isn't even bored. He has completely assimilated himself to the

autonomous mechanical system of diplomatic socializing, in effect absorbed into the introverted system of a lifeless, shabbily decadent musical comedy. Lucy and Da Costa are really a matching couple in their egoism and reliance on the hollow frame of melodrama and/ or burlesque. They may well be open to a more serious treatment (in the manner of Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*), but Powell refuses, or neglects, to let them rise above the level of flippant, flat type-sketches. Placed between them, there is no other resource for the feebly good-natured Lushington than to let himself be engulfed in the hollow burlesques in which Lucy and Da Costa have chosen to play. His departure for the Baltic capital means nothing more than transportation from one place of stale farce to another; the passengers on board the ship to the Baltic country are, so to speak, doomed by the author to be the characters of a farce detached from the reality of the world. When Ortrud Mavrin seduces Lushington on the deck of the ship, she says,

I am a woman of the world. I know men a little. But is that any reason why they should behave in that way to me [she refers to the wooing of the two Counts]? ...With you, I feel safe. (30-1)

However, their being persons of 'the world' does not guarantee that they have really lived a life full of significant substance. This sense of unreality is something common to the writers of the 'lost generation', but *V* lacks relevance as a comment on the hollow, farcical unreality of modern life – and, as a consequence, its plausibility is also undermined. The characters refuse to be taken seriously. They are content with their positions in a farce. We cannot but wonder where on earth their 'world' is.

This is especially so in Count Bobel's case: judging from his behaviour in the Baltic capital, his worldly experience largely consists of such things as having a night out with prostitutes with concocted aristocratic names, robbing a valet of his fiancée, and displaying a toy pistol on the road near a state party venue and getting arrested. He is content with the repetition of nasty petty adventures, farcical without being lively, yet still enjoyable for him as a burlesque villain destined to survive (in that respect, he is a distant ancestor of Mr Jack in *FK*). As Count Scherbatcheff knows his fate and in fact accepts, without complaining, the mechanical process of meaningless dwindling into death, so Count Bobel knows and accepts, willingly, that he is chained by fate to the mechanical continuation of hollow merrymaking. The scene in which he is turned out of Lushington's hotel room fully shows Count Bobel's relationship with the comic merry-go-round of the world (the scene leading

to the event is one of the most well-made farcical set pieces Powell has created, describing the repeated opening and closure of a society door with an expert touch). Lushington, in his room unable to find his evening trousers, hears from the receptionist that 'a gentleman and two ladies' want to see him, and asks her to send them up, thinking that the man must be the American ambassador; only to find that the three are Count Bobel and the two seedy *demi-mondaines*. Desperate to avoid being seen with them, he tells the Count that 'the door opposite leads to [his] bedroom' and that it is 'an important moment in [his] life', making use of the fact he has shed his trousers. The Count is completely taken in, shaking with laughter: 'You English! ...I myself was so slow that I thought you were putting your clothes on. Never for one moment did I guess that you were taking them off' (137-8). Count Bobel is so engrossed in his world of seedily erotic boudoir comedy that he cannot see the world in more serious ways; and Lushington, knowing the 'forcefulness' of traditional comedy, has appealed to it with complete success. When, after the death of Count Scherbacheff, Ortrud and Da Costa, Lushington meets him again on board the ship back to London, Bobel remarks to Lushington:

In Russia we have an expression – *nitchevo*...It means *nothing* or, more freely, *what does it matter?* ...Say to yourself – *nitchevo*'. (186)

It is possible for us to hear an echo of Hemingway's *nada* in 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place' here, but only in a comically downgraded version (the effect heightened by the fact that the Count is referring to sea-sickness).

The life of the 'woman of the world' Ortrud in the Baltic city, where 'the unreality was something in itself' and '[n]ot the product of historical association nor even the superimposed up-to-dateness' (41), is no less formalistic, and she even seems to enjoy being part of that very system, imposing an ever-present comic routine on the domestic life around her, but, at the same time, she has an animal-like quickness and 'hardness'. The conversation between her and Professor Mavrin about the necessity of the latter's changing into formal dress ('Panteleimon, do not you think that your clothes are a little incorrect now that we have friends to see us?' ...'You wish that I put on evening dress again, my dear wife?' 'Would it not be becoming, Panteleimon?' 'Very well, my dear wife. What you think is no doubt best,' 64) has a comically absurd, detached formality, both in language and substance. And, to add to all the absurdity, when the Professor reappears in full evening dress, the guests are all leaving ('My poor Panteleimon, you have had this trouble and now our guests are departing. I have been the cause of all your trouble.' 'It is no trouble, my

dear Ortrud' etc, 67); Ortrud having dexterously made a secret, out-of-the-way appointment to meet Lushington at his hotel, with the quickness of a predator jumping at her prey. On one plane, Ortrud represents the very system of stale social comedy; on another, her animal spirit resists its autonomous formality.

The contradiction in this character is a rare element in *V* that feebly moves toward saving it from being a 'purely formal' kind of farce without a trace of seriousness. In her, two characteristics exist on the same plane, one incessantly contradicting the other. Her animal hardness exposes the hollowness of the social rituals, and sometimes the social structure itself, that make people look like half-animated, half-inanimate automatons (in this sense, she is a forerunner of Jean Duport and Mona in *Dance*); however, the farcical unreality of the Baltic capital, contrived by the author, prevents us from accepting the binding force of the social context depicted. Given this circumstance, her resistance can only be a matter of melodramatic gesture.

The love of Ortrud and Lushington is consummated, or comes nearest to consummation, halfway through the volume, in the abandoned site for a state institution for mental defectives, a place 'left without meaning' where 'it seemed easier to feel meaning where there was perhaps none' (111). They confirm the impossibility of her coming over to England; Ortrud says 'Good-bye' in his arms. A melodrama is almost consummated here, but it is consumed as soon as it is consummated. After a moment of rapture (Ortrud cries '*Mein Liebling!*' in her native language), their affair can only dwindle into a routine with a time-limit ('Sometimes it occurred to Lushington that soon he would be going back to England...He often saw Ortrud,' 141). Ortrud's death at the end of the volume is quite redundant, for, in any case, Lushington is leaving soon. When she leaves him with Da Costa, Ortrud gives Lushington a flower which was on her dress: a dainty but unnecessarily melodramatic gesture of leave-taking, reciprocated next morning by Lushington (in yesterday's evening clothes, as if to be true to the hollow formality of the comedy he has been a part of) picking off its petals one by one.

Lushington leaves the fantastic country in this way:

Waldemar and Courtney remained at their respective salutes...prodigally dramatic, a soldier was standing on one of the bastions of the central tower...It was the final and rather masterly shot of the reel. (181)

But the dramatic 'end' mark here is ironical; for, while a drama is always provided with a definite ending, the world's production of melodramas never ends. A melodrama

is something eternally reproducible and consumable; there, tragedy is made relative, comedy loses its driving force. As Waldemar's phrase ('This is a grave and tragic episode') makes Lushington think, 'Here then was that *rather* astonishing mystery about which so much had been said...' (171, my italics), so the final shot of the city is only 'rather' masterly.

Underlining the relativism, on the final page of the volume, Lucy says to Lushington, 'I suppose I am *more or less* yours now' (191, my italics). They have to keep on playing, half-heartedly, a melodrama that is 'rather' comic and at the same time rather tragic, but in the final analysis more comic than tragic because of its flat continuity, both in time and in space ('From what you say it must all have looked rather like this,' 190). But the question remains: are these frivolous people representative of 'modern life', or are they doomed just because *they* are hollow, directionless, etc – because they are characters from a genre comedy? This question also casts its shadow on *FVD*, in which Powell began to face the more serious subject of 'power' in comedy, which was to become his lifetime obsession.

3. *From a View to a Death* (1933)

Among Anthony Powell's five pre-war novels, *FVD* marks a turning point. In *AM* and *V*, he relied on a traditional circular movement for his comedies. After all his experiences, Atwater accepts the invitation to just another party; Lushington returns to London and his half-hearted love affair with Lucy. There is a sense of the end of one cycle, but never of a life; life must go on in more or less the same way as before, and the comic rounds of the characters can never end. In other words, these are comic novels following the traditional structure of 'framed' comedy, however meaningless their substance might be. But *FVD* ends with the death of the hero Zouch, an 'Übermensch' painter with an ambition to 'marry well' into a family living in a country house. For Zouch, there is no beginning again from scratch; he is decisively thrown out of the endless cycle of the autonomous comic world.

A traditional comedy in a similar setting would have ended with the banishment of the villain from the house after a comic unmasking of his character, as in the case of *Tartuffe*. The villain is not killed; his banishment is part of the comic pattern. The house, after being the stage for a comedy generated by the insinuating villain, is restored to order; the people in it wiser for the experience. But here, *Passenger Court* and the country around it are approaching collapse; they don't have the vitality to take Zouch in and to banish him finally to let him begin his petty evil

plotting all over again. The binding force of the Court is too weak to provide the characters with the framework of an ordered social comedy that teaches readers how to behave in order to survive in real-life society. It has lost the vitality to constitute a frame for healthy, edifying comedy; the irony is that it is Zouch himself, an intruder treating life 'as a sort of quick-lunch counter where you helped yourself and all the snacks were free' (18), who has to see the Court as such a frame. He has to marry into the Passengers and construct Passenger Court as an autonomous microcosm of pastoral comedy. As a painter with not much artistic talent and social standing, he feels the need to insinuate himself into the life style of a country gentleman; maybe an artistic one, but definitely not in bohemian sense of the word. But Passenger Court doesn't readily provide him with the frame he needs; first of all, he must put Passenger Court and Mary Passenger in the frame of the ideal country life. Zouch must put the place in a frame, if he himself is to be framed.⁸ A clear parallel can be drawn between Powell as the author and Zouch as a painter. The author must frame the entities concerned by the act of writing, by making use of a literary genre, in this case that of the comic novel; Zouch must reconstruct Passenger Court as his potential home, by putting his life as a painter in the frame of country life; and both fail. Zouch cannot settle into his ideal of a country gentleman's life, and thus *FVD* is a failure as a 'comic' novel. Like a conjurer's 'well-known and rather irksome trick' that has to be 'finish[ed] quickly' (an expression Powell used in *AM* [44]), the disaster of Zouch, the 'tuft-hunter' and a society 'fox', proceeds mechanically, just as foreshadowed on the epigraph page by the quotation from the fox-hunting song 'John Peel' ('From a drag to a chase, from a chase to a view/ From a view to a death in the morning'). This is different from the predictable scheme of a traditional comedy. Life is not assimilated into the comical round. Instead, comedy is assimilated into death. Passenger Court and the town and fields around it are not, in the final analysis, a locus for comedy; as Robert K. Morris puts it in his monograph, '[t]he hitherto farcical tour...becomes a sardonic circuit leading to frustration and insanity' (49). As Zouch is driven to a death by the deadness of the place he tries to encircle as a site of happy pastoral life, so this novels is killed as a comedy by the deadness of the material it purports to frame as comedy.

⁸ See the scene in which Zouch first sets foot in the Court: 'He walked towards the room opposite...Through an open door he could see French windows, which allowed a narrow shaft of yellow sun to fall in the hall and throw up a highlight from the floorboards on to a picture[s]...copies of copies of romantically conceived Italian ruins' (2-3). The effect is like frames framed in a framed frame; but the ultimately framed landscapes have no substance at all, being 'copies of copies of romantically conceived ruins'. Frames abound in Passenger Court, but nothing worth framing is there.

However, a disturbing question arises. Most of the characters of *FVD* are formed in a farcically flat manner. Is there much significance in exposing the flatness of the characters of a farce? Isn't it going too far, as Morris does, to find in such a glaringly farcical character as Major Fosdick 'the most eloquent example of the gentry's decline' (53)? The 'Übermenschen' Zouch and Mr Passenger seem unable to find appropriate places in the overall atmosphere of farce, and the 'Übermensch' idea, promising at the opening, never achieves the full development it deserves. It is almost as if the depth of their mental hollowness and the serious intensity of their conflict had been frivolously dismissed from the start.

Zouch's specialty is 'bright, lifeless portraits that would have been hung in the academy' (reminding us, incidentally, of the lifeless landscapes by his contemporary 'Übermensch', Adolf Hitler, in the days when he aspired to be let into the Academy of Vienna). He is a society painter living by preying on his sitters. He is a 'sitter-killer' in two senses: on one plane, he frames the sitter in the bright lifelessness of his painting; on the other, he 'kills' the sitters (especially women), in that he makes them objects of his social exploitations. For Zouch, seeing is killing, a particular form of the quest for power. But it should be noted that in this novel Zouch not only sees but is seen, as James Tucker appropriately points out in his monograph (28). He is not the 'eye' to the whole volume (as Atwater and Lushington were) but a character who is aware only of part of its plot; he cannot unobtrusively drift through the pages, but has to be seen to forcibly ride his way through them. He tries to force a frame on his subjects, not only the sitters for his portraits but also Passenger Court, the object of his mental landscape painting. His strategy is to lay siege to Passenger Court with a frame; but he has to meet his equal, another *Übermensch*, there.

Mr Passenger is an *Übermensch* not because he actively dismantles the frame Zouch tries to impose on him, but because the helplessness and mortality accumulated in his inner life refuses to be framed by Zouch's (supposedly) super-powerful 'Übermensch touch'. Mr Passenger is already dead at heart, but the meaninglessness of his death is forceful enough to dismantle the frame of meaning Zouch wants to impose. His inside has been 'gnawed with megalomania,' for '[w]hat he wanted to be he did not know. He knew only what he did not want to be' (26). His person has the same structure as Passenger Court and the town around it: on the surface, they seem to have a traditionally stylized structure, but their inside hollowness dismantles the framework, and in its turn puts a frame of death and anti-climax, devoid of any lively substance, round Zouch's plot of comfortable country life gained by a commercial love affair with Mary Passenger, and round the

novel's country house comedy of sham love and inept hunting.

The only successful love affair Zouch has in this novel is the short one with Joanna Brandon, whom he cannot afford to be in love with if he is to pursue his plot. The first time they come near to starting an affair is during a rehearsal of the 'pageant' held at Passenger Court, and their affair is consummated during the actual performance.⁹ The first time, both Zouch and Joanna feel the matter is proceeding too fast: 'because having none of his experience and being not at all opposed to the course that he seemed to intend that matters should take, she thought that perhaps in some way unknown to herself she had already ruined everything' (71). The lovers are conscious only of the protocol of love, the frame their love should adapt itself to. But they fail even in the attempted adaptation. Everything is ruined: the daily life is a field of ruins, where a group of the dead who are unaware of their deaths enact the deadly pageant of formal repetition.

They do manage to get into bed, mainly because Joanna wants something to 'happen' in her life. But the love making is excluded from the frame: the scene skips to the morning after:

He disengaged himself from her and, getting out of the bed softly, he went across the room to the open window. He looked out of it towards the fields, at this hour unnaturally close to the house. The morning light brought them just beyond the lawn. The grey, mysterious English fields.
(138)

The play is already over: the Court has as good as collapsed, and an open field lies in front of Zouch. It is one of the 'lovely views' it is 'part of [Zouch's] profession to look out for' (140), but at the same time it is an open stage for the deathly knockabout scene for him. He must come out in the open and, to settle as a country gentleman, construct a framework of a love affair this time with Mary Passenger, as he produces her portrait ('Joanna had cried because he had made love to her too violently, and now Mary was crying because he had not made love to her violently enough...Scenes like this were becoming far too common in his life,' 142). There seems to be a big jump between these sentences. Zouch attends a fox hunt to show that he can ride as a country gentleman does, but is thrown off by the horse, and dies;

⁹ This pageant takes its material from the Restoration court, but the setting is quite without historical accuracy. It is a restoration of an era of decadent courtly love, but the stage, the deadly Passenger Court, is a complete mislocation. The pageant cannot be expected to be accurate in historical details because the stage manager, Mr Passenger, detests it. The frame itself is mislocated here. See Robert K. Morris's monograph (67-8).

while the rest of the characters pass away from the plot quietly. Major Fosdick has a nervous breakdown and is taken to a nursing home; ¹⁰ Mrs Brandon dies unnoticed; Joanna departs for London apparently for no purpose. For the Passengers, who have failed to become real passengers and are left at the Court, ‘There nothing else to do’ as Betty Passenger remarks. Everyone is dead, or as good as dead.

Zouch has to die because he has tried to put a frame of happy rural life around the reign of death suppressing the life in Passenger Court, and has been defeated in the attempt. ‘He’s an ambitious little brute whom Mary has taken a great fancy to for some reason. She’d have a fit if she knew some of the things about him that I do,’ says Betty, but she is, in spite of her vicious sharpness, too lazy to let Mary know.

Traditionally, the comic villain is taken into the circle of comedy by being banished: he is laughed at and thrown out, but that in fact means he has been released on bail on condition that he be kept under watch in a remote corner of the system of comedy. We are relieved and amused by his banishment, which leaves the rigid control of the system unshaken. Sometimes a resistance is dreamt of; but it never succeeds in real life. Then, is it possible to regard Zouch as a trickster who slips through the surveillance network of utilitarian comedy at the cost of his life, and deconstructs the workings of such comedy? If so, *FVD* is a comedy that escapes from and laughs at the endless loop of traditional comedy aimed at educating people into domestic life; but it should be repeated that this is done at the cost of the comic life of the work. Readers cannot but wonder. ‘The frame of comedy is certainly destroyed – but to what purpose?’ What arises here is, yet again, the farce-versus-satire issue. If the people around Passenger Court were characterized with the predictable but nevertheless reliable roundedness of the characters of Austen novels, the shock of such subversive act wouldn’t have been small. But, even in this novel, Powell seems undecided whether he should completely throw away his pre-war mode of farce. With Mr Passenger’s Compton-Burnettian suffocated egoism at one end of the scale, and Major Fosdick – a pure product of the author’s fantasy – at the other, this novel reserves the mode of traditional farce as a fallback position, while destroying the frame of traditional comedy. And as long as farce remains merely a fallback position, *FVD* cannot fulfil itself as farce. Zouch seems to be perpetually perplexed between the two poles; at the end, he is lightly disposed of by a half-heartedly farcical gesture.

¹⁰ Catastrophe comes for the Major, too, when he comes out in the open: his transvestism, until then kept in the boundary of his private room, is exposed to Mr Passenger. The Major quietly retires to have a breakdown, but Mr Passenger can make nothing out of this revelation: after his return to the Court, he and his wife form a kind of bond in their impotent inanity.

Due to this awkward cohabitation of genres, *FVD*, a novel about lifelessness in the lives of certain people, itself degenerates into lifelessness.

When, at a later period, Kenneth Widmerpool – a monster of will who is comparable with, but far more elaborately characterised than, the pathetic little ‘superman’ Zouch – was created, Powell probably had *FVD* in mind as a failed prototype. The traditional comic structures that rebuke the likes of Tartuffe or Falstaff are tacitly taken to represent an inherent morality in society that ultimately will not tolerate these charming but disruptive rogues; in *FVD*, this inherent morality has ceased to operate in the corrupt post-WWI society. But Zouch is destroyed arbitrarily in a gesture derived from the obsolete mode, now merely functioning as an empty framework of farce. In contrast, in *Dance*, the will-power of Widmerpool is more realistically allowed to prosper. He may sometimes be absurd; but his movements can have a formidable impact, especially as it gathers impetus as his career develops, surprising and intimidating the weaker-minded characters around him, including Nicholas Jenkins.

4. *Agents and Patients* (1936)

A & P is at once the most flippant and the most brutal of Powell’s pre-war novels. Powell treats Blore-Smith, definitely the least attractive of his pre-war heroes with a cruelly bullying attitude. Such an approach would not be so surprising in someone like Powell’s friend and literary rival Evelyn Waugh, whose *Vile Bodies* has a hysterical, nightmarishly fast development from which Powell probably got a hint. But it is quite disturbing when we look at Powell’s development as a writer of disenchanted but ultimately not cynical comedies. In fact, *A & P* is the black sheep among Powell’s pre-war novels: it makes readers wonder if it is a kind of novelistic vacation (like the ‘holidays’ Maltravers and Chipchase enjoy in Paris and Berlin) in which the author gives vent to his repressed sadistic inclinations through the medium of farce, or an uneasy but necessary stepping stone for Powell towards *Dance*.

It cannot be denied that there is an element of the former in this novel. Undoubtedly, some things worth more deeply delving into are left untouched or just cursorily mentioned, while Powell lets himself enjoy directing the frantic acceleration of the plot. For instance, there is the relationship between Maltravers and his wife Sarah, probably a prototype of that horrible, emotionally overloaded Maclintick household in *CCR*. Similarly, the mercurial character of Mrs Mendoza – verging on light schizophrenia – remains unsatisfactorily two-dimensional, a defect

Powell makes up for by the creation of Mrs Andriadis in *BM* and *AW*.) This novelistic neglect of organic development of the plot is a major factor in letting *A & P* fall between the two stools of a picaresque novel featuring an innocent in the successive crazy events of a dangerous world and a comic description of a crumbling, decadent society. However, *A & P*, though not flawless, is a novel marking Powell's further progress towards *Dance*. He attempts to describe the battles of will between people of various positions and personalities, in which they veer dangerously towards brutal inhumanity; a theme that comes into full bloom in *Dance*. The title, derived from John Wesley's sermon,¹¹ shows Powell's unprecedented inclination towards an explicit, structured study of the human power struggle – something that is to become Nicholas Jenkins's lifetime obsession. That is also evident in the dictum put forward by the novel that human beings are either 'agents' or 'patients' (though here, as in *Dance*, a self-seeking manipulator and a victimized wimp are not so far apart as they first appear, and indeed sometimes interchangeable). Powell's inclination towards thematic interpretation of life had already begun before the war. What emphasizes that is the use of 'explanatory' images (notably the street-performers who have to raise some money before one of them can escape from the chain), which is going to become an essential (and sometimes over-used) device in *Dance*.

However, while *Dance* delves into the relationships of myriad powers with a deliberate, almost ponderous slow-motion technique, *A & P* is a novel full of fast journeys; transportations so frantic that they create a sense of vertigo in which readers and Blore-Smith lose themselves, given scarcely enough time to see through the ever-changing structure of power encircling them. (There is much stress on the disorientating mechanisms of the twentieth century – cars, films, and even the wildly implausible final aeroplane.) With Blore-Smith, readers are incessantly whisked from one place to another: the stage changes from London to Paris to Berlin to the English countryside, featuring a film director, an amateur psychoanalyst, a society woman, a retired naval officer chasing her, a bizarrely anglicised French aristocrat, a prostitute called Yoyo, a German film director with a hook in place of a hand, an English actor who can play any role comparatively convincingly, and a lot of others. It is worthy of note that three of the main characters have a name connected with transportation: *Maltravers*, *Chipchase*, and that impossibly named Gaston de la *Tour d'Espagne*. But, at the same time, their names also suggest that their travels are unstable and displaced: *Maltravers*, *Chipchase*, and a Frenchman called de la *Tour d'Espagne*. At

¹¹ Sermon LXII, I. 4. For the full text, see *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 6, 267-277.

one moment they are here, at the next they are there, not knowing where their journey is leading. *AM*'s epigraph - 'as if they had heard that enchanted horn of Astolpho...which never sounded but all his auditors were mad, and for fear ready to make away with themselves...' - is more appropriate to this novel. Astolpho's horn, in this case, is Gaston de la Tour d'Espagne's coaching horn, blown ineffectively:

...several screeching sounds came from the farther side. Isolated, creaking notes, as from some creature in pain...The Marquis was sitting on the window-seat with a coaching-horn in his hand. He continued to make unsuccessful efforts to blow this and merely waved them with his left hand as acknowledgement of their arrival. (186-7)

Indeed, when these 'bored barbarians' (a phrase used by V. S. Pritchett in his 1960 essay) blindly and impulsively desire just another change of places, they look more like 'some creature in pain' than human beings. They want to escape from the stale enjoyment in one place, and look for another 'good time' in another place. But there is no such thing as fresh enjoyment: they cannot but rely on the old bag of tricks containing night clubs, drinks, prostitutes (male and female), and ineffective attempts at love. The staleness of their enjoyment degrades the scenes into a fast-played reel of routine knockabout comedy. However hard people try to escape from the bind of such automated comedy, there is no way out. They are barbarous animals, but they are animals in a cage, like the gorilla Maltravers and Chipchase look at in a Berlin zoo. Some of them just keep on looking for the exit to the outside; not knowing that, for them, there is no outside to this stale world. Others accept their entrapment, and turn to bully and exploit fellow animals in the cage; knowing that, once encased behind the bars, animals are no longer able to return to the outdoor life.

A & P opens with the closure of a story: 'Chipchase, judging it prudent, from an increasingly set expression on Maltravers's face, to bring the story of his emotional life to an end' (1). As Chipchase himself admits, his 'emotional life' means just another sordid love affair; but he, at the same time, objects to the notion that 'just because one's love affairs are sordid it doesn't matter whether or not they go wrong.' He doesn't mind the endless repetition of sordid short stories in his life; he just wants to exact as much profit as possible from such eternal repetition; and so does the hearer of Chipchase's story. These two villains are so alike in substance that it is sometimes difficult to tell which is which. Though Maltravers is a film man and Chipchase is an amateur psychoanalyst, their roles are often interchangeable, Chipchase handling the camera competently and Maltravers imposing arbitrary, but

for them profitable, readings on Blore-Smith's mind. They are not distinctly professional in their trades (see the happy-go-lucky method of the footage of the outrageously titled 'psychoanalytical documentary film' *Ædipus Rex*), but their very amateurishness and lack of professional conscience help these nomads procure a shady, procrastinating survival in the semi-intellectual – if you like, upper-middlebrow – world, endlessly sponging on wealthy victims of one kind or another. Maltravers and Chipchase gladly – at least without remorse – accept the meanness as an inevitable condition of their lives that they are confined in an eternal repetition. Certainly, they deplore the fact that their plan to leave Britain may fall through, and Maltravers says he craves for 'new and vital experience' whose 'virtue' will be lost by repetition (2-3); but, in fact, they are just pulling long faces while they are fasting (or pretending to fast), as hypocrites do. At the end of the volume, they are going to cross the ocean to America, just as they wanted. But they know that that cannot provide them with a 'vital' breakthrough; their crossing the Atlantic is a mere expansion of their routine sponging journey. They are downsized, smug, materialistic Zarathustras, nightclub Nietzscheans; although – or because – they are content to be confined in the endless repetition of the stories of seedy little exploits/ exploitations, they are none the less power-conscious, ready to dominate the other characters that happen to come into their small stories.

Blore-Smith, who first appears in the volume as if casually thrown into it, in a walk-on as one of the crowd ('Blore-Smith, on his way from the City...was already one of the audience [of the chain-breaking street show],' 6), is just one of such exploited characters, although rather an extreme case. Extreme, because he is the hollowest of hollow patsies, in fact a pure void; his personality is devoid of the substance necessary for a person worthy to be the hero of a novel. Gently but strongly protected by his timidity and disproportionate wealth, he cannot make out what he wants to do. Chipchase later calls him a 'male Madame Bovary', but Blore-Smith's mental capacity is so small that he is unable even to establish a small but tangible purpose in life, as do the two villains; let alone Madame Bovary's lethal romantic craving for an ideal love story. He has no story to tell, as he has experienced no significant happenings at all in his life, whether great or small; that makes Blore-Smith ideal material for the villains to frame in their makeshift stories of film-making and psychoanalysis.

Maltravers, meeting Blore-Smith for the first time when his car knocks down the young man, invites him for a drink. Blore-Smith, drunk with alcohol and the great plunge into 'serious life' he has just made by impulsively buying an utterly unsaleable piece of 'modern' art, tells Maltravers 'most of his life story' (32), but he

really has not much story to tell, except that '[o]ne doesn't seem to get any of the things one expected' in London. When asked, he can't even name anything 'one expected': he just replies, 'Well, I mean life and so on.' But, he cannot define what life is, or what it should be like (it should be added here that Charles Stringham wanders through the first trilogy of *Dance* in different circumstances but in a similar state of mind,). He badly needs to define himself and his life, and is ready to grab at any story of 'real' events in life that money can buy, however sham or makeshift.

'I *am* one of the people to whom things happen,' Maltravers tells him (33, original italics). In the context of their conversation, he is not telling an untruth: his (and Chipchase's) life *is* full of events and stories, only they are events in terms of love as 'the most boring form of lust,' power as 'the most useless pots of money,' and fame as 'the vulgarest sort of publicity' (to borrow Fotheringham's depreciation of them, *AM*, 62). But mired deep in the soil, they really thrive on it; the only thing that matters is moving to a comparatively new place where one can forget about one's fetters with comparative ease, at the expense of the people over whom one can wield power (Maltravers says to Chipchase just before they take Blore-Smith to Paris and Berlin: 'I haven't had a real holiday since I've been married...I may let myself go,' 70-1). And the point is that the victims also enjoy themselves: they enjoy being exploited, being made to believe in the frame of the story of 'enjoyment' and psychoanalytical 'treatment' or 'caring for one's ego' (Maltravers's phrase, 45) offered by the exploiters, and being taken from one place to another within the exploiters' orbit under the pretext of 'breaking down' the walls of confinement.

'I'm really over here to – to break some of my barriers down,' Blore-Smith proclaims in Paris (85), but his hearers are the regular faces of the walled-in circle of Maltravers and Chipchase's 'good time' friends, including Yoyo, the prostitute who (in Chipchase's expression) lets Blore-Smith 'buy experience'. Losing his wallet (and perhaps virginity) to her in a state of drunken unconsciousness,¹² Blore-Smith feels 'very near the end' (95) and wants to 'go back' to England; but England is a place he never really belonged to. However, the story of his exploitation is far from an end: the disaster is incorporated into the therapy programme; even Blore-Smith's declared decision to go back to the comfort of being a nonentity in London is interpreted by Chipchase as an indication that he has become able to 'take a firm line about matters' (97), thanks to the experience he has gained. The story of psychotherapy offered by Chipchase and Maltravers has in advance incorporated

¹² Maybe Powell got a hint for this episode from personal experience: his memoirs feature an account of his loss of virginity to a prostitute in Paris, he having taken her for a girl who just wanted a night out. (Its bare candour is a proof that Powell is no prude).

even Blore-Smith's resistance. The psychological cage set up for Blore-Smith by Maltravers and Chipchase is so flexible that there is no way out from this game of 'breaking the walls down'; there, every movement of Blore-Smith is watched by Maltravers and Chipchase as something within the range of prediction but all the same amusing, and ultimately profitable for the 'knives' (219) of this card game played within the boundary of the stale world's autonomous regulations. This is explicitly demonstrated in Blore-Smith's two disastrous attempts at love affairs.

'There you are. You treat the thing as a joke yourself and then expect me to be furious,' Maltravers says (119), when his wife tells him and Chipchase that Blore-Smith has asked her to go out with him. The three cynics are half-heartedly toying with the humour of the episode: Chipchase says it was completely unpredictable and that Blore-Smith must be crazy; Maltravers protests, because Sarah is indeed attractive (while his relationship with her is a mess). Nobody can take this laughable false step of Blore-Smith seriously, but when Sarah assures her husband that she 'only laughed at' her would-be lover, Maltravers really is furious. If they want to keep on sponging on him, they have to pretend to take seriously his precious little ego entrapped in the cage they have made from the ready-made materials of 'worldly' experiences. Maltravers is right: Blore-Smith asked Sarah to be his 'mistress'. It is not love but the experience of loving, or in substance owning a mistress, that he is after. So all is 'forgotten'; Chipchase, having feigned anger at this 'unexpected' business, assures Blore-Smith that he expects 'that sort of thing's happening to her all the time' (122), which is the real sentiment of this cynical but essentially business-minded villain.

'My good man, how do you suppose I can do that [desert the 'hated' Berlin and go back to London]? Do you think I should be here at all if I were my own mistress?' Mrs Mendoza says to Blore-Smith (145), after she has ordered him to take her away from the nightclub where the usual faces inevitably gather. She cannot go out of Berlin because she is not 'her own mistress' but somebody else's money-bound mistress: the logical conclusion is, if Blore-Smith wants to take her as a mistress to London, where her heart is, why not? Deserted by these two, Commodore Venables (her former owner) and, for once, Maltravers and Chipchase are at a loss. However, while the Commodore poses in the zoo in such a way as to convey 'in too obvious a way that he was playing a role in a tragedy' (154), Maltravers sensibly suggests, 'After living with Mendie for a week he will be more in need of treatment than ever' (158). In other words, Blore-Smith will need a more strongly barred psychological cage to constrict and at the same time pamper his hollow ego, after a brief illusion of freedom. As always, he is right: Mrs Mendoza

hysterically wants to go back to the place she has escaped from, where she 'used to get more amusement out of five minutes with them than you've managed to supply in three weeks' (166). After all, Mrs Mendoza is made from the same material as Maltravers and Chipchase; she is doomed to keep on living within the circulating world of stale amusements, where tragedy is no more than a laughing matter. Wherever you go, changes of place in that world are routine and, ultimately, amenable to regulation by the stronger-willed. See the scene in which Blore-Smith is caught trying move to a country cottage with Mrs Mendoza: Chipchase at once takes out a notebook and writes something in it, an obvious demonstration of watching and discipline. There is no way out for Blore-Smith but to become their patient again. And Mrs Mendoza no longer has any intention of plucking herself and Blore-Smith from the story offered by the villains; on the contrary, she is openly penitent for the desertion ('I was very silly. But it brought its own punishment', 194). Their story can go on forever; once entrapped in the circuit, there is no way out. Only, the merrymaking gets staler and staler as time passes. Looking at the scenes in the country house where *Cedipus Rex* is shot, readers cannot but wonder where the volume is going. Some device is needed to bring it to a conclusion.

AP is put an end to by Blore-Smith's knockabout escape to his old London flat in an aeroplane that appears from out of the story as a glaring *deus ex machina*, a device so wildly unreal that we wonder if Powell is serious in concluding the story of Blore-Smith's pilgrimage. But is the story really at an end? After the final confrontation with Maltravers and Chipchase, and having successfully expelled them from his life, he retrieves from the waste-paper basket the photograph they gave him, featuring themselves. He has told the villains that he will risk the possibility of the Real Thing – what he says he is going to turn to – being not so different from his recent sham 'experiences'. He has got from the villains sufficient will power to discard them; they will remain in the story of Blore-Smith's battle of will power in this world (where nothing is replete with real meaning) as mentors and co-conspirators in spirit. Like *Candide*, Blore-Smith returns to his starting point at the end of the story; but that is not in order to 'cultivate one's own fields' but to become himself a disillusioned but hardened 'knave'.

On one level, *A & P* is a comic novel which tries hard to be 'hilarious' and attains only a comparative success. But it is also an attempt to delve cold-bloodedly into the struggle and battle of people's will power in a social world past its sell-by date, where the hollow frame or cage of custom barely protects us. That attempt cannot be said to have attained full success in *A & P*, either, but it does go beyond the superficial frivolity, and reaches tenuously for the huge war fresco of *Dance*: an

endeavor Powell pursues further in *WBW*.

5. *What's Become of Waring* (1939)

Powell's career as a writer of comic novels started well with *AM*, neatly structured and with a lot of scenes that do manage to be very funny, although the world portrayed was already stale and the comedy to be generated from it had half lost its energy. But *FVD* is pervaded by an atmosphere of impotence and death, and its hidden theme is, as I have argued, the death of the frame of comedy. The façade of a light comedy that barely hid the nothingness of the world in *AM* (and, in a more frivolous manner, in *V*) crumbles here, and everything is just odious or, if not odious, bleak. In this context, we can see the frantic goings-on of the characters of *AP* as a desperate attempt to find a place where comedy is still fresh and organic – an endless, deranged journey through the Western world *à la recherche de la comédie perdue*. Indeed, throughout his pre-war career, the novelist Powell kept on searching for the lost valid method of relating himself to the frame of comedy, which was somehow still binding people together, although merely formally.

It is difficult to say exactly how much of such process was intentional, and how much he was forced towards it, involuntarily. Even in his last pre-war novel, *WBW*, there is an uneasy cohabitation of the elements of light, irresponsible, 'holiday-making' comedy (Bromwich, Payne and Co.) and the human relationship around such serious-minded 'killjoys' as Hudson and Beryl Pimley. Even here, the farce-versus-satire issue is not completely settled: *WBW*'s light manner and setting is sometimes incapable of accommodating the serious issues it deals with. There is absurd farce in one extreme, and the grimness of human social life on the other, but the possibility of compromise is apparently lost, or at best marginal.

WBW is also a story of a search for the lost: on one plane, a search for the elusive, supposedly deceased travel author T. T. Waring;¹³ and on a deeper plane, a search for the lost authenticity of text-production in general – literary texts, and, metaphorically speaking, social customs as a text produced through the ages by human beings. But the result is grim: T. T. Waring existed only as a name to be printed on the back of the books of travel someone has plagiarized from other authors. At the end of the volume, it becomes quite doubtful whether there is such a thing as an 'original' or 'authentic' text in this world – and even if there is, it remains

¹³ Powell never clearly mentions it, but the naming of the concocted author is reminiscent of T. E. Lawrence as an adventurer, writer, and complex, self-contradictory Briton.

improbable that people would want it. The literary search is a complete failure; or rather, It is quite successfully carried out, but what is found out is too bleak and uninteresting for the general public. The mystery is certainly solved at the end, but what has driven the search up till then – the searchers' desire to know the 'authentic' identity of a text – in turn proves irrelevant. The plot of *WBW* gradually disorganizes itself: it has no denouement, as required by traditional comic or detective novels, but ends indefinitely, with the anonymous observer-narrator already having lost interest in his narrative and seeking a temporary escape in sleep. People's comic struggle and intriguing around Waring as a literary and social entity – and, with it, the reader's effort to follow the narrator's text – come to nothing. The conclusion of *WBW* is strangely frustrating; here, even the sense of the plot coming full circle (as in *AM*, *V*, and even *AP*) or to a debacle (as in *FVD*) is denied. Readers are left in the obscurity of a world where the production of life's enduring texts, literary and social, has proved distastefully futile.

Nevertheless, people continue to produce such literary and social texts. On the literary plane, manuscripts keep on being stacked on the narrator's desk at the publishing house where he works as a reader. And on the social plane, Captain Hudson, failed author of the Waring biography and failed lover of Roberta Payne (self-alleged former mistress of Waring), chooses to reconstruct the loveless future with pretty but mediocre, and at the same time power-conscious, Beryl Pimley; thereby choosing to reproduce the timelessly aged, hollow social text of universal 'home' life. Probably, he will some day resume producing literary texts, too – it is not utterly impossible to imagine him to be among the authors of the various autobiographies that weigh down Nicholas Jenkins's bag at Oxford in *BDFR*.

People know the futility of the production of a text called enduring life, and literary texts as its mimesis; but at the same time they cannot bring themselves to cease production. For the mass social life of human beings to continue, the life of each person has to be formed in terms of the happy ending of traditional comedy. But there is no valid rationale for such a comedy, only the general desire for life and hope to continue. Here, the demonstration cannot but become tautological, and therefore forced. The dubious text of traditional comedy that purports to reproduce the world we live in, is in fact sustained by our blind but strong will to survive, and ultimately by our will for power in the pointless struggle for survival that makes the world endure. That, in itself, is a bleak, grotesque comedy of a different kind from the lost reassuring variety: a concept that directly connects *WBW* to *Dance*.

WBW starts quite well in an atmosphere of easy-going, light comedy. During a

wedding ceremony, a paper ball is flicked through the air into the narrator's hat, and when opened, proves to contain the message 'Put all your money under the seat or I'll drill a hole through you. Red-handed Mike' (1); turning around, the narrator recognizes the face of Eustace Bromwich, an ex-Guards officer and social vagabond wandering throughout Europe, living the life of an expensive gigolo. After making an unreliable suggestion that the wedding girl might be his daughter,¹⁴ Eustace disappears in the London crowd. Then there comes Roberta Payne, a 'charming little creature' writing short articles and living the life of an expensive mistress, and at the same time a raconteur whose stories are not to be relied upon at all. This opening sequence has an attitude of pleasant irresponsibility towards the events of the world, rather refreshing after the no-way-out atmosphere of *FVD* and *AP*. If Powell had chosen to live up to this promise, *WBW* might have become an accomplished literary extravaganza, sustained by a nonchalant indifference about the distinction between truth and falsehood.

But Powell refuses that possibility. Eustace and Roberta, frivolous raisers of the curtain, are relegated to the position of supporting actors in the production. What is brought to the spotlight, or more accurately, the void that occupies the centre of the stage, is something also concerned with the problem of truth and falsehood, but in a far less spectacular way: namely, the literary search for the life story and identity of T. T. Waring, a travel writer who is surprisingly featureless in personal background and in writing. The Waring whom the narrator presents to us is so drab and characterless that readers cannot but feel slightly disturbed after the flamboyant opening. He is an author who has sold well because of his lack of individuality: his books have the accent of 'everyone who had ever written a successful travel book, Burton, Doughty, Hudson, and the rest of them', appealing to readers 'of the kind who find author's name hard to remember' and ending up in 'ship's libraries and the Caledonian Market' (25). Thus, the narrator presents Waring's writings to us as anonymous texts circulating in this world as mass-produced commodities. The 'literary personality' of T. T. Waring glaringly formulated and publicized in accordance with the popular image of a manfully 'modest', ever-wandering world traveller enduring every hardship as a Briton (not a 'Britisher' with the gait of 'a comedian's on the stage,'

¹⁴ Eustace's general demeanour and baseless allegation of fatherhood clearly prefigure Dicky Umfraville, one of *Dance's* most likeable characters. Or, more accurately, Eustace isn't a prototype of Dicky but his alias: their happy-go-lucky character and carefree resignation to the world's absurdity make them likeable, but at the same time limit the possibility of a deeper development of their personality. As Powell noted in *A Writer's Notebook*, 'People with strong personalities often have weak characters' (122) and vice versa.

159) should.¹⁵

It is quite natural that the narrator, himself a writer working on Stendhal's ideas on violence, can see through and is left cold by such commercial opportunism in the guise of a popularly romantic and masculine 'philosophy'. But himself a tough businessman, he readily accepts that there is marketing possibility in the deceased author, and feels no remorse in pushing Hudson, an innocent fan of Waring's popularised 'philosophy', into the spotlight as the featured literary Sherlock Holmes in this shady case. This narrator is at once an unobtrusive, literary-minded observer who clearly harks forward to Nicholas Jenkins, and a relentless trafficker in realpolitik in the world of letters, mired deep in the relativity of values. (John Russell's monograph makes the interesting point that, as he is 'an equal underminer of Captain Hudson', it is no wonder that the aged Pimley, the real author of Waring's first book, takes him for Alec [70-71]). That makes him a character with a unique potentiality in the novelistic world of Powell. (Though, regrettably, it is not fully realized: the last-minute reflection on 'power' is something that directly anticipates *Dance*, but is not quite enough to carry the weight it might have done, reminding us of the last-minute philosophising at St. Paul's in *MP*). At the same time, we cannot but wonder how sincere he is as a literary Watson. From the start, there is something suspicious in the business; the narrator, however reluctant in the depth of his mind, is part of the sham world entrapping the doggedly, almost madly, honest and serious-minded victim Hudson.

'The style was lively and clear. Hudson was a dark horse' (34), is the narrator's assessment of Hudson's writing, which makes him decide that Hudson is the man to write the biography of T. T. Waring. However, if Hudson is such a good writer, why on earth is he so enthusiastic about so mediocre a one as Waring? The only possible explanation is that he is a narrator of unusual skill of which perhaps he himself is unaware, but a very commonplace reader, deeply embedded in the world as one huge processing machine of recycled, mediocre texts and stories. He even admits that he has read every book that Waring has written, and that he 'liked the first one as well as any' (29). He doesn't say 'best' but 'as well as any'; the irony in this expression is all the greater because it is unintended. In effect, Hudson has admitted in advance that he belongs to the public he resignedly describes, after the devastating revelation of the truth about Waring, as liking nothing 'so much as reading the same book over and

¹⁵ Alec Pimley, when he appears before Hudson without the guise of Waring, answers Hudson's candid question as to how he made a living up till then, in a distinctly Waring phrase, the very phrase the narrator remembers Hudson using recently: 'the generality of mankind are good-hearted folk' (162). Waring's self-quotation makes the distinction between the original and the borrowed: Alec's personality itself is an accumulation of the borrowed.

over again' (176).

After all the events are over, the narrator explains to Eustace, who is dreaming of making a fortune with his colourful recollections, that Waring's deed could not have brought him more than four or five hundred a year: in his way, Waring was a commonplace and serious-minded man of action eking out a living in the tired old world. Hudson, who has the narrative skill to chronicle in a lively way the minor, commonplace events forever taking place in the world of action, might have been *the* man to tell the story of the petty fraud of a man who in fact belonged to Hudson's own circle of daily life, Alec Pimley alias Robinson and T. T. Waring. However, there is one serious defect that prevents Hudson from being the chronicler of Waring's life: his craving for the popularised, romantic myth of masculinity, with T. T. Waring, the chivalrous British traveller manfully enduring the hardships of the world, as its symbolic figure. In the narrator's half-sympathetic, half-despairing phrases, Hudson's real life 'was lived among the shimmering domes and minarets of T. T. Waring's Orient, where all the men were brave and all the women...chaste' (134). Hudson, an army officer of the crumbling British Empire, is living in the dreamed-up glorious past of the global Empire. That makes him quite incompetent in the present real world around Waring, full of deceit and cheap tricks.¹⁶

'The thing is a fake...It's not only the book. There is my mucking things up with Beryl. It is all part of the same business,' Hudson says truthfully (179). The narrator introduces Roberta Payne to him as a self-alleged former mistress of Waring, and Hudson's engagement to Beryl comes to a grief, when he begins to regard her as 'one of the most beautiful and attractive women one could possibly meet' (108) in preference to Beryl, considered 'pretty' in the circles where 'such judgments were regulated by traditional concepts of physical beauty' (32, the narrator). The narrator's cynical attitude in introducing Roberta to the story is epitomized in such passages as 'I did not believe a word of this [her allegation of having had an affair with Waring]; but it was such an amusing idea that it deserved encouragement' (74) and 'If she could get engaged to him [Waring], Hudson might be able to write his life' (80). He is taking the whole Roberta business as a good joke, so rarely obtainable in this stale world that its authenticity is rather out of the question. However, Hudson, mired deeper in Waring's phraseology and way of looking at the world (or ones Waring borrowed from existing literary and social texts) since he took up writing his

¹⁶ Incidentally, the narrator's (and Powell's) slightly dismissing attitude towards a person from a part of the empire, the Indian Lal, and his decidedly two-dimensional characterization, is somewhat disturbing, however minor Lal's role is. Such an attitude seems to more or less undermine the satiric narrative's authenticity.

biography, falls seriously in love with this woman he chooses to regard as his [and Waring's] *femme fatale* – while Roberta is nothing more than a charming playgirl who has no business with a 'bore' who 'is desperately serious and has no money at all' (190). True to his illusory vision, he calls off his engagement with Beryl, but is infuriated when his *femme fatale* goes on a free holiday with Hugh Judkins, the proprietor of the publishing house. In fact, Roberta is a flamboyant but tough businesswoman hopping around in life at other people's expense; just as Waring's 'philosophy' of a man enduring the world was not the creed of a glorious British subject but the commonplace daily feelings of a shady literary businessperson, swindling a tenuous livelihood from the stale, banal world by recycling other people's texts. Indeed, as Alec Pimley, having thrown away the disguise of Waring tells him, Hudson has played an unintended comic role by making a 'pretty good fool' of himself, in the connected businesses of Waring and Roberta. These two affairs are similarly founded on the relativity of authenticity and truth – in relation to literary texts in Waring's case, and to love in Roberta's case. But, for Hudson, there is no room even for self-righteous contempt for Waring and Roberta: he has proved himself deranged by Waring's cheap, concocted text on manhood, having applied it to Roberta, of all people.

WBW could have ended here with this devastating revelation; but it doesn't. The narrator has already lost interest in the story around Waring, having made up his mind to return to advertising where people are at least serious about their business. But the narrative goes on disconsolately about Hugh Judkins' conversion to 'truth', and about Hudson's reconciliation with the world in which the best we can hope for is the relative utility of the established social customs, but certainly not truth and authenticity. Hugh, as if appropriating Hudson's frustration, suddenly begins to attack his company's writers and try to put an end to their production of texts he regards as 'filth' (210) soiling the world. But a publisher who suppresses his merchandise, banal but saleable texts, is nothing but an oxymoron. He is reduced to cracking up in a paroxysm of anger (at the 'untruth' of a spiritual séance, which on a previous occasion opened the story of the disappearance of T. T. Waring and this time hints at the inauthenticity of his text) and forced to leave the stage as a deranged person. The scene might have made good comedy in another context and provided a lesson for readers, but not here; it is just painful, inappropriate and, deliberately, redundant. Hudson also leaves the stage of *WBW* at this séance, but not in derangement: he reunites with Beryl as a disenchanting but more business-minded person, and goes to Africa with her. He goes there to help keep order in the real British Empire, crumbling and shadowy, but nevertheless needing serious-minded

military disciplinarians. Hudson and Beryl leave the stage together, having come to tenuous terms with the social texts that are drudging, recycled, without glory, but nevertheless still keep people going, and are sustained by people's will for power within the limitations of the old world they are destined to inhabit as long as they live.

Thus *WBW* merely peters out, everyone quietly abandoning the anticlimactic literary detective-work for more workaday life, where people have to carry on their small-scale power struggles. The report of the 'real' death of Alec Pimley at the end of the volume is completely unreal for the uninterested narrator, and equally for depressed readers, whose desire for a novel with a beginning, development and denouement has been comprehensively frustrated. This novel generates some laughter, but laughter of a feeble kind directed at readers' expectation of a good old consumable comic story that will divert him from the drudging reality of the world.

This cul-de-sac, in which comedy is stifled and a vision of society as a huge accumulation of power struggles looms before us, is the point Powell, a writer of comedies, reached before the war. He himself must have felt the suffocation: he could produce no novels or stories during the war. However, after the war, Powell turned his eyes to people's unstoppable desire to keep on weaving the social texture, something he regarded as axiomatic in most of his pre-war novels but began to carefully look at and dissect in *WBW*. It was this novel that finally stifled Powell as a writer of cleverly light comedies, but at the same time suggested the possibility of a new kind of comedy, more tenacious and large in scale than any of his pre-war work.

Foreword to Chapters Two to Five

Before plunging into *Dance*, a *roman fleuve* so rich in details, and making an overall analysis of its novelistic qualities, I think it necessary, and convenient, to offer a preliminary sketch of what Powell is going to do there, and how the series is a departure from his pre-war novels; thereby making clear the unique possibilities and the problematic of *Dance* that we should keep in mind when reading each volume of the sequence.

Though Powell's pre-war novels make disturbing challenges to the conventions of the traditional well-made comic novel with organically and plausibly structured opening, development and happy ending, they are at the same time products relying on the novelistic contrivance of a schematically enclosed plot in which a limited comic game is played to rules imposed by the author. True, Powell's pre-war novels take place in a tired world where not much possibility of a good, edifyingly comic story is left. Nevertheless, all of them have a structure focused on the development of a series of events that proceed towards a despondent but essentially comic ending, either with the attainment of a full circle of a weary merry-go-round (in the case of *AM*, *V* and *A & P*) or with the total collapse of a character's cherished absurd plan (*FVD* and *WBW*). As comic novels, they are anti-conventional in their denial of the world's plotted comic movement towards an organically built-in happy ending; but this denial, carrying the implication that no pleasantly comic story worth telling is left in the world, relies on the traditional enclosure of comedy controlled by the author. To put it bluntly, they are clever anti-comic-novels of an energy-saving kind: in order to show us that comedy has lost its vitality in this stale world, the novels make a cynical, recycling use of the single-mindedly organized enclosure of the comedy of manners that the author does not really believe in. In that genre, there is no necessity for people's personalities to develop, because the comedy is fixed in an atemporal enclosure (thus Atwater is ever characterless, Zouch is always an ambitious little brute while Mr Passenger is a living corpse, and Blore-Smith is doomed to remain an irritatingly timid misfit); there is no way out for the protagonists from the limited comic circle they find themselves in; and the writer and readers can smugly resign themselves to another wearily comic demonstration of the absence of grand stories in the world.

However, with the beginning of *Dance*, Powell embarked on an attempt of a totally different kind. In 1961, the year between the publications of *CCR* and *KO*, he

said in an interview with W. J. Weatherby:

After the war...I decided that the thing to do was to produce a really large work about the things I was interested in – the whole of one's life, in fact – for I have no talent for inventing plots of a dramatic kind in a comparatively small space – 80,000 words. Such a scheme has great advantages, but you pay a price in the large number of characters you have to stick to. You have an overall picture of how they live and must limit yourself in what you deal with...If one lived a thousand years, one might bring everything in, but then you would have to cope with a thousand years of experience rather than the normal span. (53)

'The whole of one's life', by the nature of things, cannot escape from temporal elements: people are born, mature and die, with or without apparent development or change of personality, but surely with a need to sustain it over a long period through other methods than the help of the assured hand of the novelist. Therefore, when people look at various stages of their lives, it is inevitable that they are tempted to make comparisons and find parallels, contrasts, continuations and changes in the process of life. However, when we look at our experiences at a certain stage of life, we can't wholly focus on a single plot but at once see various plots that are often without obvious connections to each other, taking place at different quarters of the world; but we are inevitably led to search for synchronic principles that rule our various experiences. The largest reason for which *Dance* is a departure from Powell's pre-war novels is that, instead of imposing a privileged and ruthless sway over the helpless characters as he did in the limited enclosure of a farcical comedy, Powell (through his alter ego Jenkins) is relegated to the position of just one of the people who are forced, by the human need for a sense of order in life, to search for the never obviously visible patterns of continuation and transformation, similarity and difference, in the larger diachronic and synchronic view of life.

In the pre-war novels, the characters are confined in a small arena with no exit; even such wildly farcical characters as Dr Clutch and Major Fosdick are given a place in the closed system of a contrived comedy, which serves its creator's artistic intention with its autonomous movement. However hollow its frame is – as especially proved the case in *FVD* –, it is quite out of the question that other lives are going on in other places. People may long to move to other places (e.g. Fotheringham's yearning for America), but when they do manage to do so, they are obliterated from the scene, never to reappear (see how Atwater can't even remember

Susan Nunnery's face once she does depart for America). The centripetal force of the small, hollow frame set by the novelist is absolute, numbing people's desire for a larger vision.

Everything changes in *Dance*. In the huge panorama of life it sets out to portray, there can't be any single frame in which people's lives can be completely contained. People's centripetal inclination to keep a niche of their own in life is incessantly denied in the centrifugal, multi-layered expanse of the whole society. Here – and everywhere in the sequence – we need to ask what kind of dance Powell and Jenkins are invoking as a metaphor for life. The dance metaphor is extremely versatile – it seems to contain, at one extreme, dances solo, *à deux*, or group dances of three or four, and at the other dances featuring the whole nation or several nations, such as the two World Wars. The point is that, in real life, we are inevitably featured in more than one dance at the same time: we move back and forth between numerous solo or small group dances that take place on a larger dance floor. The centripetal focalisation of a particular small dance by the dancers taking part in it, which is necessary for its success, is incessantly counterbalanced by the centrifugal forces of the movement of the whole society that reduce to nothing people's petty efforts in the small dances. But, at the same time, we cannot but ask whether the movement of the whole society has a centripetal 'meaning' or pattern, when looked as a whole; with this question, we reach for a larger, fuller sense of life.

Dance necessarily implies choreography, or patterns that give a sense of meaning – a sense that something is expressed – to the movement of the dancers. As I have argued, Powell in his pre-war novels – in spite of his assertion that he isn't good at producing a properly dramatic plot for a novel of normal length – made much use of the author's privilege of imposing an ordered choreography, or plot, of his own on the microcosm of a novel by cutting off the elements of the world that are unnecessary for the plot. In *Dance*, too, Powell is very keen on focusing on the micro-movement in a particular quarter; he even seems to have developed a slow-motion technique for tracing extremely small farcical happenings – as we can see in the famous scene in *BM*, in which Widmerpool is covered by a cascade of sugar. Powell is certainly very sure of his hand in the description of such apparently meaningless and often farcical small movements; but at the same time, if *Dance* is to be a large, enduring portrayal of life (which its sheer size inevitably suggests), such scenes have to be incessantly fed back to the larger background of the dance floor and given significance in it. However, it is never obvious whether there really is a coherent meaning in the whole dance, or how large the dance floor is; Jenkins has to, as it were, grope in the dark to find a larger meaning for the small dances his torch

has come across.

Powell's pre-war novels deny the traditional task of the comic novelist to prove that the world, at least the society he or she describes, is an ordered system that provides people with an edifying plot organically moving towards a happy ending; but they maintain, however tiredly, the control of a comic novelist over the whole of the limited world he describes. That is why Powell is there able to wearily but ruthlessly toy with the mediocre, two-dimensional characters. Readers are supposed to accept the author's presentation of the novels as enclosed microcosms of comedy, so that the author should be able, when he wishes, to impose deterministic patterns on the story and deterministic judgments on the characters. But in *Dance*, there is no such implicit agreement over the privilege of the author. People may or may not have a hidden depth of personality, and the events may or may not belong to the larger patterns of life; and Powell the author/ Jenkins the narrator is just one of those people who aspire to a rounded, larger meaning of life. In *Dance*, such people's struggles are humanely, rather than farcically, comic, because the author humbly accepts the fact that human beings, however incomplete and two-dimensional their existence is, cannot live without trying to build an enclosure of meaning around them for their own happy survival, and (if possible) to enlarge it to the whole world. Such efforts of disparate individuals incessantly contradict each other, and are reduced to nothing by the ever-amorphous movement of the world; but, as one of such people with a limited knowledge of the world, Jenkins sees without derision numerous people's deluded but serious struggles to give a meaning to the world, and tries to find, rather than impose, a choreography of life in which they can be connected synchronically and diachronically. Therefore, the largest questions when we read *Dance* should be: does the huge bulk of *Dance* succeed in displaying a coherent choreography? If it does, how and to what extent? If not, what is it prevented by, and what is the huge bulk of *Dance* meant for?

Chapter Two

A Dance to the Music of Time: First Movement

1. *A Question of Upbringing* (1951)

After the grand, or even grandiose, opening with the workers round the fire and the dance of the four Seasons, heavily charged with images from and allusions to the classical world, the main content of *QU* might puzzle readers (it must at least have puzzled contemporary readers who didn't know that the volume would only be a part of an extended series). Jenkins, the narrator-protagonist, seems to be rather puzzled himself. The existence of a world of vigorous power-struggle is adumbrated before him, but it is uncertain, at least when we reach the end of this volume, whether he is a Dancer whose personal steps are omitted for some purpose, or no more than a narrative device, a passive 'eye'.

There is no sense of building towards the Dance image, or even towards the ending of the volume. The episodes dealt with (the appearance of Uncle Giles at the school; the Braddock alias Thorn joke; the house of the Foxes; Jean's impression and the chamber-pot incident; Widmerpool and Jenkins in France; the quarrel over a tennis match; a silly traffic accident; Stringham getting a job) are apparently so trivial and thin that it even seems doubtful whether they are worth the forceful, conspicuous metaphor of the Dance. The question 'what is the Dance?' remains largely unanswered, even seemingly unattended, in the overall atmosphere of triviality. Readers might ask, 'but why these episodes? Who are these ineffective people? Are they satirical light portrayals of the "toffs" of the period? Is this just a collection of "society" sketches? Or is something more serious intended?' At a casual glance, the subject matter is so flimsy and the structure so sketchy that the opening Dance image seems disproportionate and portentous. Indeed, the accusation of triviality and pretension is something that persists with the whole of the *Dance* series; the more especially since Powell relies more and more heavily on 'explanatory' images and metaphors to show his theories on human relationships in the later volumes.

But to come back to this particular volume, the main problems for Powell are to do with writing a novel destined to be drastically incomplete, with an open ending that inevitably denies readers' satisfaction. The essence of the Dance, if there is such a thing, has yet to be reached or even seriously groped for. Everything has to be adumbrated, rather than clearly defined. Hence, Jenkins the protagonist is made to

experience, almost always as a faceless, unobtrusive spectator, a succession of 'polite surprises' (to borrow a term used by James Hall) in various corners of middle-to-upper-middle life. On the surface, each of them seems to have little to do with the others. However, as with 'variations on a theme' in music, there exists a common theme or thematic undercurrent that can be found in the episodes, as the author rings the changes on the main characters – Widmerpool, Stringham and Templer – and lesser ones around them. Indeed, it is going to constitute one of the major elements of the Dance metaphor. It is the possibility and difficulty of serious self-promotion and self-realization, the power needed in the process, and the odd, farcical steps people are induced to take. In his monograph, Neil Brennan rightly argues that 'at the root of each scene...is some familiar pattern of slapstick, farce, or burlesque' (77). That connects *Dance* to the pre-war novels, but at the same time Powell's attitude towards the farcical has become more deeply reflective.

There is a strong element of contest in the episodes. Along with it is a sense of confinement, a feeling that all these contests are to be fought according to the rules and conditions operative in particular quarters of life. The two "schools" (the public school and the University) and the three households in between – the Foxes', the Templers' and La Grenadière – are presented as places lacking in contact with the outer world: the dramatis personae scarcely change, and nearly all the scenes are enacted by a few fixed members temporarily or perennially trapped in the places concerned. However, it is not that the places have no connection to the outer society; indeed, some of the characters also belong to a larger world of power, aspire to belong there and break out of confinement, or are involuntarily thrown out from the inside.

The School is apparently a small world ruled by the melancholy and oppressiveness of tradition. But at the same time, it is a place disputed between Gothic tradition and the sweeping vulgarity of the outer, newer world: the 'central concentration of buildings, commanding and antiquated' is 'intruded upon' by structures that seems to be experimenting in 'architectural insignificance' (2), and the house itself, the main stage of chapter one, is one of the latter. Widmerpool is a person in whom this ambivalence between the inside and the outside is focused. He is an awkward boy never assimilated to the place in spite of all the solitary, painful 'runs' supposed to get him into the house team; but at the same time, no one in the house knows what his overcoat, which made him so notorious as an alien, is like: it has, in an obscure way, become a 'traditionally ludicrous aspect of everyday life' (6). The School has made an attempt to absorb him into its traditional mode of life; and Widmerpool himself, at the School and indeed throughout his life, tries hard to

conform to the rules of the establishment he deems in power – but he never fully succeeds. Widmerpool shows great horror at the arrest of Le Bas; he thinks the housemaster should be, by nature, the ruler of the inner world of the house, and sees himself as a dutiful, obedient champion of the regime. (Stringham teasingly tells him that he is ‘higher up in the house than [Stringham is],’ 48.) His self-image as an obedient insider is, for himself at least, genuine. However, he is not to stay inside for a long time: he is destined to leave the house a few weeks after the incident, to continue his struggle in a larger society.

In the former part of the chapter, Le Bas’s feeble effort to shut out the outer world from the house is concentrated on a person who smuggles the forces of the outer world into the house: Uncle Giles. He is a sly intruder (no one can tell how he reached and got into the house in the first place) and a person who plays a confidence trick on the rules of the house (he proclaims that ‘most certainly I shall bother’ to extinguish his cigarette if that is the rule, but when he makes that gesture of obedience to the law of the community after he has consumed most part of the cigarette, its smell has filled the room, causing great trouble for Jenkins as regards Le Bas). But at the same time he belongs to another ‘house’, namely the house of Jenkins, and the power-struggle there: the purpose of his visit is to discuss the family Trust, a matter whose esoteric attraction cannot be appreciated by Jenkins, at present too young to be a full member of the family.

This oscillation between the ‘suggestion ... of an outer world’ and ‘the disturbing impact of home-life’ (25), the sense of one’s personality in connection with place, is also clearly seen in the Braddock alias Thorne incident. On the surface, Stringham seems to have fully exploited the ineffectively weak personality of the authority of the house (most humiliatingly for Le Bas, Stringham impersonates him when calling the police). But the apotheosis of Stringham as a trickster and the author of the incident (he gloats over Widmerpool’s dismay at being a secret witness of Le Bas’ arrest) is short-lived, however exultant he may be at first. As soon as the news reaches the house, many inaccurate, spurious versions of the story (whose main source is none other than Widmerpool) are distributed and assimilated into the never-ending accumulation of traditionally comic stories in the house (‘I sat straight down and sent off a letter to my people’: Calthorpe Major). Stringham’s disgrace is no smaller than Le Bas’s, in that his claim to creativity and brilliance is utterly denied in the stale ‘comic’ atmosphere of the house. In the final scene of the chapter, at the chapel where ‘emotional intensity seemed to meet and mingle with an air of indifference, even of cruelty within these ancient walls’ (50), he looks like a ‘carved figure symbolising some virtue Resignation or Self-sacrifice’. The School,

supposedly a place to form people's personalities, can also be a site for their deconstruction.

In the next two chapters, Jenkins becomes a field-worker who visits several closed environments. The three houses, the Foxes', the Templers', and La Grenadière are places where the problem of social distinction comes to the fore, pointing at the different paths of life that the characters are going to follow.

The house of the Foxes in Berkeley Square has the typical atmosphere of a drawing-room comedy: the characters (Buster, Miss Weedon, Mrs Foxe) take the stage in turn, powerfully enacting scenes of deception and the putting up of fronts. This is the introduction of Jenkins to the world of histrionics, closely related to the formation of people's identity – a subject matter that is going to be continually pursued and repeatedly deconstructed in the series, in obvious and less obvious formulas (to pick up the obvious ones, the Seven Deadly Sins charade in *KO*; civilians masquerading as soldiers in the war trilogy; X. Trapnel's schizophrenic role-playing; and of course, the incarnations of Widmerpool as a pupil, a solicitor's apprentice, a stockbroker, a Donners-Brebner man, an army officer, an MP, the chancellor of a red-brick university and a would-be 'youth' guru). And at the same time, it introduces Jenkins to the world of cold-blooded power battles, their participants incessantly seeking to enlarge their spheres of 'influence' (a term liked by Uncle Giles, an outcast in such a world). The 'overpowering' character of Mrs Foxe is something quite new to Jenkins; but when he tries to describe her 'forcing' character to Templer, he finds that he has no word for that in his vocabulary at present. At this stage, he is nothing more than a surprised observer.

Jenkins records his surprise once again when he is used by Lady McReith, who is sleeping with Templer, as a 'dummy' when she demonstrates some steps of the foxtrot: 'the feeling that all this offered...some additional and violent assertion of the will, was –almost literally—intoxicating' (92). The problem of sensuality and power is intertwined in the Templers' house with intrusion into the territory of others and the defence of one's own (Peter's foray into Lady McReith's bedroom, and Jimmy Stripling's attempt to insert obscenity into the respectable space around Sunny Farebrother). But the desire of Jenkins himself toward Jean is prohibited from materialisation by her 'air of belonging to *another and better world*' (74, my italics), and at the mock climax of the chapter, he is relegated to the place of a voyeur of another's frustrated, impotent spatial intrusion. Templer's brother-in-law, the racer Jimmy Stripling, who is perennially tormented by a guilty feeling about not having been able to take part in the Great War, tries to rag Sunny Farebrother (who meticulously tailors his identity as an ex-officer and City gentleman) by putting a

chamber-pot into his hat-box, which Farebrother carries around as a symbol of respectability, along with the fishing, hunting and cricket tackle (obviously, proofs of his 'heartiness'). But that is not to be achieved: suddenly the door is flung open, and Farebrother himself appears in front of Stripling. Thwarted, he has no alternative but to stride on.

Losers in the contest are relegated to the position of automata, feebly continuing to pursue the track they have chosen. When people realize that their cherished plots have degenerated into stale, lethargic farce, they have no alternative but to accept their roles in the farce and conform to the mechanical continuation of the circumstances.¹⁷ In the first chapter, Stringham's plotting as the brilliant author of Braddock alias Thorne knockabout was denied originality, and he had to stand in the chapel as one of the crowd of pupils who maintain the traditional, stale comedy of public school life. Here, Stripling's self-image as a trickster who brings burlesque into established social system is shattered, and he becomes a defeated, pathetically comic adherent to social code. The stale farce that makes the world go on oppresses people's aspiration to a more desirable identity; they are confined in the closure of the world as the stage of lifelessly repeated, formalistic social comedy.

At La Grenadière, we meet Widmerpool again, but not as the dejected boy at the school. As Patricia Spack says, 'Like Stringham and Templer, although in a mode different from theirs, he understands the realities of power which Jenkins has yet to grasp' (286). He has already begun, however inexpertly, his life-long struggle to get the better of others. In contrast to Jenkins, who '[is unable to] remember for [his] own use any single word of French (109)', he has made more progress in French than anyone else in the house, and ticks Jenkins off about the house rule concerning that ('You know we are supposed to talk *French* here, Jenkins' [118, original italic]), when they first meet. Widmerpool, as we are going to observe on numerous occasions (especially in the army), is in his element when he thinks he is an insider, a loyal supporter of the system. Powell's treatment of such an attitude is always ambivalent: on the one hand, Jenkins cannot but be impressed by Widmerpool's determination to become an insider, especially when his own 'in'ness is in doubt (at La Grenadière; and again, in the army). On the other, there is an amused tolerance (or disdain) of an observer whose 'in'-ness is implicitly endorsed, something that seems

¹⁷ Not that Stripling's joke was such an enjoyable one: it was brilliant only in the originator's poor imagination. Patrick Swinden rightly argues in his 1984 book that the comedy is 'in the unthinking way he [the narrator Jenkins] separates the machinery of the joke from those of its attributes which actually make it a joke' (114). It is a failed attempt at a Wodehousian practical joke told in a Powellian, 'extremely depressurised (and depressurising) manipulation of language' (ibid).

to throw a disturbing shadow on the sharp comedy of, for instance, *LM*, where Widmerpool's social (or 'society') snobbery is in full swing.

Here, Widmerpool's disguise as an insider is never complete: his identity among the closed but international society also remains somewhat infirm: first introduced to the scene with the indefinite identity of '*l' autre monsieur Anglais*', his clothes don't exactly look English, 'without adding to his appearance the least suggestion of French Origins' (118). But the fact that Widmerpool directly connects (self-centred) obeisance to the local systems to the reinforcement of his identity is evident at his first appearance. He says in English, 'I thought it might be you, Jenkins. Only yours is such a common name that I could not be sure' (117). Thus relegating Jenkins to the position of '*l' autre monsieur Anglais*', he sternly ticks off Jenkins' faux-pas in language. Indeed, his linguistic efforts are directed towards rising in power and authority within the system rather than communication itself.

His respect for the rules in power at present is demonstrated most strongly in the Örn-Lundquist incident. This silly dispute (over a trick Monsieur Lundquist uses against Monsieur Örn in a tennis match) first takes the shape of a trouble in linguistic communication: in rage against Lundquist, Örn mutters a word comprehensible only to the North European Lundquist, and that starts the whole discord. While Jenkins remains utterly unable to ease the strain, Widmerpool succeeds in reconciling them: dismissing Jenkins' question as to what the word meant, he behaves as if he knew its meaning ('I explained [to Lundquist] that we all understand that Örn should not have spoken as he did'), and sticks to the protocols of a reconciliation between men of honour ('It was very formal.... Why should it have been otherwise?' 155).

While Widmerpool is unusually keen on conforming to the prevalent rules for the purpose of his promotion, he takes it for granted that every human being is like him in that respect; it is quite natural for Widmerpool to be astounded to find that Jenkins has no particular plan for his promotion in the world, and to criticise him frankly. Jenkins is given an impression of a 'mixture of secretiveness and curiosity [which is] quite intolerable' (131) by Widmerpool's envious enquiry about two successful types at the school, Stringham and Templer. But he nonetheless retains a secret curiosity concerning the world of power ('I should have liked to hear more [from Widmerpool, about Mrs Foxe's resources and divorce], but...many things one may require have to be weighed against one's dignity,' 130), and cannot but be impressed by Widmerpool's will and quest for power in the Örn-Lundquist incident. His later attempt at a 'declaration' of love to Suzette, the landlady's niece, is, as he himself admits, partly the result of Widmerpool's advice to adopt a more 'serious' attitude towards life; Robert L. Selig points out in his monograph that Templer's

sexual exploits tend to be 'somewhat impersonal props for his own self-esteem' (77), but Jenkins's decision to make a 'declaration' is no less so – and it is in a more formalistic way, as he is going to make the declaration on the day he leaves. However, this attempt at communication of love ends in a fiasco. On the morning of his departure, seeing Suzette's straw bonnet gone from the hall, Jenkins goes to the summer-house after her; he holds the hand of the woman in the straw bonnet and begins his prepared speech, but she turns out to be Madame Dubuisson, wife of a French businessman who is weirdly Anglophilic and proficient in English. In this scene, the protagonist Jenkins looks at the circumstances with a metonymic imagination which reduces a person's identity to an object of fetishism, the principles of human relationship to a formalism like Widmerpool's ('The excitement of seeing Suzette's straw bonnet was out of all proportion to the undecided nature of my project,' 164). He receives full punishment for his own version of such an outlook. Like the crude diplomat Widmerpool, he makes much of the formal procedure (he meticulously considers the schedule of the day of valediction). But when it becomes evident that his reliance on formality is misdirected, he has no way to escape from the formal procedure forced on him. And, as he resigns himself to being a clown in the circumstance and 'confesses' his love to Madame Dubuisson, he suddenly begins to feel warmly towards her; such is the binding force of this unintended, but quite banally formal, comedy of misidentification. *Dance's* bitter comedy is at its best when protagonist-observer Jenkins's own snobbery and weakness are explicitly or implicitly demonstrated, and we see in him an involuntary corroborator of Widmerpool's one-upmanship in life. This is one of such moments.

At the University, Jenkins' consciousness of the existence of the world of power is enhanced, but he cannot make much progress in his engagement in it. The University is a place where the process of sorting out by time becomes manifest; the structure of past, present and future, hitherto only weakly sensed, here shows its ominous effect, obviously connected with the outside world of power. The inside power-struggles of 'here-now' are contrasted with, and taken into, a larger perspective of time and space. Influences from the outside world evolve in variation and connection with each other, resulting in the final dispersion of the school friends at the end of the volume, which marks the end of boyhood: Stringham and Templer go on their own ways, while Jenkins is made to stay put for the time being.

At Sillery's Sunday tea-party, a recognized institution of the University, two elements from the outside world appear. Quiggin, an aggressive, petulant student reputedly coming from a lower-class background, and Bill Truscott, Sir Magnus Donners's protégé and a man reputed to be having a difficulty in deciding 'whether

to become...Prime Minister, or a great poet', seem, on the surface of it, to be antithetical to one another; but they have a quest for power in common. Quiggin, who makes a great show of being an underestimated talent ill-suited to the laziness of university life, is in fact keen on meeting people he considers important, and quite adept at making an impression on them. Though he fails in getting the job at Donners-Brebner, he is going to be successful as a hanger-on (see his later relationship with the novelist St John Clarke and the 'red earl' Erridge), taking full advantage of his social marginality. In contrast, Truscott, seemingly far more centrally established and prosperous than Quiggin, is a person who is chased by the time limit for success: before he finds out that Truscott is really looking for a young man for Donners-Brebner, Sillery, a conscious power seeker in his 'eccentric don' way, speaks as if expostulating with him for wasting time with dons and graduates 'when a career had still to be carved out' (185).

This sense of a looming time limit also runs through the rather silly accident in Templer's car. Templer, who has gone into the City without attending a university, comes to Oxford to display his car; but he makes a mistake in handling his fast-moving machine and drives it into a ditch, thus endangering Stringham's and Jenkins' chance of returning to college in time. What saves them before the time-up is a *deus ex machina*, a bus coming from nowhere. But the incident makes the three realize that their public school friendship has come to the time limit; Templer becomes a past friend for Stringham – and for Jenkins too, when it comes to that. And for Stringham, bored by university life and already 'beginning to live in the past' (173), Truscott and Donners-Brebner work as another *deus ex machina*: he makes no more apparent effort to get into the job than he did to get back to college after the accident (he propagates acceptance of the tenet of 'complete submission to Fate,' 199), and everything is arranged by the people of will: Sillery, Mrs. Foxe, Buster, and (though marginally) the college servant Moffet. The following passage epitomises their ruthless way of disposing of Stringham, which Stringham accepts with his usual nonchalance: 'Sillery assured Mrs. Foxe that he was always at her service: when he took Buster's hand he put his own left hand over their combined grip, as if to seal it:...Something in the dignity of [Moffet's] bow must have moved Buster, because a coin changed hands' (219). After all, Stringham wants to go. But he lacks the will to discharge himself from the place of his own accord; this lack of will and nonchalant acceptance constituting an undertone in Stringham's downward drift through his later life.

Thus, Stringham is drawn to the outside world of power and sensuality, not by his own will but by the force of circumstance. Along with Templer, who is regarded

by Stringham as 'relaps[ing] into primeval barbarism' (173), Jenkins is shoved into the past in Stringham's mind. That is clearly shown when, at the end of the volume, Stringham cuts the dinner appointment with Jenkins in London, in preference for a party where his future fiancée might appear; perhaps predictably, *QU* ends cyclically with the scene in which he has a gloomy dinner with Uncle Giles, who is extremely conscious of the world of power-politics but cannot manipulate the powers to his advantage (though the title of the book he is reading at the restaurant, *Some Things That Matter*, echoes Widmerpool's determination to confine his activities to important things). Like Uncle Giles, Jenkins is now aware of the existence of the world of power, but is unable to go into it; his apprenticeship has not really begun before the Buyer's Market opens.

2. *A Buyer's Market* (1952)

As I have already mentioned, Powell is very (sometimes excessively) fond of using 'explanatory' visual images in his novels. At the end of *BM*, there appears one of the most glaring ones, so much so that Powell blatantly declares, 'This is perhaps an image of how we live.' But this image of the Russian billiards is not so simple as it first appears. Indeed, Powell and the narrator Jenkins even seem to be somewhat muddled in their imagery. They say, 'There are specific occasions when events begin suddenly to take on a significance *previously unsuspected*, so that... we ourselves, *scarcely aware that any change has taken place*, are careering uncontrollably down the slippery avenues of eternity' (274, my italics). The phrase 'previously unsuspected' suggests that now people are at least vaguely aware of an 'unsuspected' significance in their lives (as they should naturally be, in the real game of the billiards, by the disappearance of the balls); yet they are 'scarcely aware that any change has taken place', and 'careering uncontrollably down the slippery avenues of eternity'. So, are people the balls or the players? If they are the balls, who are the players looking down at the table? If we try to dissect the image rigorously, we have to conclude that it is slipshod, undermining the climactic effect that the section arguably aims at. However, I think this confusion, conscious or not, can be defended on one ground: the 'agents and patients' theme. In Powell's novelistic world, the distance between an agent (a player who pushes the balls) and a patient (a ball pushed about helplessly) is quite small. People may suspect the entrance of a new significance in their lives, and try to play the game according to such awareness; but their 'reading' of the table is always incomplete, and they are reduced to the position

of the balls pushed by the force of circumstance or by their own uncontrollable impulses and unreasonable passions (Widmerpool does not grab Barbara's hand for social advancement; the reasons for his engagement to Mildred Haycock in *LM* and his marriage to Pamela Flitton in *MP* ultimately remain mysterious.) Time, or the 'slippery avenues of eternity', is where of people's crumbled designs on life – their failed life 'choreographies' – are endlessly accumulated and toppling over. The Dance image (at least its 'choreographed' side) and the Russian billiards image are incompatible or, indeed, contradictory. This contradiction between the two images runs through *Dance*. People try to promote their spatial designs on (or to expand their circle of influence in) life, but such designs are incessantly betrayed by Time, 'that treacherous concept' (*KO* 181). Change is sudden and uncontrollable, its effects are incessantly accumulated but hardly noticed, and the breakage of the dam is hardly a significant climax; 'the process of life and death that are always on the move' (224) relentlessly goes on, and the sense of climax, the sense that something one has waited for a long time came at last when it had to come – in other words, the 'sense of design' (260) – is to be found in the shapeless anticlimax constituted by the fluidity of Time. (In Lynette Felber's words in her 1988 essay: 'The narrative progression...frustrates its readers as the revelation of the significance of events is continually postponed, creating a pattern of arrested desire' [587]). In contrast to *QU*, in which the scenes seemed to be confined to the frame of 'here-now', the idea of Time, or of the perennial, exhausting battle fought among people from time immemorial, is recognizably introduced for the first time in the series.

Characters in *BM* are speculators – in both senses. They observe and reflect on human relationships, and at the same time try to bet on the right side. The 'market' metaphor of the title, though not overtly explicated in the volume (a rare thing for Powell), is apposite here: people invest not only money but emotions, commitment, love, or pride in the market of human relationship, hoping for such dividends as monetary gain, social advancement or acceptance, the realization of one's self-image or sexual fulfilment, at the possible risk of bankruptcy, humiliation or self-exposure. For Jenkins, too, the problem of engagement in the 'market' comes to the fore in this volume, in the form of his relationships with Barbara Goring and Gypsy Jones. His narration seems to be transfixed in the tension between detached stylization and the frank admission of his humiliations – a balance that, after the off-stage conclusion of the Jenkins-Jean affair between *AW* and *LM*, was largely lost (though only intermittently restored) as Jenkins hid behind the mask of a spectator.

The social occasions in the volume – the Huntercombe dance, Mrs. Andiradis's party, luncheon at Stourwater castle, and the birthday party and funeral of Mr Deacon

– are market places where people are incessantly evaluated and invested in for possible future gains, dominated by the economics of society in its various strata. The scenes take place predominantly in upper-class surroundings (Eaton Square, Belgrave Square, Hill Street), but these are constantly contrasted with such haunts of economic constriction and genteel shabbiness as Shepherd Market, Fitzrovia and Bloomsbury, and the Widmerpools' flat near Westminster Cathedral – if not as openly down-and-out as Lambeth or Whitechapel. The common principle there is, as V. S. Pritchett says in his 1960 essay, that '[o]ne must be interested in behaviour, not in emotion; in the degree to which people hold their forts – and how much money the forts cost – not in what human beings are' (173), if one wants to be a winner. As the life and death of Mr Deacon – that complex personality by turns rounded and shallow, short-tempered and tolerant, grave and frivolous, sly and quixotic, but oddly touchingly human in the final analysis – testifies, the exposure of human elements is the mark of a failure in the masquerade of the Market.

Mr Deacon, one-time painter and now antique dealer whose life and death provide a loose frame for *BM*, is a person in whom the contradiction of past, present and future is to be distinctly discerned. There is a sense that 'none of [his] pictures could possibly have been painted at any epoch other than his' (3), while his mode of art has completely slipped out of fashion; nonetheless, his present life is directed towards the future improvement of society (he is a pacifist and socialist), and he is far from unconscious of the economy of human relationships. When he first appears in person at the Louvre in the past experience of the protagonist Jenkins, he gives the adolescent Jenkins a 'long, appraising glance' (14), evaluating him as a possible object of desire. In the first chapter one of Mr Deacon's paintings (*The Boyhood of Cyrus*) works as a metonymy for Jenkins' passive and romantic affection for Barbara Goring, representing 'a two-to-one chance of seeing [her] at dinner' (16). But, behind the glossily stylized romanticism of the historic painting, there the relentless power game of love, in which the painter himself struggles and suffers (as can be seen in his relationship with Max Pilgrim).

In contrast with the still naïve Jenkins, Barbara regards love as a power game. Her time is something to be invested in the marriage market, which is dominated not by romantic affection but by power politics ('Do be quick... I can't wait all night while you make up your mind,' 16). Jenkins's reaction is ambivalent. On the one hand, he is 'enchanted on the spot by this comportment'; on the other, Barbara's 'peremptoriness' makes him wonder whether he is still in love with her. Jenkins is fascinated by the quick development of the game; but at the same time, he cannot wholly embrace the fact that the principal element that drives this game is the sense

of power, not affection. At the Walpole-Wilsons' dinner and the Huntercombes' dance, Jenkins enters the world of economics disguised in gentility, but he can never become a positive speculator; just as the moneyless apprentice solicitor Widmerpool ends up in a disaster when he succumbs to his impulse and grabs the hand of Barbara, whom he knows he cannot afford to marry. However hard Widmerpool tries to become a part of the system (he waits for the chance to dance with Barbara with the same expression as when he was 'waiting for the start of one of the races for which he used so unaccountably to enter [at school],'⁶⁵), the oddness of his desire stands out in the superficially smooth system of dance parties; though everyone there, including Jenkins, is potentially engaged in the power struggle for the satisfaction of his or her own ego. As Stephen J. Tapscott puts it, they 'dance in the tension between centripetal, social manners and centrifugal personal needs' (116).

When Barbara refuses to let Jenkins take her hand on the ground that 'sentimentality' should be avoided, her narcissistic remark, 'How blue my hand looks in the moonlight' (64), makes Jenkins comprehend the 'little game played for her own amusement' (66). And after the sugar incident and a rather complacent realization that Barbara is not for him, Jenkins is made to realize that Widmerpool had, just like himself, 'bottled-up emotion' (80) for Barbara.¹⁸ Barbara may safely be regarded by as a thing of the past, by Jenkins; but the problem of emotion itself stays in the present. In this context, it is natural that, when Jenkins encounters his 'milestone' of time, Mr Deacon, his and Mr Deacon's absorption in their common past is impeded by the presence of Widmerpool; and when Stringham, another figure from the past, leads them all to Mrs Andriadis' party, the tensions between observation and participation, and between economic drives and emotion, are made clearer.

Upon arrival, Jenkins compares Mrs Andriadis' house to a tapestry 'into the depth of which the personality of each new arrival had to be automatically amalgamated' (101); at the same time, he bitterly reflects after the party is over:

...the impact of entertainment, given by people like Mrs Andriadis...depends upon rapidly changing personal relationships... To be apprised suddenly of the almost infinite complication of such associations...without being oneself, even at a distance, at all involved,

¹⁸ The narrator Jenkins's usual self-concealment becomes a drawback here: we are never told how he looks or dresses, whether other people like him or not, or whether he can afford to marry. The parallelism between Jenkins and Widmerpool is one of the axes of this volume, or indeed the whole *Dance*, but Powell allows this interesting matter to be undermined by his conscious or unconscious neglect.

might have been a positive handicap, perhaps a humiliating one, to enjoyment. (160)

One can never appreciate the 'rapidity' of the change of relationships without taking part in it. After he has escaped from Mrs Andriadis' house, disillusioned, Jenkins plays with the idea of composing 'a series of essays on human life and character in the manner of, say, Montaigne,' thinking the actions and nature of the people at the party were 'so icily etched in [his] mind' (152). But the phrase 'so icily etched' betrays the fact that Jenkins has failed to grasp the fluid, ever-moving nature of human relationships at the party: he poses as a cool observer who can fix the 'characters' in static forms by his writing, but in fact he is nothing more than a young man who has failed to invest his time in the ever-moving market for future participation: 'From the point of view of either sentiment or snobbery... the night had been an empty one' (153). The appearances of Uncle Giles at the beginning and end of the chapter work very effectively, giving a neat sense of structure. He first appears as a fictional objector in Jenkins' mind to the 'frivolity' of Mrs Andriadis' party; then, in reality, as a person wholly uninterested in Jenkins' story of the night. What he is interested in instead is his own present value in the market of the world: 'he produced from his overcoat pocket a handful of documents, looking like company reports, and glanced swiftly through them' (156). He is a failure in the market, but his esoteric yet deep 'seriousness' is a rebuke to Jenkins' self-stylization as a frivolous *raisonneur* without the awareness of the fallibility of his interpretation. (John Russell in his monograph: 'The Andriadis guests he thought he could etch, and here is a man known so long whom he can't begin to account for' [123].)

Like Jenkins, Widmerpool oscillates between participation in power and in sensuality throughout *BM*: he is so swayed by the news of Gypsy's pregnancy that he is forced to cancel a meeting with Sir Magnus, a scheme he and Bill Truscott, Sir Magnus' secretary, have arranged in advance. 'There really are moments when one should forget about business,' Widmerpool says (130); but Jenkins' complacency (he thinks of the principle of 'pleasure before business' as a truism, without taking on the responsibility of participation in pleasure) prevents him from fully appreciating the impact of the remark. Again, his complacency is to be punished – in the next chapter, by the revelation that Widmerpool is pursuing Gypsy. Contrary to Jenkins's naïve idea that life is 'divided into separate compartments, consisting, for example, of such dual abstractions as pleasure and pain, love and hate, friendship and enmity' (159), such things are tightly stitched together in the tapestry of people's egoism, as shown in the Seven Deadly Sins tapestry in Sourwater castle.

The circumstance of the visit to Stourwater, and the castle itself as well, is full

of the contradiction between formalized convention and powers that trespass the walls of convention. When the Walpole-Wilson group reaches the castle, it at first looks like an apotheosis of the Middle Ages. But once inside, though the things assembled there are all genuine, the effect is 'discomforting'. In the same way, the drama of conventional human relationships enacted there is really charged with too many contradictory forces to be encased in convention. The news of Stringham's apparently happy engagement is weighted against the disturbing notes of the commentary by Jean Duport, also newly married, on Luxuria among the Seven Deadly Sins tapestry: 'All newly married couples have someone of that sort [a devil 'lending a hand' in copulation] about.... Didn't you know? I see you can't be married' (191). At Stourwater, too, Jenkins remains a somewhat dazed observer, but Jean's remark that he was 'so deep in the tapestry' has a deep double-meaning: Jenkins thinks he is just fascinatedly observing the tapestry, but, once having passed the door 'through which there is no return' (160), he cannot escape being woven into the texture of power and egoism, just as the guests at Mrs Andriadis' house seemed to be 'automatically amalgamated' into 'the confines of a picture or tapestry' (101).

In contrast to Jenkins, Widmerpool, who, 'like the phoenix', rises 'habitually ...from the ashes of his humiliation' (222), has here already begun his ascent in the world of power. The incident in the dungeon, with its circumstance so deeply embedded in the setting of the castle and the character of its owner, perfectly fits into the texture of the chapter; yet at the same time it offers a sly twist of the themes previously presented. The way Sir Magnus tells the guests 'with an air almost of discomfort' that he thinks the dungeon is 'where we should put the girls who don't behave' (201) adumbrates his disturbing inclination towards sadism and confinement. Jenkins allows himself to be submerged in the fantasy: when Widmerpool suddenly appears beyond a grill-barred window, Jenkins' 'subconscious fantasies of the mind' (204) overflow, and he thinks Widmerpool is imprisoned here by Sir Magnus for a gross offence; but in fact he has just come to show Sir Magnus the draft of a speech (which is going to win him Sir Magnus's confidence) and is taking a shortcut. Jenkins' subconscious interpretation of Sir Magnus's sexual habits is exploded by Widmerpool's direct accession to the core of worldly power. The swift interchangeability of sexuality and power fully demonstrates the possibility of their mingling. This mingling prepares the background for, on the one hand, the development in Jenkins' sentimental education by Gypsy Jones and, on the other hand, Widmerpool's determination to draw a clear distinction between power-quest and sexuality (for which he is to be chastised throughout *Dance*, especially by Mildred Haycock and Pamela Flitton) in the disillusioning anticlimax of the last two

chapters.

The fourth chapter contains four ceremonies. The first two are formal ones: Stringham's wedding and Mr Deacon's funeral. The latter two are private occasions, whose ceremoniousness is understood only in retrospect, from the perspective provided by the desolate sex with Gypsy Jones ('such protests as she put forward were of so formal and artificial an order that they increased...the impression that a long-established rite was to be enacted,' 256) and the equally desolate dinner with Widmerpool and his mother ('[Widmerpool] spoke as if introduction to his mother was an experience...that every serious person had, sooner or later, to undergo' 261). What we notice here is the sense of anti-climax that flows through all four ceremonies: '[w]eddings are notoriously depressing affairs' (226); Mr Deacon's funeral after his unexpected death is just 'short' according to Jenkins; the intimacy between Jenkins and Gypsy is not increased at all by their sexual involvement; and just after that, Jenkins is told by Widmerpool, 'you sometimes make me feel that you must live completely out of the world' (270). Friends are off to the world of sensuality and power; Mr. Deacon, Jenkins' 'milestone' in time, is suddenly gone; Jenkins' participation in the world of sensuality and power is repeatedly denied by Gypsy and Widmerpool. At the same time, however, it should not pass unnoticed that there is a sense of culmination, a sense that something has come to a head in Jenkins' outlook of life, in the development of things in these few days of anti-climax; the 'hidden gate' of the billiard table suddenly went down and things came under the common choreography of the power game. The process is symbolized in the coming together and mingling of people whom Jenkins has up till now classified as opposites: Members and Quiggin as literary politicians on the make; Barbara Goring and Gypsy Jones as narcissistic self-loving women; and Jenkins and Widmerpool as 'fellow-conspirators' (272).

At Mr Deacon's birthday party, which, though guests are fussily selected, strikes a note of 'anti-climax' (236) for Jenkins, it is Quiggin and Members that occupy the centre of the stage. In contrast to Jenkins, they have already attained the position of 'writers', and in their respective ways show a 'similar sense of what the immediate future intimated' (246) – a gesture towards their feud over the patronage of St John Clarke in the next volume – while Mr Deacon himself is scarcely featured at all, as if he were already dead and giving the stage over to those who have to live in the future. Indeed, it is Mr Deacon's funeral that eventually occasions Jenkins' attempt to participate in the world of sensuality by seducing Gypsy. 'Funerals make one's mind drift toward the direction of moral relaxation', says Barnby (252), soon after which he deserts Jenkins in Mr Deacon's shop to invade 'other spaces' (253) at

a phone call from Mrs Wentworth. Barnby thus deconstructs the dualism of power and sensual imagination. At the same time, his departure prepares a closed stage of seduction for Jenkins, whose desire is dominated by the sense of expectation and climax: 'I asked myself whether this situation...was not one often *premeditated*, and...not to be lightly passed by' (256, my italic). The form of the climax, however, is different from Jenkins' expectation: far from the fulfilment of emotion, it is recognized that the burial of the matter is now complete. 'How brown my leg is...Fancy sunburn lasting that long,' Gypsy says, echoing Barbara's narcissistic remark at the Huntercombes'. The exertion of power for the sake of one's egoism emerges as a common theme in the field of love; and later, as something indeed common to all the business of the world, when Widmerpool declares his determination that '[n]o woman who takes [his] mind off his work is to play a part' (272) in his life – a life which is to be devoted to the pursuit of power but also to be deeply troubled by sexual entanglements. Jenkins and Widmerpool become 'fellow-conspirators' in the burial of their sentimental attitudes to the world, symbolized by *The Boyhood of Cyrus*. The 'boyhood' world where things and people are apparently compartmentalized in their own places (as in *QU*) is over; Jenkins' seemingly romantic and intoxicating affair with Jean in *AW*, and the whole development of the Dance of the world, now must be considered against the 'vortex' (274) of power and egoism.

3. *The Acceptance World* (1955)

In *Dance*, Powell's way of focusing on the trivial events in life and yet trying to make a serious (however comic) portrayal of society in its various strata and quarters requires a process of bridging in between: otherwise the series falls into a kind of comic soap-opera where people just repeat their comic antics and no depth or growth of personality is necessary. (That was just the mode adopted by P. G. Wodehouse, a comic writer for whose 'genius' Powell – unlike his friend Evelyn Waugh – never gave anything beyond lukewarm praise.) The narrator Jenkins has to editorialise and formularise events so that a meaning or, in the absence of 'meaning' in a pragmatic sense, certain patterns or laws concerning human behaviour (something Powell admits to be the main subject-matter of *Dance*) may at least be adumbrated, if not 'icily etched' on the pages. Considering this, it is natural that, as the experience of his protagonist self widens, the narrator Jenkins increasingly makes general or metaphorical statements on such subjects as love, women, or power, laying an

emphasis on those 'placard' scenes or conversations supporting his interpretations of the world. Bernard Bergonzi is right in his opinion that Powell is now 'prepared to allow that they [order and coherence] may appear in the verbal patterning that the novelist imposes on his material' (5). (It must be pointed out, though, that sometimes he nudges so hard that his elbow could penetrate readers' ribs, as in the rather crude assertion of the central metaphor of this volume, the 'Acceptance World', at the opening of the fifth chapter). After the foregoing two volumes, it seems that the conventions are advantageously established. Regular readers have got accustomed to Jenkins's reserved position as the usually unobtrusive observer and (at a later date, at the time when he reflects on and narrates the events) the formularising force of the narrative. Especially given that Jenkins's narration cannot possibly reach a conclusion at this point in the series (there are too many loose ends in the plot to permit a sense of ending), the increasingly powerful formularization needs to be accepted as a necessary novelistic evil, or a *donnée* between the novelist and readers, if a rewarding rounding-up is to be expected at all from this mammoth novel of the trivial.

However, there is an awkward problem here: the gap between the first trilogy and the rest of the series. At the end of *BM*, when Jenkins grabbed at the chance to sleep with Gypsy Jones and experienced a bitter disillusionment with sexual relationships, it seemed that his life had begun at last in earnest; that Jenkins himself was after all subject to the laws of the power struggle he was beginning to discern in the world. *AW* seems to follow the line: Jenkins falls in love with Jean Duport, younger sister of his schoolmate, Peter Templer; the volume ends with an ominous prediction of the return of her husband (who is supported by Widmerpool in his business). But, at the beginning of the fourth volume, *LM*, Jenkins has already parted company with Jean and is ready for marriage with Isobel Tolland, who is to be his almost invisible wife for the rest of *Dance*. Jenkins is settled, smugly or resignedly, in an obscurely aristocratic family setting, and nothing worthy of note seems to happen in his life as a husband and father: readers are not told how he gets along with Isobel, whether he continues to love her sincerely, or even what the names of his children are. Does this change undermine Jenkins's credentials as chief interpreter of the world in *Dance*?

It must be admitted that the clumsiness of the change is one of the serious technical drawbacks of the series. At the same time, this exclusion of Jenkins from the *Dance* scene after *AW* can be defended on the ground that Jenkins is not designed to be among the highlighted dancers in the whole choreography of *Dance*, but is essentially set to function mainly as a witness-reporter with a limited view, putting

forward his interpretations of other people's behaviour. Powell makes him narrate in the first person just because the interpretative narration requires an observer who interprets ('I interpret like this.') Jenkins is made to confine himself to a walk-on part in the scenes, gathering and collating information about the main dancers, in order to become the fictional author of the volumes. Jenkins' marriage is a purely procedural device that puts the emotional life of the narrator off stage; even if such an unlikely thing as Isobel's disloyalty to Jenkins (or vice versa) had happened, it would have affected the narration very little. From this viewpoint, Jenkins's affair with Jean can be read as a preparation for his loss of self in the plot of *Dance* and his retirement to the consciousness of a witness-interpreter. Crudely put, the Gypsy/ Jean affairs are experiments to know how far Jenkins, the infinitely functional protagonist, can go; after the experiment, he has to revert to his reserved – perhaps exclusively reserved – position of an observer.

Jenkins' account of the affair is as nearly ecstatic as he can offer (here is the only occasion when the sedate narrator Jenkins, as the alter ego of the stylist Powell, repeats an adjective: when he is about to go into Templer's house, where he and Jean has their first sex, he says, '...the face of the drive, where the snow lay soft and tender, like the clean, clean sheets of a measureless bed,' 66); but, when we read the passage, it must be noted that the narrator Jenkins knows that Jean was carrying on another affair at the same time. The narrator Jenkins is here tracing the interpretation of the situation by the protagonist Jenkins, who thinks that he is entitled to choose, of his own accord, to be submerged in the timeless ideal of love. But, in the reality of the plot, his affair with Jean is ruled by the economy of time; and it is Jean who plans the economy. 'Did Peter mention that Bob [Duport] is back in England? ...And that his prospects are not too bad? ...That may make difficulties...Don't let's talk of them,' Jean says in the typically Powellian fragmentary love-conversation at the end of the volume (214). She seems to suggest that they should postpone discussion of the future and revel in the eternal present, but in fact she is emphasizing the present in order to get as much pleasure from her affair with Jenkins before Duport's return, while also sleeping with Jimmy Brent (William Bowman Piper even suggests the possibility that Jean meets Jenkins naked at the door of her flat because she has been in bed with Brent until just before [185]). Even when the door of the room is closed by the innocent protagonist Jenkins, the privacy of the room of love has already been violated by forces from the outside world, and by Jean as their agent. In narrating his involvement with Jean, Jenkins never once attempts to describe his own assertion of the ego: even in the narration of his own sexual relationship, he is essentially an interpreting witness rather than an active participant.

AW begins, in a typically Powellian way, with the description of Ufford, a Bayswater hotel patronized by Uncle Giles, which has apparently no potentiality to sponsor a larger plot. This 'private' hotel seems to have no connection with the outer world: it is situated 'in a latent, almost impenetrable region west of the Queen's Road' (1). When we reread the description of the hotel, we are tempted to compare the hotel with the flat Jean rents for her secret meeting with Jenkins, where '[t]he furniture and decoration...were of an appalling banality' (137). But at the same time, Ufford (painted in 'battleship-grey') is a place full of the atmosphere of power-struggle which reminds Jenkins of a ship, a Conradian schooner, 'with the uneasy memories of the strife of men...riding at anchor on the sluggish Bayswater tides'. Even in the privacy of the hotel, people are constantly reminded of the workings of worldly powers. When Mrs. Erdleigh, the clairvoyant Uncle Giles sometimes consults (and is possibly having an affair with), tells him, 'You live between two worlds...Perhaps even more than two worlds' (14), Jenkins interprets this as an indictment that he is transfixed between diffidence and dissipation, and in a sense he is right (considering his affair with Gypsy Jones in *BM*); but it has a larger meaning, too. Mrs. Erdleigh predicts his business trouble with an old man and two young men, probably St. John Clarke, Members and Quiggin. The point is that, in Mrs. Erdleigh's prediction, Jenkins' future love and his future business trouble can be contained in a single act of clairvoyance. Certainly, this new perspective provided by occultism is quite unexpected, and seems to sit oddly with Powell's stock-in-trade of objective social observation. However, when we have another look at her clairvoyance in the whole series (with a grain of salt regarding Powell's decision to let her concrete forecasts come true in this volume), we can see that her occultism has a deep root in the understanding of human life as an arena where people's wills collide with each other and the battle develops forever according to the dialectics of power. The world of love and the world of business are never separate, and can both be seen as versions of power struggle.

The central metaphor of the 'Acceptance World', at least as it is used by Jenkins,¹⁹ has a direct connection to the above theme. We have to read the future

¹⁹ One of the regrettable defects of this volume is the fact that Powell's presentation of the metaphor in the form of Templer's words is somewhat messy. Templer's explanation chiefly concerns 'accepting' other companies' debts for a while (in expectation of the interest); but Powell and Jenkins seems to take the explanation for a metaphor of 'accepting' one's own risks (on principle, not someone else's debts). A more straightforward reference by Templer to the need to take risks in business ventures would have been more apposite (though perhaps a little pedestrian). Is it that Powell was mesmerized by the charm of the phrase ('the Acceptance

movement of the market and 'accept' risks in all our ventures ('not only [in] business, but in love, art, religion, philosophy, politics, in fact all human activities,' 170) in order to bring profit to ourselves. It is impossible to shut out the element of egoistic self-assertion from the privacy of sexual bliss, as the protagonist Jenkins tries to. This concept of life as an arena for severe business transaction (where the matter of sentiment is rather irrelevant, if one wants to continue to win) is a development of the 'market' idea of the former volume, and it is what holds *AW* together. It makes the volume work as the conclusion of the first trilogy, where Jenkins is trained as the observer-reporter of the battles fought in various quarters of society. The apparently disparate worlds of the power-struggle of Members and Quiggin over St. John Clarke, Mrs. Erdleigh's clairvoyance, the affair between Jean and Jenkins, and the decline of Stringham, are now all connected by a common basis, harking forward to the agonizing human relationships in the second trilogy, and to the more blatant struggle in the rank system of the Army.

On the surface, the Ritz palm court (where Jenkins comes across Templer, Mona, Jean and Quiggin) is a closed and privileged upper-class arena protected from the bleak winter of the outside world. However, the social strata are never static even there, because people are 'driven...at different speeds by the same Furies' and are 'at close range equally extraordinary' (85), no matter where they find themselves. Indeed, people from various socially defined worlds meet here in the luxury of the palm court: Members, St. John Clarke's secretary and a man who is determined to go up in the world of letters (though he cuts Jenkins in favour of something better); Templer, a friend of his who has diverged from his previous life into the City world; Quiggin, a self-styled 'practicing Marxist'; and Mona, a model who abandoned the bohemian world to become stockbroker Templer's wife. The ease with which they seem to be socially defined makes an apparent contrast with Jean's air of having set up a 'barrier...between herself and the rest of the world' (61); but a closer examination reveals that the others' social fronts are not as inflexibly firm as they look. Members, who propagates 'art for art's sake', feels no shame at all in making use of St. John Clarke, an old novelist of limited merit; Quiggin deftly supplants Members as Clarke's hanger-on, an action that has little to do with the practice of Marxism (though he teaches Clarke how to use the word 'bourgeois' and brings him on a demonstration march); Templer, who shows a 'recurrent desire to escape from whatever world enclosed him' (41), has come to the Ritz for one of the 'treats' for his wife he hopes may placate her indefinable discontent with the world they live in

now; and Mona deserts Templer to go back to the bohemian world she found in Quiggin. Their worlds commingle: they are all inhabitants of the Acceptance World, in which people have to 'accept' risks and use cunning in their self-assertive ventures. After all, Jenkins himself is here in the Ritz to carry out a business negotiation; and he is alert enough to the changing circumstances to 'open diplomatic relation...with the new government' (115) when Members is replaced by Quiggin as Clarke's secretary.

By contrast, in his narration of the affair with Jean, Jenkins seems to represent the whole matter in the light of improvisation and random chance. 'Certainly the chief attraction of the projected visit [to Templer's house near Maidenhead] would be absence of all previous plan' (63); here, Jenkins thinks, is an escape from the incessant need for business scheming. But the affair is not exempt from the pattern of the power-struggle of the world, even from the beginning: what starts the affair is a peremptory order from Jean ('"You must come," said Jean, in her matter-of-fact tone, almost as if she were giving an order,' 63). Considering the fact that she is going to have an affair with the unattractive Brent at the same time, it would be safe to say that she substantially considers Jenkins as a convenient object of flirtation, however passionate she is during the affair. Certainly Jean is living in the present, for temporary sexual pleasure; but in the pursuit of the pleasure, she is extremely adept at turning casual chances into affairs of some duration that can be disposed of when the time comes, at her own will. As Robert K. Morris says in his monograph, 'love becomes power, power, love', but 'the problem is not one of analysis but control' (160).

Even after they get into the rear seat of Templer's car, the narrator Jenkins completely avoids describing the growth of his protagonist self's emotion towards Jean as a climactic, temporal process. Instead, he emphasizes the perfect timing of the sudden climax, their embrace. It was, he says, 'as if the two of us had previously agreed to embrace at that particular point of the road' (65). This description of their embrace as an impulsive, chance, but perfectly timed happening prepares the 'clean, clean sheets of a measureless bed' bleached of all planned meaning. But the attractive unplannedness of the visit is destroyed the next morning, when Mona's capricious desire to invite Quiggin introduces into the house the power-struggle of the outer world Jenkins wants to avoid. Jenkins' haven of love for Jean cannot but be absorbed into the economic system of the world; and time is money there, even time for rapturous pleasure has to be carefully planned for the utmost amount of enjoyment.

The seemingly meaningless and farcical fuss around the planchette that follows, involving the Templers, Jenkins, Quiggin, Mrs. Erdleigh and Jimmy

Stripling (now under the power of Mrs. Erdleigh), does have a meaning in this context. If we take the gadget at its face value, the great point is that it writes without any deliberation; but Mrs. Erdleigh, the clairvoyante, emphasizes the hidden pattern behind everything in the world, in such a way that it almost sounds like a parody of Quiggin's Marxist views: 'Commencement – Opposition – Equilibrium...*You can't get away from it* – Thesis – Antithesis – Synthesis' (90, my italics). Why Marx, who comes 'through', warns Quiggin of Clarke's illness is never explained; but certainly Quiggin has to go back, before time is up, to the 'field of operation' (101), the stage of dialectical strife in the world ruled by the economy of time as money. And Jenkins himself must struggle to claim his share in the economy of time: a date from the tantalizingly reluctant Jean whose days are allegedly tightly packed with other things (very probably including Brent). Their affair is assimilated into the pattern of the struggles in society.

'Yet love, for all the escape it offers, is closely linked with everyday things, even with the affairs of others,' is the sentiment of the narrator Jenkins when he tells us that the protagonist Jenkins chose to tell Jean about the incident in the Hyde Park (Quiggin and Mona together pushing St John Clarke's wheelchair in a left-wing procession), after intercourse in '[t]he calculated anonymity of the surroundings' (138) of Jean's flat. It is characteristic of Jean that she at first looks at Mona's conduct as a way of gaining an advantage within the frame of her relationship with Peter. She is projecting on Mona her own method of dealing with men: she regards a couple's relationship not as something set in the timelessness of pleasure, but as a power-struggle in the utilitarian economy of time. It is no wonder her confession (indirectly induced by Jenkins' story), in spite of making Jenkins suddenly sick, in the end helps her hold him more tightly in her power. '[i]t was hard to know how to frame a complaint ... She had not been "unfaithful" to me' (142). Jenkins has no right to Jean's past; she manipulates time dexterously (as Piper points out [182], Jean does not confess her present relationship with Brent), in order to turn Jenkins' jealousy towards the past into a decision to cling to her more tightly in the future. After this struggle has been concluded in Jean's victory, the unplanned visit to Mrs. Andriadis' flat and their expulsion by the hostess (whose 'conversion' to the left takes the shape of the appearance of a new 'beau', the Trotskyist Guggenbuhl, who also took part in the procession and is going to supplant Quiggin as Clarke's secretary) works as comic relief, largely due to the humorous resignation of Umfraville, the society guide who advocates the principle of enjoying the moment. Nevertheless, it is a 'part of the same diagram' (165) of the metamorphosis of the society and the individual. It provides a respite before the more dismal event of Stringham's fall, but at the same

time prepares the event by bringing the theme of changing times into obviously privileged social strata. The strong-willed and cunning rise, while those who neglect to effectively assert their egos gradually decline into obscurity; we cannot be made more strongly aware of the passage of time than when we witness such changes of rank on the ladder of power.

Le Bas's Old Boys dinner at the Ritz is seemingly characterized by its unchangeability: it's the 'vestige of school discipline...reborn' (180) in a luxurious social institution, with Le Bas making identical speeches from year to year. But the return to the timeless unchangeability of the past is never smooth, even for Le Bas himself. He wants to avoid the cliché of 'happy school days', but by doing so, he falls into the admission that he was never quite happy in the position of an authority who has to keep the unchangeable order in the House ('no good pretending that all time spent at school was – entirely blissful...certainly not for a housemaster...' 189). His attitude makes a strong contrast with that of Widmerpool, who identifies with the undoubted authority of the School order past and present (Stringham's mockery of Widmerpool, 'You are higher up in the house than I am' [QU 48] has come true). Widmerpool's past of unrequited struggle for the never attained goals at the School is glorified within himself. The precious time he speculated for his advancement has, in his self-esteem, resulted in his present and future advantageous position in The Acceptance World, and that has entitled him to reconstruct the past in his own way. In the disturbance that follows Widmerpool's self-intoxicated harangue, only Stringham is unperturbed, in the privacy of his alcoholism. But his privacy is that of a man who has lost all connection with the present of worldly power-struggle; unlike Widmerpool's assumption of authority, his usurpation of Widmerpool's identity by mimicry is concerned only with Widmerpool's past self, and continues only for a second. Widmerpool tracks Stringham into his brittle privacy of the present: he is the 'moving spirit' in holding Stringham down on his bed, regardless of Stringham's assertion that it is a 'fundamental human right' to go in and out of the privacy of one's own bed. Jenkins' reply to Stringham's accusation, 'Nick, are you a party to this?', is just 'Why not call it a day?' (207); he knows that a 'day' is really over, and that Widmerpool's self-obsessed philistinism has gained a victory. In fact, Jenkins witnesses the event as a reluctant 'party' to, or inactive accomplice of, Widmerpool: Margaret Boe Birns's point that Jenkins and Widmerpool are 'linked together in an oppositional way, but joined they are' (88) in the changing class system rings particularly true here.

The narrator Jenkins reports the reflection of the protagonist Jenkins, at the end of the volume:

Perhaps, in spite of everything, the couple of the postcard could not be dismissed so easily. It was in their world that I seemed now to find myself', the narrator Jenkins reports the reflection of the protagonist Jenkins, at the end of the volume. (214)

The protagonist Jenkins tries to assimilate his self to the timeless image of the embrace: for him, love is food for ideal reflection rather than ruthless business transactions in the movement of time. But his affair with Jean is already nearing its end with the indirect help of Widmerpool and the 'deliberate manoeuvre of Jean herself for her own purposes' (*KO* 180). Jenkins's self is engulfed in the overall pattern of egoistic utilitarianism; his education as the passive, functional, and at the same time fallible observer-interpreter of society is now complete.

Chapter Three

A Dance to the Music of Time: Second Movement

1. *At Lady Molly's* (1957)

It's both the strength and the weakness of *LM* that it is neat and compact (though intermittently drifting towards untidiness, especially when the Tollands are about). Readers who haven't read the first trilogy will be able to enjoy this volume on its own, if given the synopsis of the first trilogy and a brief lecture about who is who. That is partly because the plot evolves around two easily discernible axes (Widmerpool-Mrs Haycock/ Dogdene and Erridge-Quiggin-Mona/ Thrubworth): both follow the development of an amorous relationship, and end in a clear-cut showdown (Widmerpool loses Mrs Haycock and Quiggin loses Mona). Another reason is that the tone of Jenkins's narration comes closest, among the twelve volumes, to that of tolerantly light-hearted satire, a label often attached to *Dance* by both those who praise it and those who denigrate it. Everyone in this volume is apparently 'flat', superficially given a role that is easy to define socially; the situation and atmosphere suggest a modern version of the hackneyed tradition of comedy of humours, whose essence lies in the fixity of the structure of the 'comic' and of the personality of each character. In particular, the snobbery of Widmerpool, the flattest of all grotesquely flat characters ('the greatest bourgeois' of the *Dance*, who, in Marcia Muelder Eaton's words, 'intentionally wills himself into stereotypical parts' [178]) is amply displayed and amply punished in *LM*. True to the nature of comedy of humours, the façade of his personality does not change at all after his sexual fiasco at Dogdene and the breaking of his engagement: he is as complacent as ever, and even offers the newly-wed Jenkins his own 'view' about marriage. Readers can be certain that he is going to continue his social climbing in much the same manner as ever. The dominance of the mode of artificial, schematized comedy seems complete. We might even want to pat Widmerpool on the back for having been a good sport who entertains us by his famous comic routines (what Evelyn Waugh called the 'annual treat of Widmerpool' in his review of *CCR* [919]); on the other hand, Widmerpool in this volume does not evoke the same strange mix of horror and laughter, as he does elsewhere in the series. And in general, *LM* constitutes an island of steadily good-natured social comedy in the sea of half comic, half bleak confusion and disintegration that occupies the greater part of *Dance*. The main criticism against *LM*, especially the plot around Widmerpool, will be that the neat social comedy is

built upon social quicksand. Widmerpool's desire to get into Dogdene is one even he himself would not have conceived in his later life. The tough but shallowly characterised socialite Mrs Haycock is fitter to appear in *A & P* than in *Dance* (she is strongly reminiscent of Mrs Mendoza) – perhaps that's why she never reappears in later volumes. In short, the neatness of *LM* rests on the fact that it is related more deeply than any other volume to the conventions of comedy of manners/ humours; if readers feel that this is a kind of 'break' volume in the series, that is quite understandable.

However, it would be unfair to regard *LM* as totally depending on such conventions; rather, Powell is playing with them. He unexpectedly overturns the stylized artifice of traditional comedy of manners (ruled by a single fixed system of values) by displaying the realities of a life in which the contrasting outlooks of various individuals collide with one another. Certainly, *LM* is well schematized when read as a self-contained, traditional comedy: it is full of pluralities and parallels that invite us to compare, contrast and find common patterns (there are two peers who own a stately home, two hangers-on, two old soldiers; Mrs Haycock has a relationship with two of the characters in a period of nearly twenty years, and the volume ends with the two hangers-on being chastised by their own sexual relationships). However, *Dance* is not ruled by a single, fixed principle but is an ever-changing arabesque of people's various principles of life, now formed, now dissolved. In Powell's case, the apparently schematized and artificial plot is a means of emphasizing by its very plurality and parallelism the ultimate impossibility of summing up the world in a single schematization. Similar events form comic repetitions, but the participants' views of such events differ drastically and battle with one another, sometimes even contradicting themselves. Unlike the traditional mode of comedy of manners, the *Dance* world is not founded on a single scheme of values. There are various games in progress, each with rules of its own; people fight to win in their own specifically schematized game (e. g. 'getting on', sex or leftism), and at the same time insist that the value system of the game in which they are immersed should extend to every area of activity. As in traditional comedies, people's relationship with convention is the source of the comic in *Dance*; but here, there is no single, absolute convention, or set of rules that controls the whole of life.

In *LM*, there are moments when characters who have seemed to be compartmentalized in their fixed personalities are found to be performing or to have performed on the same stage with one another, and when the depth and diversity (and, sometimes, even dignity) in the personality of apparently flat or hollow characters

are revealed. Such moments are often provided by the stories told by the characters about others; they reveal many things about their subjects, and at the same time about the story-tellers themselves, thereby introducing the problem of narrative reliability and the contrived nature of 'reality'. These stories have their own strategy of revelation and concealment, closely connected with the formation of versions of reality. As Stephen J. Tapscott sums it up, gossip 'provides Nick with several views from which to synthesize a multidimensional and relatively objective – or comic – perspective on actions and on his own experience' (112). These narratives get intertwined with each other and with the past and present of the plot, contributing to the larger pattern of the realpolitik of people's egoism.

LM begins with a story told about General Conyers, and ends with ones told by him. He is a 'frame' character of the volume, and all major elements of it are compounded in his personality.²⁰ He is not a simple man: he is a man of humour – in both senses – and of society; he is a man of powerful action and at the same time a cool analyzer of human power politics.) At the beginning, the General is represented through the malicious retelling of some hearsay by Uncle Giles. At the end, the General tells the story of Widmerpool's defection from Dogdene and at the same time interprets it, using the terms of psychoanalysis. Then, at Jenkins' request, he tells the story of his charge formerly told by Giles at the beginning of the volume. He puts forward his interpretation of the Widmerpool story with a forcefulness appropriate to a soldier ('You are going to say you are a hard-bitten Freudian, and won't hear of Jung and his ideas. Very well, I'll open another *field of fire*,' 230, my italics), but he knows the ultimate fallibility of his interpretation ('...I should approach this business with the greatest humility – with the *greatest* humility,' 233, original italics). Unlike Giles, he does not propagate the truth of his interpretation of the laws that rule reality. Giles' stories are mainly told to alleviate his sense of failure, to prove he is unsuccessful only because others are unduly pushing. The General's realism is characterized by its disinterestedness: his mind is interested in the subject-matter of his stories, but has no intention of personally profiting in any way by telling them, even when the subject is himself (the reality of the charge Jenkins has been so curious to know is 'I had the greatest difficulty in getting my pony out of trot' and 'Later on in the day, I shot a Boer in the shin' [235]).

This issue of the relativity of realism is focalised in the two axis characters of

²⁰ Also, Conyers is a prototype of the efficient soldiers in *Dance* who are at the same time comic performers that are treated by Powell as one of the preferable forms of survival in the power-struggle of the world: they include General Liddament in *SA*, and on a lesser scale, Sergeant Ablett, also in *SA*, and Colonel Finn in *MP*.

the plot, Mildred Haycock (née Blaides), and Erridge, and the two axis places of the volume, Dogdene and Thrubworth. The image of Mildred Blaides Jenkins met almost twenty years previously, a girl in V. A. D. uniform, infamous for rackets goings-on, had for a long time given place to the conception of her as a Florence Nightingale-like 'figure of decided romance' – always connected with Dogdene, a 'faery' place 'set among giant trees' (9-10). All that is put in a new perspective when Jenkins is taken to Lady Molly Jeavons' house. Molly's is a place where anyone may come from any social milieu that can roughly be called middle class or above, and anything can be discussed in the medium of gossip. It is here that Jenkins hears about the Tollands, especially the eldest brother Erridge and Thrubworth (another large country seat in this volume, where Erridge lives in desolation). Here he also meets Widmerpool, in the new incarnation of a fairly successful stock broker and future husband of Mildred Haycock, and Mrs. Haycock herself after twenty years. These two pivots of the plot, seemingly disparate, get gradually woven into the same texture of the realpolitik of love and egoism, as the volume proceeds to the two escapes in the end – Erridge's escape from Thrubworth to China with Mona, and Widmerpool's escape from Dogdene, alone; Widmerpool missing a chance to break into the closed society of the upper class, and Erridge deserting the place handed down to him as a peer.

As for Widmerpool, Jenkins reflects, 'Yet, for some reason, I was quite glad to see him again.... As an aspect of my past he was an element to be treated with interest, if not affection, like some unattractive building or natural feature of the landscape which brought back the irrational nostalgia of childhood' (45). This is his reaction when he sees him at Molly's for the first time in some years, indeed the first since the night Jenkins helped Widmerpool put the drunken Stringham into bed. At that time he thought of Widmerpool's physical triumph over Stringham in terms of a 'social upheaval', 'a positively cosmic change in life's system' (*AW* 209). Jenkins' present positive response to Widmerpool's appearance may strike a note of somewhat chilly indifference towards Stringham's decline; Jenkins has in fact let Stringham sink into oblivion, but at the same time, he seems to have forgotten, or failed to fully appreciate, the rising trajectory of Widmerpool. For him, Widmerpool is like a 'building', something that should be always there, having never been 'anything but "settled down"' (45) in his pit of eternal obscure toil for the unattainable laurel. When they next meet at Widmerpool's club, Widmerpool says about Jenkins' hack-work, 'It may lead to something better. If you are industrious, you get on' (52). In his eyes, his own utilitarian diligence has disconnected him from the unsavoury past (he defines Barbara Goring and Gypsy Jones as 'forgotten') and will allow him,

Mildred's husband, in due course 'to judge how Lady Molly must have looked there [at Dogdene, whose mistress Molly has once been]' (57). For Widmerpool, the historical/ temporal feature of buildings (which comes first for Jenkins) is nothing unless their gates are opened by his plans and efforts. It is noteworthy that the success of Widmerpool's planned rise has always been symbolized by territorial invasion and occupation; the point is, to borrow Uncle Giles' phrase in the opening, to behave 'as if he owned the place'. His aspiration to intrude into Dogdene, in itself fatuous enough for a man rising in the world of real business, can be looked upon as reflecting the social status he thinks he has reached.

However, it is a temporal element of Mildred's life that worries Widmerpool: namely her past as a reckless playgirl. As always, his countermeasure is diligent planning: this time, the schematization of their sexual relationship. Widmerpool plans pre-marital intercourse, not because he cannot curb his passion, but as a strategy for keeping Mildred's favour. The history of Dogdene (his dexterity in inviting himself and Mildred there is admired by Chips Lovell, the hard-core socialite and 'raisonneur' of high life) is utilized as something that will heighten the romantic atmosphere of his well-planned intercourse with Mildred. As if in accordance with that, Jenkins, when later in the day he is asked by Mrs. Conyers where the Widmerpools came from, answers, 'Nottinghamshire, I believe,' to vaguely suggest that generations of Widmerpools have lived in a rural setting, with a 'manor house...Widmerpool tombs...tankards of ale at The Widmerpool Arms' (83). He adds a temporal dimension to Uncle Giles' spatial metaphor: social consideration makes him behave as if the Widmerpools had always owned the place. Here, as everywhere in the series, Jenkins works as Widmerpool's social accomplice.

Uncle Giles' phrase is (perhaps deliberately) repeated at the end of the third chapter: Mona, prevented from having the pleasure of the night at Thrubworth to herself by the arrival of Susan and Isobel Tolland, says, 'I didn't think the girls were up to much. They behaved as if they owned the place' (153). This remark is slightly nonsensical, as the Tollands do own the place. In fact, if there is a person who is trying to behave as if he owned the place, it is Quiggin, her husband. The two days at Quiggin's cottage (Erridge lets him and Mona use it for nothing) and Thrubworth have distinct makings of a comedy of humours, with Quiggin as a rigorous Left ideologue, and Erridge as the dreamy, naïve and rather awkward heir of a country seat. The setting almost suggests a modern version of the novels of Thomas Love Peacock, with Thrubworth as an ideal stage for the clash of humours. However, what makes this chapter not quite a mere transplantation of the convention to modern times is the hidden elasticity of the protagonists' personalities: both Quiggin and

Erridge are egoistically power-conscious, and can adapt themselves, in their own ways, to the fluidity of the realpolitik around the place.

'Do you think it nice? ...As it is, I would much rather be looking at a well-designed power station. Perhaps, as being more rural, I should say a row of silos,' Quiggin retorts to Jenkins, when he rashly says, 'You have a nice landscape here. Is there a house behind those trees?' (107). On the face of it, Quiggin is propagating a socialistic planning of the landscape; but the real purpose of his lecture is to smother the existence of the 'house' owned by the patron he plans to personally exploit (he is trying to make Erridge sell the trees to meet the expense of starting a magazine of which he wants to be sole editor) or at least to isolate Erridge from the house and family-tree of the Tollands ('I am not at all interested in the rest of his family,' 122). Later, when the dilapidated and apparently absent-minded Erridge stands at the door of the cottage, Quiggin shows a desperate anxiety to expel him without revealing his identity to Jenkins. But Erridge's self-confinement in his dream is not something Quiggin can take advantage of; on the contrary, it shows Erridge's firm resolution to relate to reality in his own way. Quiggin cannot prevent Erridge from inviting Jenkins to Thrubworth on the ground that he is a striker (in fact, it is not the script-writers but the electricians who are striking), and thereby frustrating his intention; Erridge's attitude can be called a delusion, but his is a delusion supported by an intuitive, egocentric grasp of the elements that constitute the reality of the ever-changing power-politics of human relationships. Quiggin takes revenge by resorting to the conventions of high society officially detested by himself, and by consciously playing the role of a bore in a comedy of manners. The entrance of the two girls strongly steers the atmosphere from comedy of humours to comedy of a 'social life abhorrent to him [Erridge]' (145). Quiggin insists on opening the last remaining bottle of champagne to celebrate the engagement of Erridge's sister Susan, thereby revealing Thrubworth's aristocratic family tradition which Erridge wants to conceal. The game is drawn here; but at the end of the volume, Erridge gets the better of Quiggin by deserting Thrubworth with Mona for China. The territorial dispute is brought to an end in the flow of time, by an unexpected variation on the theme of love and relationship.

Molly's South Kensington house is, in contrast with Thrubworth and Dogdene, a place characterised by its easygoing acceptance of the miscellaneous elements of life: everything is 'disposed... as if the owners... were still picnicking in considerable disorder'; '[n]o one was ever...turned away from the Jeavons table' (159; compare it with the closed-in atmosphere of Thrubworth and the difficulty – according to Lovell – of 'penetrating' Dogdene). It is here that the characters in this

novel – without conventional connection with one another – congregate, and where the existence of unexpected human connections is revealed. But even this place has a kind of unintended exclusivity; its guests span the social categories Jenkins usually meets: some peers; a retired general and his wife; many members of the upper middle class; people having something or other to do with art. Ted Jeavons, who happened to get commissioned in the Great War but was a car polisher in a motor show when he met Molly, is really the odd man out. It is he who opens the door to the ever-moving larger patterns of reality. We should note that it is on one of his nights away from the house that Jeavons tells Jenkins about his affair with young Mildred. His narrative expands the pattern of human relationship to street level, and to the past (it is noteworthy that each thinks the other has not changed at all since they parted). This expansion of the pattern is doubly humiliating for Widmerpool, who has planned and fought to obtain his present position as a gentleman who is admitted to the exclusive Dogdene with his future wife. John Russell, in his monograph, contrasts Jeavons's unobtrusive social adventurousness with Widmerpool's fussy, competitive and self-conscious attempt to 'have' a woman with a title (142-3). Indeed, Widmerpool is always at great pains to conform to the code of behaviour of the circle he wants to join, from a private school football team to a religious cult group.

People cannot ultimately project themselves into future human relationships with utilitarian profit motives (in Conyers's words, 'Got to have a plan, of course, but no use knotting yourself up in it too tight' [234]); those who try to do so often end up being punished by unexpected traps from the past (in Widmerpool's case, the revelation of Mildred's past – note that she describes herself as a woman absolutely adverse to planning) and unpredictable pitfalls in the future (his impotence at Dogdene). But it should not be ignored here that, though his decidedly hollow personality is quite unchangeable, Widmerpool is not a mere butt of laughter, a man in the fixed position of a clown in a comedy of humours. Like Samuel Pepys, who has left a very down-to-earth account of his own experience of thwarted desire at Dogdene (11-12),²¹ Widmerpool has a 'preoccupation with money and professional advancement'; but at the same time, again like the 'realist' Pepys, he has 'a kind of dogged honesty' (ibid), and there are moments when that honesty constitutes a saving grace, however awkward a form it may take. When Mrs. Haycock decides to desert the ailing Widmerpool and go off with the others (including Jeavons) on the night of

²¹ This passage is one of Powell's literary pastiches in *Dance*. Others include a letter of Byron's (*VB* 171), Proust's *Remembrance* (*MP* 119-21), Creevey's diary (*BDFR* 43), and Gronov's *Reminiscences* (*BRFR* 43-4)

the revelation, he accepts the situation calmly; perhaps because he has by then made up his mind not to expect much affectionate attention from her in their married life, or perhaps because the arrangement makes it easier for him to slip away without the trouble of delivering her to the hotel. Whichever might be the case, he is true to his materialistic realism even when he is the victim of a situation that has not been planned against, and endures it by resorting to yet another plan to make the best of it. Widmerpool's incessant materialistic planning comes near to a form of delusion, when, at the end of the novel, he tells Jenkins that he and Mildred 'talked things over quietly, and came to the same conclusion' (238), as if they had made a new plan for the future together; but it also guards his ego against the world, like Erridge's attitude to which I have referred. Both Widmerpool and Erridge insist on relating to reality on their own terms that are indispensable for them, as nearly everyone in *Dance* does to a degree (some of the more obvious cases are Uncle Giles, Gwatkin, and X. Trapnel). It would not be totally wrong to say that each maintains his or her own version of realism, if 'realism' means a way of coming to terms with the objects and events in this world.

The relativity of 'reality' is concisely summed up in Jenkins' conversation with General Conyers in the last scene of the volume.

The change in his voice announced that our *fantasy life* together was over. We had returned to *the world of everyday things*. Perhaps it would be truer to say that our *real life* together was over, and we returned to *the world of fantasy*. (236, my italics)

Jenkins has this thought when the General asks what he wants for a wedding present, having finished discussing Widmerpool's escape from Dogdene and his own charge in South Africa. At the beginning of the conversation, the General says he is, and always has been, 'a great believer in people knowing the truth' (226); but that is not incompatible with his 'greatest humility'. He tries to summarize reality as rigorously scientifically as he can, but he knows that, in the 'terrible and passionate drama' (234) of life, schematization is ultimately doomed to fail. Nevertheless one cannot help schematizing life, in the General's case by psychoanalysis – and, on a larger scale, in Jenkins' case, by his own act of writing *Dance*. In a sense they are not far from Erridge and Widmerpool; the difference lies in the fact that the General and the narrator Jenkins are aware of their fallibility.

In her monograph, Isabelle Joyau points out Jenkins's oscillation between 'a crusade for relative spirit' as 'a corollary of the aporia of knowledge' and 'a lust for

the absolute, a penchant for encompassing abstractions', at the same time asserting that *Dance* challenges traditional novels by 'failing to sweep mysteries away in a lightning revelation' at the ending (38-41). For the comic narrator Jenkins, and for Powell as a novelist of comic realism, to know the relativity of 'realism', and yet to grasp, as un sentimentally as possible, the human desire to interpret the 'terrible and passionate' drama of the incessantly changing world in a concept that is most profitable for oneself, is, indeed, the fundamental ethic of the whole *Dance* as a comedy in which the fixation of pattern and its disruption sustain a dialectic. *LM* is light in tone, but Jenkins is as conscious here of his way of having a relationship with reality as anywhere in the sequence.

2. *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* (1960)

CCR is, regrettably, one of the weak links of the chain that is *Dance*. Not that it fails to be readable. It provides many excellent sketches of the stagnant life in London around the time of the Spanish civil war and the abdication of King Edward VIII. Its virtue is somewhat similar to that of Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* or *Mr Norris Changes Trains*. The scenes are loosely put together under the normally bland eye of a single narrator, but there are many moments when the observer's eye is suddenly brought to a sharp focus and the scene and the personality of the protagonists come to life. (For instance, the scene in which St John Clarke tries to play up to Lady Warminster without losing the dignity of a venerable but progressive man of letters, or the one where Maclintick tells Jenkins and Moreland how he came to be married.) However, the struggles of the musicians and critics that occupy much of this volume fail to rise to the level of the half-mythological, invincible petty scheming of Widmerpool, Uncle Giles or Sunny Farebrother. People in *CCR* just seem to be deterministically bound to expire in their claustrophobic little cells of dull daily lives, without the sense of endurance and survival that is the resource of the long bitter comedy of *Dance*. The absence of laughter in this volume is quite remarkable: everyone is just ineffectively acrid, melancholic or resigned.

In his review of the volume, 'Marriage à la Mode', Evelyn Waugh hoped that it would be found to play 'an essential part in the grand design' after all (919). It generally does not; though Powell certainly sows some precious seeds to be reaped later – especially Matilda Wilson, almost the only female character in *Dance* whose toughness has a rounded depth that requires readers' enduring sympathy. (Most of the female characters of *Dance*, including even Jean, lack this depth, most of all Mrs

Maclintick in this volume, whose single-minded acerbity is out of all proportion even with 'the general easy-going acceptance of the bizarre' [Waugh] of the series). However, the largest drawback of this volume is, I think, the absence of a character or scene that works as – to borrow John Bayley's phrase Widmerpool in his 2000 essay of his ('Genius of the Dancing Master') – a 'catalyst' that 'complements and indeed inspires other figures in the dance, the narrator included' (4). That is partly because, while music must be the essence of Moreland's or Maclintick's lives, for Jenkins (and Powell) it is neither as indispensable as literature and painting, or as curiously attractive as Widmerpool's power-quest. The lack of inner motivation to take on the musical world makes Jenkins's narration stilted rather than intelligently observational (compare it with the full-bloodedness of the St John Clarke scene mentioned above).

It is understandable that, after Widmerpool's bustle in *LM*, Powell wanted to take a step back from him and to attempt a larger group portrait of the society of the late thirties. However, there is no denying that *CCR* inclines heavily towards what Evelyn Waugh called an 'interim report' before the war. This volume fails to arouse the narrator's and readers' desire for cross-reference, which is one of the vital elements in *Dance*: the scenes, though well written, are consumed within the frame of this single volume, diminishing the impact of Powell's serious intention in making a foray into the intricacies of people's married lives. The change from the comedy of *LM* to the ominousness and pessimism here is understandable as a preparation for the coming war, but then Powell should have built up the right to dispense determinism and helplessness, rather than forced the change with the metaphors and bare explications in narration and conversation. That said, however, it is not totally impossible to discern in *CCR* patterns of the battles in life that makes it serve the general intention of the series, if not enhance the 'grand design'.

CCR opens with a scene that is as metaphorically charged in the powerfully Powellian way as any in the whole series. A door stands alone on the ruins of the bombed-out Mortimer, a pub where Jenkins first met Maclintick and others:

Beyond, on the far side of the twin pillars and crossbar, nothing whatever remained of that promised retreat [along its lintel is the word *Ladies*], the threshold falling steeply to an abyss of rubble; a triumphal arch erected laboriously by dwarfs, or the gateway to some unknown, forbidden domain, the lair of sorcerers. (1)

The door is leading to no place where human comfort is to be obtained; maybe to a place dominated by powers beyond our cognition. On this side is the world as the endless repetition of sordid work and barren human relationship; and a hopeless, vague romanticism that keeps us serving despite the barrenness but is rootless and of no substantial help in the manipulation of human matters. Time, which has moved in relative linearity and generated a variety of changing patterns until now, is in this volume surveyed retrospectively, and is revealed as a system of stagnant repetition, paradoxically sustained by people's romantic belief that there is a place free from humdrum repetition. Maclintick's suicide at the end of the volume is a symbol of the fact that no one can escape from the restrictions of space and the repetitions of time, and that such restrictions and repetitions are the very conditions of the continuation of life.

CCR is structured towards the final demonstration that everything narrated until then has been a part of life's sordid repetition; the time scheme of the first chapter suits such a backward projection of fatalism. Time shows quite a complex movement there: first of all, Jenkins sees the ruined door of the Mortimer (the phrase 'not yet been rebuilt' suggests it is just after the war) and hears the singing of a blonde street singer on crutches; her song reminds Jenkins of the time when he heard it before the war, the day when Moreland talked of getting married to – the first flashback. The mention in Moreland's talk of Barnby's name and of the contrast between the methods of love of Barnby and Moreland brings the time, in the narrator Jenkins' consciousness, back to the first meeting at the Mortimer and the seduction of a waitress by Barnby at Casanova's Chinese restaurant – the second flashback. The mention of Barnby's adroitness brings the matter forward to Moreland's shyness and 'exhibitionism' in executing a love affair with Matilda Wilson, the actress Moreland talks of getting married with, in the first flashback. We find a guide to the layered time there in the person of Moreland, a character Jenkins has kept up his sleeve until now. It seems appropriate that this guide to the past is a man who is heavily infected with nostalgia (a disease that becomes his death in *TK*); however, Moreland's is rootless nostalgia for something without substance in reality. 'That woman's singing ['Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar...'] has unsettled me. What nostalgia,' he says about the street singer (3), not knowing the whereabouts of the Shalimar or what the place had been. Suggesting the Shalimar had been some disreputably amorous establishment, and wishing there were somewhere like that where they could spend the afternoon, he tells Jenkins they should 'live for the moment' and find some appropriate place to amuse themselves. However, when Casanova's Chinese Restaurant is mentioned, he replies, 'I never felt quite the same

about Casanova's after that business of Barnby and the waitress.' In the actual present, Casanova's, the stage of one of the ruthless amorous pursuits of Barnby, is repellent for Moreland, a self-styled addict of the '*princesse lointaine* complex' (8), a romanticist who cannot bear to repeat the humdrum banalities necessary to be successful in seduction.

Casanova's was also the place where that theme of repetition and banality in love and life in general were discussed. The discussion shows that Maclintick and Moreland are alike in that they cannot abandon their romanticism. Maclintick, despite his 'calculatedly humdrum' (17) appearance and way of life, still believes there are authentic criteria of beauty and that he can prove that by finishing his book of theory if only he gives himself a sufficient duration of humdrum life sustained by hack work and Irish whiskey, before it becomes impossible for him to stand it any longer. Moreland, although he argues that Casanova's greatness lies in the fact he didn't get bored by the repetition of seduction and that love was intolerable to such a person, still cannot help complaining that most of his emotional energy is exhausted in repeatedly spending time in order to get women into bed, the place of banal relationships ('Problems of Time and Space as usual,' 34). Even when the Casanova's Chinese Restaurant period is over and the time comes for him to consider getting married, he insists, 'Choosing the type of girl one likes is about the last thing left that one is allowed to approach subjectively' (46). The point for him is still the subjectivity of emotion, not the cold-blooded power politics of human relationships. Indeed, he seems to have found an ideal object for his romantic emotion in the actress Matilda, and to have escaped the repetition of the procedure of seduction. However, once they are married, Moreland cannot but come to the bitter realization. 'It is not that I am any less fond of Matilda, so much as that marriage – this quite separate entity – somehow comes between us' (123). Marriage is as lacking in romanticism, and as much dominated by cold, repetitious facts, as seduction. 'They were, indeed, married some months later...Not long after, I found myself married too...Life...all became rather changed', Jenkins says (56). This sentiment is ominously conspicuous for its flatness, as if to indicate that Jenkins has nothing but trite set phrases to describe the suffocation of emotion in the prison cell of people's married lives.

This flavourless remark of Jenkins connects the time of the narrative to the present of the second chapter. Here, the atmosphere of stagnation and sense of blockade are extended from the bohemian world to society at large in the period of the Spanish Civil War, a war of ideas fought in the muddle and confusion of the real field of operations. As the world comes nearer and nearer the repetition of the

madness of war and the end of the rule of reason, the characters who are present in the chapter begin to vaguely feel that neither fascism or communism is desirable but that humanism has lost its grip on the real world; every one of them is helpless in his or her own prison. Jenkins visits three places in a day in this chapter, and he sees all of them in terms of a heavy sense of compartmentalization and imprisonment. The European situation casts a shadow everywhere, but it is reduced to, and assimilated into, the level of each character's petty and short-term tactics of life in his or her severely restricted area of operation.

Lady Warminster's house in Hyde Park Gardens is a place of family politics where the problem of absent Erridge, who repeatedly escapes from his imprisonment in Thrubworth, is discussed. He has recently returned from his trip to China, aborting both his plan to 'see for himself' and the attempted love toward Mona; and now he is going to Spain to side with the vaguely defined 'Left'. But 'like less idealistic persons', Jenkins says, Erridge is 'primarily interested in pleasing himself' (94): in Spain, he will be able to 'forget the trivialities of estate management in the turmoil of revolution' (78). St. John Clarke, outdated man of letters who, as Erridge's confidante, comes to discuss the management of the human relationships around him, speaks 'as if the war in Spain was being carried on just to please him personally' (95). In both cases, the civil war is a vehicle of personal wish (Erridge's wish to escape from Thrubworth where undesirable trivial reality dominates; the wish of St. John Clarke to comply with, and to be recognized as a part of, a trendy intellectual circle), rather than a vital political issue. This is exactly the case at the Maclinticks', too: there, both the husband and the wife are at the end of their tether in the confinement of a gloomy married life. The Spanish Civil War is taken up by Maclintick – who is disgusted by everything in the world and equally hates the Left and the Right – as a mere convenient source of irritation to his wife.

Between the oppressively real but ineffective micro-politics at Hyde Park Gardens and Pimlico, the scene in the nursing home has a theatrical, almost comic atmosphere, due to the rapid successive appearances of various characters, especially two very flatly snobbish ones: Dr Brandreth, a music bore who appears with a black bag 'like a stage property in a farce'; Widmerpool, a stockbroker who aspires to be 'the Beau Brummel of the new reign [of Edward VIII]'. However, both Jenkins and Moreland are out of place on the stage of comedy; for them, who have both been married for some time, the nursing home is a confinement where their wives are 'imprisoned' (Jenkins uses the word himself, 97). The theme of spatial restriction connects apparently disparate districts Hyde Park Gardens and Pimlico; and at the same time, the word 'abortion' (Isobel Jenkins has had a miscarriage; Matilda

Moreland's baby is long overdue, and when born, survives for only a few hours) adds a darker tinge to the places of confinement. Brandreth laughingly explains that he means by 'abortion' nothing illegal but roughly the same thing as 'miscarriage' (a case of stillborn premature birth); but that cannot but remind us of another common meaning of 'abortion' and 'miscarriage'. Every attempt at action outside the routine is destined to cancellation and anti-climax in *CCR*: Erridge's escape to Spain; Isobel and Matilda's pregnancy; Maclintick's long-promised book of theory.

In the next chapter, Mrs. Foxe's house in Berkeley Square, where she holds a party to celebrate the first performance of Moreland's symphony, becomes the stage where this theme of attempts to break out of the confinement of routine and their ending in anti-climax is further developed. Though there is a lot of applause in the concert hall, Moreland's attempt to influence the public outside the bohemian world ends in 'a faint sense of anti-climax' (139): society accepts Moreland's symphony blandly, within its own terms of appreciative consumption. Maclintick flatly rejects the remark of Gossage (another music critic in the circle), made to meet the festive atmosphere of the party, that the symphony has been a 'great triumph': 'going round pretending the symphony is a lot of things it isn't, does Moreland more harm than good', he says (150). He insists on looking at the anti-climax with realism, and accepting the fact that the symphony is a respectable piece of work but not Moreland the genius's best. However, when his wife endorses his view by saying, 'Not much of a success, Maclintick thinks. I agree with him for once', he explodes with unreasonable anger and attacks her, subtly contorting his own opinion:

I didn't say anything of the sort, you bloody bitch... What I said was that the music was 'not Moreland's most adventurous' – that the critics had got used to him as an *enfant terrible* and therefore might underestimate the symphony's true value. (151)

Maclintick cannot bear to have his strict aesthetic view (which paradoxically reveals that he is a romantic who believes there is an absolute criterion of beauty and genius) repeated by his wife in her daily acerbic prattle.

Jenkins's belief in social façade is such that he can say 'the symphony was a great success' as a social compliment to Moreland's wife, even after he has witnessed the scene between the Maclinticks. But his formalism is fully punished. Matilda herself is aware of the anti-climax of the symphony, and she is no less afflicted by the humdrum confinement of married life than the Maclinticks. First, she asks Jenkins:

Is it fun to be married to anyone?...I mean *married* to someone. Not to sleep with them, or talk to them, or go about with them. (157)

and this 'dangerous abstraction' leads, just as Jenkins fears, to 'further embarrassments of the kind [he] hoped to avoid' (157). Next, she reveals that she has already repeatedly experienced married lives (her first marriage was with Carolo, an ex child prodigy on the violin who is interested only in making money and never tires of conquering women, regardless who they are). And finally, she completes her remonstrations by telling Jenkins she knows that Moreland has fallen in love with a woman out of his or Matilda's circle, namely Jenkins' sister-in-law Priscilla. However, Matilda knows she can be a good 'manager' of Moreland (whom she still loves, in contrast with the malignant Maclinticks) only within the frame of marriage. She can do nothing about his affair with Priscilla because 'it is all quite innocent' (161), in other words not something that can be negotiated within the routine of a married man's daily life ('some old tart like myself he could sleep with for a spell, then leave'). She has no way but to wait: wait for the conclusion of Moreland's attempt at love.

'Look here, Nick, you are not being serious. I want to be serious' (165), says Stringham, the long-lost alcoholic socialite who has come to the party quite unexpectedly and helped Jenkins out of the embarrassing tête-à-tête with Matilda. In the situation, this can be seen as quite a sharp criticism of Jenkins's non-committal role as mentioned above. However, Stringham himself is now somebody not to be taken 'seriously' in the world he is a part of. His family talks of him like 'some terrifying legendary figure...about whom it was appropriate to joke as dreadful to behold, but at the same time a being past serious credence' (145). He immediately tames Audrey Maclintick – who is fuming after the contention with her husband – with a fancy treatment ('Hullo, Little Bo-Peep. What have you done with your shepherdess' crook?'), and charms Moreland with his nonchalant wit; all such horse-play is possible because he is a drop-out who has given up the responsibility and care of maintaining a small enclosure around him. But that does not mean he is a person who has no wall around him; on the contrary, a confinement is maintained for him by Miss Weedon, who keeps him in a room on the top floor of the Jeavonses' house and denies him money to buy drinks. He can amuse others by burlesquing the confinement of marriage (see his stream-of-consciousness narrative concerning his worry about his wife's sigh, which ends in the nonsensical realization that she wasn't sighing about him, not being aware of his existence at all, 176-8), but that's only

until he has to go back to the economic prison-cell. 'Not for ever by still waters/ Would we idly rest and stay...I feel just like the hymn. Tonight I must take the hard road that leads to pleasure' (183), he says to Miss Weedon, as if to parody Moreland's Kashmiri Love Song ('those cool waters where we used to dwell'). He knows the road leads only to the alternatives of the prison of repeated 'pleasure' through alcohol and the prison of pseudo married life with Miss Weedon. Stringham's apparent freedom is really the irresponsibility of one who is released from his prison-cell with an empty wallet as an invisible leash; it is the light-heartedness of someone not to be taken seriously, dependent on a serious-minded controller for his sustenance. For such a person, the 'rapturous moments' of pleasure by the 'still waters' – suggested by Moreland's interpretation of the love song – are no less unreachable than for those bound by the necessities of humdrum daily life.

In the last chapter, death comes to two of the main characters. But neither death seems significant: death means simply that the time has come for the humdrum repetition of their lives to stop. St. John Clarke, who always coveted public fame, dies, receiving neither the Nobel Prize he has long waited for nor as much posthumous recognition in the form of obituaries as his envied friend Isbister, in a world 'moving into a harassed era' (190). A mere paragraph in the paper reports the death of Maclintick, whom it describes as a 'writer on musical subjects', bleaching out all the significance Maclintick had given to writing on music. The two deaths have, nevertheless, their own small effects: St. John Clarke's death endows Thurbworth with the budget for maintenance it desperately needs (Clarke designates Erridge as his legatee); Maclintick's death becomes the 'shattering jolt' for Moreland's love for Priscilla. Both, in their own ways, have helped the small circles they moved in to return to the order of their confinements.

'It was nice of him not to have done himself in... the night we left him there. That would have been even more awkward' (218), Moreland says to Jenkins, in a tone fitter to describe some minor dispute about the date of an appointment (the choice of the adjectives 'nice' and 'awkward' has a horrible casualness). Maclintick's death does not have the shocking effect of the calculated ending of a well-structured story: 'It was cold, slow-motion horror, the shaping of a story recognizably unfinished' (217). Maclintick, notably lacking in egotism among the characters of the *Dance*, tells at the last meeting, just after Audrey deserted him for Carolo, the story of how he came to marry Audrey. Moreland and Jenkins are anxious to receive it as a good story ('Moreland laughed loudly...much louder than the story demanded at this stage...I found myself laughing a lot too,' 208). Maclintick himself knows that there

is not much 'story' in the traditional sense in his life, or life in general, and that the stories one conceives in life are delusion ('it takes a bit of time to realize all the odds and ends milling round about one are the process of living,' 212). He cannot live outside the 'odds and ends' of his life; when his married life dissolves, he decides that the time he 'gave himself' in the discussion at Casanova's Chinese Restaurant is up. Nothing in life's repetitious principles has changed since that night for Maclintick, or for Moreland. It was just that Moreland then developed a vague romantic hope of escape, and in the present confinement of a marriage that is not too bad for him, he is again experiencing something rather like that in his romantic affection for Priscilla. Just after the termination of their affair (in *KO*, the next volume, Moreland confesses to Jenkins that they never went to bed, 'perhaps because there did not seem anywhere to go'), Priscilla marries Chips Lovell, the gossip columnist who is determined to 'marry well' and has kept an eye on her since *LM*. As Jenkins says, she, 'like the rest of her family' and in contrast with the helplessness of Maclintick and Moreland, has 'a great deal of resilience' (221); she can be a tough and self-possessed bargainer on her own behalf in her own circle.

CCR, a novel about the bohemian world, ends in a non-bohemian atmosphere: a Tolland family meeting is held on a reduced scale at Jenkins' flat. Robert brings the news of Priscilla's engagement; and Frederica, a 'frightfully correct' woman far removed from bohemianism, announces that the socialized bohemian St. John Clarke has left his money to Erridge, an idealist who has gone back to the confinement of Thrubworth after being defeated by the reality of an ideological war. Every character of *CCR*, except those who have died, goes back to his or her own niche to maintain a repetitious daily life; and the bohemian world is disposed of, the stage switching to the enclosure of the Tolland family circle, where romanticism is admittedly illegitimate. Erridge, who seems to be infected with hopeless political romanticism, has enough sense of survival to abandon Spain just before time is up for him; Hugo's 'aestheticism' is not a longing for non-existent beauty, but a burlesque tracing of the surface of the aestheticism of the past. Casanova's glad acceptance of repetition in a deracinated world turns into confinement in, and maintenance of, humdrum domestic life. *CCR* ends in disenchantment, filled with a sense of reality that comes near minimalism. This is one pole of the *Dance* world. The other pole, the sense that there are unknowable powers controlling History (the big 'story' of the world), is totally excluded from *CCR*; in contrast with *KO*, the portal to the latter half of the *Dance*.

3. *The Kindly Ones* (1962)

KO takes over, and at the same time mutates, *CCR*'s theme of repetition. The proposition that the repetition of events and the restriction of space are the very condition of our life, still applies; each confinement is dominated by its own patterns of repetition, rules of economy and politics. But in *KO*, these patterns are contrasted with the ominous repetitions of history: what is repeated there is war, the end of the old order and partitions of the world. What lay beyond the door at the opening of *CCR*, dark powers that drive the world to mass destruction, come rushing through the door. People have to consider how to placate them; if that is impossible, how to cope, and to live with, them – that is, allow themselves to be incorporated into the machinery of war. The lethargic private lives depicted in the first and second trilogy have to be reorganized to meet the changed conditions. The loose ends in the private niches of business, love affairs or friendship now have to be tied up. In short, the role given to *KO* in the whole series is the rounding up of the interwar doings before people's lives, of necessity, concentrate on the pursuit of war.

However, it should be noted that wars do not mean the extinction of the small confinements of life that filled the former half of *Dance*. The moment the old modes of enclosure are extinct, a new kind of confinement, with its own micro-politics, is born. Indeed, Jenkins is going to experience many such confinements in the war trilogy: the politics within the company at Castelmallock; the quest for power in Div HQ; various kinds of sectionalism in the whole pursuit of war. But they are all subjected to the 'Rules and Discipline of War', to borrow the phrase used in Uncle Giles' certificate of commission, found among the things he left in this world. After the almost perfect self-effacement in *LM* and *CCR*, Jenkins's own past life is thrown into a far stronger and harsher light in this volume, and not without reason. As John Russell notes in his monograph, that is a prelude to his 'public decision to get into harness for war' (173), however self-effacing Jenkins might continue to be in his narration of the war. A bitter experience leads to an examination of the past, and to a realisation that human beings have always been made to struggle as soldiers in their own parts of the vast battlefield that is the world. The coming war is a far more intense, and all-embracing, application of such militarism in human relationships. War becomes the metaphor applicable to the micro politico-economy of the whole world; it breaks up the old partitions of the world and establishes new ones, according to its own laws. People have to adapt themselves to the rules and discipline of the place where they find themselves, to survive a war – and the challenges of peace-time too, when one comes to consider it. The theme of battle has always been

there, in an adumbrated form, since *QU* (see the cold war in the Stringham household or, minimally, the dispute over a train seat [*Monsieur, vous avez gagné,* 107]). The world has always been a metaphorical field of operations, where competent soldiers quickly respond to the rules of the battlefield but never ask why they have been compelled to fight; the powers that drive them to it are always there, but can never be defined by human reason.

The stages of the first three chapters of *KO* are apparently small enclaves, places of confinement cut off from the outer world. Stonehurst, the cottage where the Jenkins family lives before the First World War, stands alone on a hill far from the regimental society of Aldershot; Stourwater Castle in the second chapter is a closed place where the characters try to escape from the European crisis in performing a burlesque version of the Seven Deadly Sins; and the Bellvue, where that veteran Sisyphus, Uncle Giles, has died, is a fortress of daily life for Albert, an economic hideaway for Duport, and an actual place of confinement for the occultist Dr Trelawney, who has nowhere else to go and actually gets locked up in the bathroom. However, their independence is threatened by ominous forces from the outside; each of the places is proven to belong to the larger pattern of the big metaphor of war, battle and survival games.

KO begins with Albert, the Stonehurst cook, elaborately locking up the stable-block; in order, he explains, to prevent 'them Virgin Marys' [suffragettes] from 'busting in and burning the place down' (2). Albert's use of the phrase 'Virgin Marys' is rather irregular: in normal parlance, there can be no other Virgin Mary than the one who bore Christ. Mary is no longer the one and only symbolic feminine figure who gives motherly care to the world. The 'Marys' are capable of propagation, and repeatedly come back to persecute the world, apparently with no discernible reason for Albert. He, an egoist of the first order in his small way, feels himself constantly pursued and threatened by the sexual desires of more than one women: 'the girl from Bristol' who finally claims him, and Billson, toward whose nude appearance the first chapter develops. Albert has no way to maintain his peace of his mind but sticking to the routine of locking up – an effort to preserve the small enclosure of daily life. His efforts are in vain, because the enclosure of Stonehurst itself is a field of operation: for the sex war which culminates in Billson's appearing nude in the drawing-room (crazed by her lost love for Albert) on the day of General and Mrs Conyers' visit and the assassination of Franz-Ferdinand. The former incident has little effect on the world at large; nevertheless, it is an apocalypse for the daily life at Stonehurst, and strikes a ominously apposite note in a world embarking on the destruction of

civilization in the First World War.

Dr Trelawney, the ominous cult leader at Stonehurst who is reported to have been executed as a spy but in reality survives the war and appears again, in a much declined state, just before the Second World War, dilates on the war's fatal inevitability: 'What will be, must be...The sword of Mithras, who each year immolates the sacred bull, will ere long now flash from its scabbard' (192). He predicts the war, but he never tells why there should be such a thing. This is also the case with General Conyers, who predicts the First. 'Mark my words, this is a disaster' (70), he says, hearing the news of the assassination of Franz-Ferdinand; but he never seems to consider why human beings are doomed to fight with each other. He just makes the right prediction (in contrast with 'Captain' Giles Jenkins, that ineffective soldier who reports the incident just as a secondary episode to the theme of motoring), and immediately goes off in his motorcar, as if to realize his dictum, 'We want mobility, mobility, and yet more mobility [to maintain the Empire]' (53). There is certainly similarity between the Doctor and the General in thinking that the world is in a perennial state of war; and that immobility is the greatest curse in it ('Such gifts [learning to be free] are...not a privilege for the shiftless': Dr Trelawney, 192). But the difference is that, while the Doctor propagates mobility in the endless transitions of the spirit, the General sticks to mobility and action against the Furies, within the limitations of the real life people live only once. He breaks the 'spell' cast by Billson's nakedness by showing his will-power in taking the most appropriate action at the moment (wrapping her up with a rug he found at hand). Just before his departure, he even responds to the incantation of Dr Trelawney - who came across them running with his disciples - in the right way ('The Vision of Visions heals the Blindness of sight' for 'The Essence of the All is the Godhead of the True,' 64). It is not that he believes in the Doctor's tenets for a moment, but because the observance of the repeated verbal ceremony is the right way to handle that particular sinister character on that particular occasion. I have considered the General's 'realism' before: the essence of it is his scepticism as to toward the necessity/validity of asking why. Despite his habit (or hobby) of seeking congruous explanations to things he is interested in, he never fails to take the action that seems most appropriate to himself at the moment and on the spot - a requisite for a competent soldier who does well in the battlefield.

The narrator Jenkins confesses that, around the time when the inevitability of the second European apocalypse is dubiously abated by 'Munich', he 'found it difficult, almost impossible, to work on a book while waiting for the starting pistol' (87). However, such suffocation is the case not only for Jenkins, but for everyone just

before the beginning of the Second World War. The daily life of every performer of the Seven Deadly Sins at Stourwater Castle is threatened by the possibility of war, the possibility that he or she might be thrown into the realm of action and performance of a hitherto utterly unknown kind. Everyone is confronting the threat of the collapse of identity that was formed by the repetition of his or her daily life. In such circumstances, the events at Stourwater seem ‘not only something of a landmark when looked back upon, but also rather different from the material of which daily life was in general composed’ (89): the events there mark the end of interwar daily life of the kind Jenkins has been chronicling hitherto.

The performance of the Seven Deadly Sins is suggested by Jenkins as a relief from the international situation, something akin to the fun to be had in daily life in times of peace; and at the same time, a reproduction of various vices in life in cheap, ready-made formats. As if to prefigure the banality of the performance, Sir Magnus Donners, the owner of the castle and a sadistic man of power behind his bland utterances, is originally taking photographs of various objects in the castle: an act of frightful banality, a meaningless recapitulation of existing things. When some kind of performance before the camera is suggested, his instructions are extremely bland but firm, directing the members of the party (probably without intention) in such a way that the real ‘sins’ of their personalities and directionless lives are exposed before the lens – while the performers, except one, seem to think that they are performing their roles as a confirmation of their peacetime daily lives, undisturbed by the ominous powers outside. As Henry R. Harrington argues, the detached and ‘sinless’ Sir Magnus, with his extremely hollow personality, ‘looms as an artist manqué – a grotesquely defined shadow’ (438) of Jenkins as a chronicler of social life.

Moreland proclaims he will stick to the fun of Gluttony; Isobel Jenkins and Anne Umfraville’s performance represents ‘the nursery and playroom life of generations of “great houses”’ (129); Jenkins is Sloth, a sin not to be permitted in the pursuit of war; Matilda Moreland performs the role of what she is in her daily life, a professional actress; Peter Templer’s concept of the three stages of Lust is utterly banal and out-of-date, but appropriately represents his life as a ruthless pursuer of conventional amorousness. As his co-performer, Anne playfully performs the role of one of Peter’s girls, which she is going to be in her real life. The odd-one-out here is Betty Templer: she is the woman who restored Peter’s identity as a womanizer by falling for him after he was ditched by Mona, but now she has to suffer from an identity crisis as the amorous Peter’s wife. She doesn’t know how to dramatise her extremely brittle daily identity, but nevertheless is forcefully driven to perform by Sir Magnus (‘Yes, you must certainly play your part, Betty’). It is no wonder that, during

Templer's enactment of flirtation with Anne, she breaks down and flees from the room, not as a performer clad in a costume, but as a woman mentally as naked as Billson. But this time, there is no General Conyers, accomplished soldier and man of action who can handle the situation; instead Widmerpool comes in, clad in military dress. He is definitely not as competent a soldier as General Conyers; he looks like a military music-hall performer, in keeping with the performers of daily life in the room. However, Jenkins says, 'Nothing, up to that date, had so much brought home to me the imminence, the certitude, of war', (134). The order of daily life represented in the burlesque performance of the Seven Deadly Sins is over, and a call to new kind of performance, achievement of action according to the 'rules and discipline of war', is ironically represented in Widmerpool's costume, ready to engulf the whole world. This 'war of costume' theme is going to be the key in the war trilogy: costume, or the number of stars on one's shoulders, dominates the condition of one's survival in the army, where the difference in power is blatantly represented in the difference of rank. As Robert K. Morris points out in his monograph, 'the disparity between "acting" and "action" is manifest' (212) in the performance of the Deadly Sins and Widmerpool's music-hall appearance; but the inanity of the Deadly Sins actors is given a rough shake by Widmerpool's quick action in adopting the right sort of costume for the theatre of war. In the five volumes up till now, his snobbery has been demonstrated in the unfittedness of the costumes he tried to put on and display; but now, the most blatantly obvious of all costumes – the military dress – dominates the scene.

If the events at Stourwater are a twisted evocation of that disastrous day at Stonehurst ('For some reason my mind was carried back...to Stonehurst and the Billson incident,' Jenkins recalls, 133), the incidents at the Bellvue, a seaside hotel run by Albert, have the theme of the rounding up and revision of various stages of Jenkins' life in between. In his monograph, Robert L. Selig appropriately calls the Bellevue 'the indoor extension of a narrative highway, the end of a traveler's road' (107); various wayfarers that have crossed Jenkins's life are re-evaluated and their lives and personalities rounded off. Uncle Giles, who has appeared at so many critical points in the former volumes to symbolize the meaninglessness of life and people's doomed battle against it (each of them is driven to the struggle by his or her 'personal Fury'), has finally dropped dead, and Jenkins has to come to the hotel to clear up the residue of his life and commit his body to fire. There he meets his former mistress Jean's ex-husband Bob Duport, and learns that she switched from Jenkins to the unattractive Jimmy Brent, while Jenkins thought their affair was over because Jean went back to matrimony. Finally, Dr Trelawney himself appears from Jenkins'

childhood, in a badly changed state, but as sinister as ever, to speak on the eternal state of war of this world. Jenkins used to regard the events around them as having nothing to do with the politico-economical powers of the material world. Uncle Giles was a figure who couldn't be taken seriously; the affair with Jean seemed to be fixed in the timeless image of love free from the quest for power of the outside world; and Dr Trelawney, though a figure to be contemplated with horror (Jenkins used to imagine that his parents were suddenly dead and he himself was taken into the Doctor's cult), evoked this response mainly because of his outlandish appearance and manner of speech, something to be connected with the 'haunted' side of Stonehurst, bleached of its powerful discipline politics in human relationship. However, these estimates are to be drastically revised at Bellvue. Uncle Giles, though utterly incompetent, was nevertheless an officer commissioned by Queen Victoria, under whose name the duty of maintaining the Empire by power was trusted to the subjects. And he tried with all his might (and unreliability) to be faithful to the Queen's trust, to build an empire of his own, in his own sordid way, both economically – as shown by the sheaf of stock certificates – and in terms of human relationship – as exemplified by the *Arab Art of Love*, a book found in his bag, which gives its readers cold-blooded advice concerning the techniques and strategies of love (among the topics discussed being 'the Deceits and Treacheries of Women'). The book connects Uncle Giles' life with the Jean-Duport-Jenkins relationship under the theme of action in battle, when it is appropriately presented by Jenkins to Duport. However much Jenkins detests Duport's vulgarity, they were both fooled by Jean's politico-economical manoeuvre of love. (She deceives Jenkins by pretending to go back to Duport for her daughter's sake; at the same time she saves the expense of her travel with Brent to South Africa by traveling as Duport's wife.) Both Uncle Giles and Jean Duport are soldiers, people of action; and while Uncle Giles is incompetent, unreliable and accordingly unsuccessful, Jean prospers because she has a realistic, unsentimental grasp of the place of power in the world of love.

'[You] must emancipate the will from servitude, instruct it in the art of domination...Power does not surrender itself. Like a woman, it must be seized...He alone can truly possess the pleasures of love, who has gloriously vanquished the love of pleasure,' Dr Trelawney, who is resurrected from the bathroom by Jenkins' and Duport's appropriate action, remarks to them, as if to sum up the situation (191-2). At the Bellvue, he appears in quite a different incarnation from that of the days before the First war: the 'athletic, vigorous prophet' (186) has lost all his charismatic idealism; failed, disillusioned, as humdrum as Uncle Jenkins (there is a similarity between their rooms in the hotel; he even borrows *The Financial Times* from Duport),

but has become the more power-conscious for that. His creed of liberation from the restrictions of time and space in the material world is maintained in his insistence on the eternal transitoriness of things, but this transitoriness he now holds to be characterized by the unending power-struggle in the universe. The revision of the events of the past at the Bellvue, and its dogmatization by the Doctor, is a call to arms and active performance in life in general, and in the European situation of the time. (The next morning, the news comes that a non-aggression pact has been signed between Germany and Russia: a manoeuvre that counterpoints 'Munich' and proves that the coming war has little to do with idealism or ideologies.) Each stage of the past is revised under the prevailing pattern of power struggle, connecting to the present necessity of confronting the Furies driving the world to another war.

However, 'when the sword of Mithras...flashed at last from its scabbard' (204), Jenkins is unable to go into action at once: the door to military life is closed to him. He finds himself left over in the confinement of the stagnant repetitions of peace-time daily life. His rather inappropriate attempt at string-pulling by way of General Conyers only helps him realize he is already too old to be in the war. The General describes his and Jenkins' situation with his typical ruthless accuracy: 'If Richard Coeur de Lion came back to earth tomorrow, he would be able to tell you more...than I can about the British Army of today...Aren't you getting a shade old yourself to embark on a military career?' (210). Just as the beginning of the First War denoted the end of Jenkins' childhood, the beginning of the Second denotes the end of his youth: 'I felt a little dashed to find suddenly that I was so old, by now good for little, my life virtually over' (210-11). That is in contrast with General Conyers himself, who has retired from the Army but not from action in life: the octogenarian is going to get married again, to Miss Weedon, of all people. The furious, resentful 'Medusa' (description by Moreland) is tamed by him, and has become a woman, almost a girl, amenable for marriage. 'If he could handle Billson naked, he could probably handle Miss Weedon clothed – or naked, too, if it came to that' (217): the world has turned, the General is no longer a general, but he is still a man of action.

The general's versatile competence also makes a strong contrast with Widmerpool, the next string for Jenkins to pull. Now he is an officer of some standing, having long been in the Territorials. He seems to be completely absorbed in the 'leviathan of war'. (The word of his secretary on the phone, 'Captain Widmerpool is embodied' – apparently a phraseology specially designated by Widmerpool himself – shows he is deeply conscious of that fact). But that takes the form of self-confinement in a particular area; the rules and disciplines in the little space encircled by 'these four walls' of secrecy (221) is the alpha and omega of his

existence in the army, as it always has been in his life. But this attitude – the absorption in the rules and disciplines of the confinement he finds himself in, and a complete disregard for those of the outside world – makes it impossible for him to ‘handle’ Gypsy Jones. (A figure from his peace-time past and the object of his past affection, a Fury of pacifism now turned into an aggressive communist street haranguer), except in terms of the discipline within the small room in which he now presides. He runs off, talking of MI5 and biting Jenkins’ head off for not noticing the danger caused by her for his career as a holder of military secrets. It is quite natural that he cannot help Jenkins, for such a thing is not included in his quest for power in that room of his; but he has no hesitation in asking Jenkins in turn to help him arrange his mother’s evacuation with the Jeavonses, which quite fortuitously leads to Jenkins being called up.

Jenkins finds, among the mixed bag of people in the Jeavons house, Stanley Jeavons, a brother of Ted; he is in a position to select candidates for officers from the Reservists. Stanley is an extremely nondescript character, but he represents, in a quiet way that is in contrast with Widmerpool’s self-consciousness, the huge machinery of an all-out war. It is the organism of war as a whole, rather than personal string-pulling, that does the trick for Jenkins. The ‘rules and discipline of war’ are going to engulf everyone, sooner or later. The old order, the segregation of the ‘dances’ of individuals, are at last gone, at least temporarily. A new kind of confinement in another field of battle, remote from the conflicts of London’s artistic and upper-middle-class, the main topic of the sequence hitherto, has opened before Jenkins’s eyes.

Chapter Four

*A Dance to the Music of Time: Third Movement*1. *The Valley of Bones* (1964)

With the beginning of the war and the opening of this volume, the scene changes drastically for Jenkins. Not many of the old faces appear; the stage moves from London and its bourgeois/ bohemian surroundings to the very different and yet limited space of an army company and the battalion it belongs to. The circumstances Jenkins finds himself in and the people he mingles with are completely different from those of the preceding six volumes: a challenge for both Powell as an author and Jenkins as narrator. In the social strata Jenkins moved in previously, it was easier to regard Jenkins's self-effacement as a kind of tacit agreement between the author and readers: his acceptability as the witness of events and hearer of others' confessions was not necessarily open to question. Now, among the mostly young Welsh businessmen officers and miner 'other ranks', Jenkins – a novelist and script-writer in his mid-thirties – will naturally feel himself somewhat different, not to say conspicuous. He comes from a social quarter that has little to do with those of most of the officers and men here. Evelyn Waugh's Guy Crouchback, who joins a regiment with an atmosphere unquestionably warmer than Jenkins's own, is never wholly able to assimilate himself to the mixed bag of people there, in spite of his romantic-military aspirations; in Jenkins's case, too, there must surely be more people who find him unsympathetic, than in London's upper-middle-class or artistic circles; his acceptability as an observer who has the advantage of being an insider is less to be taken for granted here.

However, Powell wholeheartedly (and rather surprisingly) rejects that challenge. In the army, Jenkins is as insubstantial as ever – if anything more so than before. His motives for joining the army, whether he wants (as Guy Crouchback ardently does) to fight, or how he faces daily events in the army, are scarcely revealed to readers. Indeed, Jenkins's whole military life *per se* is a virtual blank (except possibly for his marginally secret job as a liaison officer in *MP*): the sum total of the personal experience and feeling he allows himself to show in this volume is his compulsive desire for the chocolate offered to him after a day's hard training (86). In the altered circumstances, Jenkins's anonymity certainly looks more strained: in the army, he seems to be more of a narrative device than in the first and second trilogies. What is it that Powell is aiming at, in return for the heavy handicap he

imposes on his novel as a realistic first-person account of military life?

One possible explanation is that, as human life has increasingly been regarded in the six volumes in terms of a battle of wills, Powell has found in the military life (where superiority in rank translates directly into power) an ideal environment in which to continue his analysis of that theme in its purest social format. Just as in civilian life, people have to grapple or comply with the system ruling the place in which they find themselves. They may try to pass the days dodging as much responsibility as possible, or to attain glory in their new military incarnation, but to be successful in either way requires a grasp of the 'rules and disciplines', as Uncle Giles' commission certificate concisely put it, of the military system. What Jenkins secretly keeps observing and analysing in the army, suppressing his own experiences, is the quiet war fought by other people. The petty and seemingly meaningless happenings of his battleless army life, where there is not even 'the consolation that one was required to be brave' (171), give him chances to observe with more acuteness than ever the relationship of the myth of the ego – working especially in terms of the urge to 'act' – to its collapse in an environment of real people. Captain Rowland Gwatkin, the anti-hero of *VB*, is a character particularly amenable for such observations. He is by no means as revolting or powerful as Widmerpool, but all the same he is a man with an enormous ego in his feeble way: he is the foil of Widmerpool as a dangerous species of socially self-promoting egoist. True, Gwatkin is mediocre, even his egoism is so; but the lugubrious mediocrity of his egoism and the 'style' he nevertheless somehow maintains contrast favourably with Widmerpool's monstrous egoism in *SA*, and help the war trilogy keep its balance between comedy and more bleak concepts.

However, it must be admitted that, in this new military circumstances where few people are amenable to the social contexts that supported the former two trilogies, Powell the author has to work harder than ever before to exert his power of control on the plot and present the patterns of power-struggle to readers in a coherent way. He is obliged to rely more heavily than ever on rhetorical and metaphorical props. Jenkins' narration boldly (and sometimes excessively forcefully) calls readers' attention to the various texts, literary and non-literary, that cumulatively provide a commentary on the lives of the characters.

VB alludes to as great a variety of texts as any volume in the sequence: poems, popular songs, biblical quotation, Kipling's story, military textbooks, Alfred de Vigny's *Servitude et Grandeur Militaire*, one of Byron's letters (of dubious origin), and the table of codes that finally ruins Gwatkin. Looking closely at this seemingly

random list, we can find two rough lines along which this volume is designed: the texts concerned either deal with the theme of the glory or misery of being bound by duty (as one of the key texts of *VB*, Vigny's *Servitude*, and its foil, Kipling's 'A Centurion of the Thirtieth', show), or are concerned with the problem of love and sexuality, particularly the subject of 'keeping pure' or its inverted form, thwarted sexual impulse. Rowland Gwatkin is the character in whom these two themes are synthesized: in the exclusively male society of the regiment, as a self-styled 'military saint' who dedicates all his life to it, he directly connects the idea of duty to masculinity (see his metaphorical comparison between the rifle to guard one's wife or little sister and man's sexual organ and its potency [66]). He asserts that for a soldier to flirt with women is acceptable 'unless he gets mixed up with a woman who makes him forget his duty' (88), which he himself literally does in the end. Jenkins follows as his main subject the collapse of Gwatkin's romantic concept of militarism, countering it with various other people's strategies for dealing with army life and the idea of duty. It should be noted that Jenkins' regiment is not one constituted by regular soldiers: most of its members are civilians (mainly bankers) who have gained a commission, and NCOs and men (mainly miners) who have been called up. The army is not the arena of their ordinary lives; the regiment is on its way to be organized as a unit of battle, but how successfully, no one can tell. The officers and men here are amateurs of war, officers and 'other ranks' alike. Nonetheless, the regiment has to be assembled and run according to military regulations. However lacking in experience in that quarter most of its members are, the necessities of war drive them on; although the priority is, almost invariably, the unexciting and repetitious domestic exertions needed to keep a large-scale society of men going.

As Kedward says, their daily life is 'as bloody usual' (4) occupied with fatigues, and the first duty described in the volume is for the officers to see if the blankets are folded in the right way. The petty duty concerning the correct disposition of bedclothes connects itself to the inscription on the wall of the chapel used as the billet (in 'gothic letters of enormous size', as if to emphasize its position as the authentic text) about the 'few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments' who 'shall walk with me in white' (5). The reference to the colour of garment in that quotation is reflected in turn in the lyric of 'South of the Border', taken up again by a soldier: 'There in a gown of white/ By candlelight/ She stooped to pray' (7). Thus, in this sequence, repetitious military duty, as represented by the bedclothes, merges with the theme of austerity in the white garment of the righteous people, and then with the subject of love ('That's where I fell in love... And we were so gay'). But the ideal woman in white is essentially something for peacetime: 'The

Mission bell told me/ That I mustn't stay/ South of the border/ Down Mexico way'. Into this mixture of texts steps Gwatkin, and the first thing he takes up after welcoming Jenkins to the company is the way blankets are folded, then the way cap badges and pips are to be worn: thus completing the circle. However, contrary to Jenkins' first impression, Gwatkin is not identical to Kedward, who later proves to be power-conscious in a realistic and efficient way: Gwatkin has another text reserved for him. His first speech to Jenkins ('We are going to make it the best company in the Battalion...I know I can rely on your support in trying to achieve it,' 9) is, as Jenkins says, quite banal in content, but he speaks it 'with the barest suggestion of sing-song, his voice authoritative'; as if he had made these ready-made phrases truly his own. Yet his voice is 'at the same time not altogether assured': the armour of his new military self has a hidden inner hollowness.

This is in contrast (and, at the same time, in secret concordance) with the blatant hollowness of Bithel, who takes over the main stage from Gwatkin in the latter half of the chapter. This overage misfit who has somehow scraped a commission is emphatically (almost aggressively) a construct: he is false right down to his cigar-holding teeth. The fact that he is a plot device (in this volume, one designed to become a nemesis for Gwatkin; in *HSH*, again, a nemesis for Widmerpool) is ironically emphasized by the comparison to a puppet, and is made completely clear when he is ragged on his first night at the billet by an effigy made from his clothes and put into his bed. But Bithel has a knack of surviving, relying on his hollowness: on this occasion, he performs an endless dance of love around the effigy, making the ragging miscarry by the sheer absurdity of his conduct. Next morning, regardless of Kedward's deftness in reporting him sick, he attains a resurrection by appearing at the parade ground like a doll whose coil has been rewound. He has nothing to do with the ideal or glory of duty ('Rather glad to get back now and have some regular money rolling in,' 34), but Gwatkin, the military idealist, cannot get rid of this alcoholic puppet animated by mechanical resilience. Indeed, Bithel's sordid resurrection on the morning of Church Parade mocks, in advance, the grand, authoritative text from Ezekiel (from which the title of this volume is derived) on the infusion of life into scattered bones; which is, as a Robert K. Morris rightly points out in his monograph (219), a metaphor for an army unit that has yet to come to organized life. Gwatkin's ideal concerning the solidarity of army life is destined to be mocked and undermined in the plot, from the start of the volume.

In reality, not all the army's components are readily amenable to the words of authority (or its mouthpiece and prophet Gwatkin, who, according to Kedward,

always has 'big ideas' for the future of the company). The soldiers are not wholly to blame for this; there are problems inherent in Gwatkin's attitude, too. John Russell argues in his monograph that 'Gwatkin's mythic approach to war is... tempered by the fact that he is not the centre of his own myth' (194), but nevertheless he is a mythologiser: his is the myth of selfless servitude to the national cause. He is as sincere as Ezekiel, but is ignorant of the fact that, in the reality of army life (and indeed in real life anywhere), there is no such thing as an absolutely authoritative text from the mouth of God, which one has merely to repeat. There are only texts, as often as not imperfect or vague ones, artificially made up by human beings, which one has to interpret (and paraphrase) in such a way as to obtain as much desirable effect from them as possible. Gwatkin is too romantically out of focus, or when he is not, too innocently literal as an interpreter of military texts. His ideas are admirable in concept, or as a parable. But in practice, they often degenerate into innocent textualism (as on the field day when the company falls seriously behind schedule because of Gwatkin's insistence that all the procedures on the textbook should be observed) or, in worse cases, farcical mannerism.

His handling of Private Sayce is a case in point. Sayce is a man who thinks of nothing but sabotaging his duty, and has many techniques to quibble his way out of trouble. He is the last person to be persuaded by language and ideas, but Gwatkin chooses to have a 'man-to-man' talk with him, when things come to a head. On the surface, Gwatkin's macho-ism is in accordance with the 'all-male setting that... resembles and repeats the all-male one at *A Dance*'s beginning' (Selig 110). But, as Patrick Swinden notes in *The English Novel of History and Society, 1940-1980*, the dislocated, rootless 'public-school ethos' (115) of his speech betrays the fact that Gwatkin merely wants to indulge himself in an exotic fantasy of male fraternity, disregarding the fact that the army is a place where rank and power predominate. (Not that such a male idealism has an authentic root – rather than conventional function – at real public schools, at least when we look back at *QU*.) He believes that he can appeal to Sayce's 'better feelings' by merely repeating 'You can do better' and 'You're a good fellow at heart' (62); but when he finally asks Sayce 'why we are all here', Sayce answers, 'To give me CB' (63). The tragicomic confusion of text and reality on the part of Gwatkin is clearly pointed out by Sayce's answer, which is quite right in a sense. As a 'military saint' (43), Gwatkin wants to propagate the ideal of 'what we are here for'; but what he should be doing 'here' in the company office as an administrator is nothing but giving Sayce an appropriate punishment.

Gwatkin's idealism is a positive impediment to his hopes of glory in the army. When Sergeant Pendry dies, or maybe kills himself because of his wife's infidelity,

he sinks into one of his 'ritual sufferings for the ills of the Battalion' (101-2). But both Pendry's wife's love affair and his own death are (as Maelgwyn-Jones, adjutant of Jenkins' Battalion and one of the *raisonneurs* of army life in this volume, says) things that happen from time to time in the humdrum reality of army life or of life in general; they have to be faced with resigned efficiency, not with high-flown ideas on love and duty. Gwatkin is going to be painfully educated in the realities of love and of army life in punishment for his romantic idealism ('chastised' by Aphrodite, an intentionally oxymoronic expression by Jenkins). In the end, his petty glory comes not in the battlefield but in his endurance of the punishment.

'One can just imagine Vigny romanticizing that fat sod' (109), Pennistone, another *raisonneur* of army life, says about a middle-aged quartermaster who is sleeping opposite him and Jenkins in a train, after he has told Jenkins Alfred de Vigny's ideas about servitude and the renunciation of action and thought in the army by soldiers who become 'monks of war'. Pennistone makes much of Vigny's text as an explication of the essentially barren nature of life in the army. However, at the same time, he knows that Vigny was a romantic who needed another kind of idealized picture than that of glorious exploits, to save him from despair. The picture of a 'monk of war' is no less a product of romanticism than that of a 'military saint' cherished by Gwatkin; Vigny himself, Pennistone maintains, was essentially aware of that. Pennistone asserts Vigny 'sees the role of authority as essentially artificial... The impetuous volunteer has as much to learn as the unwilling conscript' (108) and claims that he was 'certainly aware that nothing is absolute in the army – least of all obeying orders' (109). The military system is a social construct and is sustained in the tension between ideas and human weakness. Jenkins's strong inclination towards self-effacing analysis of texts and thoughts certainly fetters *VB* as an account of the Second World War, but at the same time it sheds a unique light on the fact that the army is a social artifice where the individual's concepts of power and servitude incessantly collide.

However, as Jenkins and Pennistone agree, there is room even in the army for the will of the individual to survive the artificial network of power. There appear in this chapter two examples of soldiers who manage to keep their egoism alive without allowing it to make life difficult in the army. 'They're not going to prevent me from having what fun the army has to offer' (117), says Odo Stevens, an egoist who can pay keen attention to others when necessary for his own profit. As if echoing that sentiment, Dicky Umfraville, that high-spirited Sisyphus, quotes affirmatively Marshal Lyautey's opinion that the first essential for an officer is 'gaiety'. What they have in common, Jenkins reflects, is 'an almost perfect narcissism, joined... to a great

acuteness of observation and relish of life' (149). Egoism is what they share with Gwatkin, but they are not romantics; they have sharp eyes for the sordid reality of army life, but unlike Vigny, they don't find an escape in the ideal abnegation of the self. Their attitudes do not change concerning non-military matters. In this chapter, where *Dance's* peacetime connections are tightly packed like the fillings of a sandwich, an unusual number of loves, past and present, appear on the scene around them; the kaleidoscopic changing patterns of love keeps repeating itself even in wartime. The two soldiers never mind the repetition, positively enjoying taking part in the musical-chairs game and exercising their will to cheat. See how the juxtaposition of tragedy and farce in Umfraville's life-story – in which he repeatedly fails to be a 'man', as a drop-out from the army and a cuckold – implies that the necessity of gaiety as a principle of life is not something limited to peacetime, but is also needed for the acceptance of eternally repeating patterns of life, army or civilian. The smaller patterns of life in this section shed a light on the more dilated problems dealt with in the military sections of the volume.

Jenkins himself cannot put Pennistone's theory on will-power into practice. However, unlike Vigny, he doesn't romantically apotheosize the abnegation of the self in the acceptance of inglorious duty: he is too much of a comic realist. Jenkins the observer's consolation is not high above in sublimity but down below in comedy. The repetitious pattern of the sordid reality of human life, in which we are submerged, has a hidden design of comedy, even in army life; sometimes the design can prove almost gloriously beautiful (never quite, but almost). The fall of Gwatkin, an egoist who lacks the technique to exert will power in the system of the army, is at once farcically comic and tragically cruel. But in the last analysis, what saves Gwatkin from essential defeat is his acceptance of the comedy in the situation around him.

At Castelmallock, a place of indefinite waiting the battalion is posted to, Gwatkin gets more enthusiastic than ever about army life. But his enthusiasm has undergone a change: he loses his former fastidious sense of procedure, and inclines towards the abstract glorification of the 'soldier's job' in general as the apotheosis of masculinity. (See his denunciation of banking life, to which he tells Jenkins he can never return after life in the army: 'What sort of life is that for a man?' 181). Contrary to Vigny's ideas of the nullification of the self in the observance of duty, the subject of duty and personal idealization of one's masculinity have merged in his thoughts. And he has found in Maureen, a barmaid 'with that suggestion of an animal, almost a touch of monstrosity, some men find very attractive' according to Jenkins (183), a symbolic being to whom his masculine ideals should be applied. However,



once things get out of the realm of symbols and ideals (although he tries hard to stave off the association of Maureen with sex and to describe her as a person like those who 'walk in white') and gets into the field of action of love, the comedy of the fall cannot but begin. His idealized masculinity gets baffled before Maureen as a woman with a body, and the performance of duty gets distorted and suffocated in his preoccupation with the possibility of a physical show of masculinity. The incident of Bithel's arrest, on the surface a very silly overture to Gwatkin's decline, is full of significance in that context. Bithel works as a parodist again; this time performing, at least in Gwatkin's eyes, a sexualized version of Gwatkin's 'man to man' principle towards Sayce, when he tries to kiss a mess waiter as a 'physical appeal' to the waiter's 'better feelings' [203]. Enraged, Gwatkin has him arrested, and takes away Bithel's weapon, formerly likened by himself to what makes a man a man. When Bithel is gone, the exhausted Gwatkin pleads to Jenkins, 'To put him under arrest was my duty'; then he forgets about Bithel, failing to carry the 'duty' to completion until the incident becomes the finishing touch of his debacle.

The night when Gwatkin's fall becomes certain, it is revealed to his eyes, as if to confirm the shattering of his illusion, that Maureen is in an embrace with Corporal Gwyllt in the garden of Castelmallock, which 'has come to mean a lot' to him. 'Gwyllt ought to pray more to Mithras,' Jenkins says to Gwatkin (230). This reference to Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* is perhaps one of the exasperating moments of Jenkins's literaryism; but Gwatkin rises above it. He frankly acknowledges the 'beauty of design' (234), or inevitability, of his fall; for an instant, the realistic sense of comedy gets the better of his romanticism and allows him a 'good laugh'. Next morning, when Jenkins tries to explain Vigny's ideas to him, he shows no interest at all; but the fact remains he could appreciate, using his own text, the comedy of his fall from a military saint to one of the countless soldiers ruled by the pattern and necessity of life, military or otherwise. 'Gwatkin marched away, looking a trifle absurd with his little moustache, but somehow rising above that' (234-5). For those who are forced into the position of comedians in the army, inverted glory comes with the acceptance of the fact that they are comedians bound by the necessity of the performance of glamourless duty, and by the rules and disciplines of material and physical life; a theme to be pursued in various forms through the war trilogy.

VB is a well written comedy, but it has to be admitted it is largely a comedy of humours that evolves around a person particularly amenable to that mode. In a way, Gwatkin is a device that guides the opening volume of the war trilogy to its conclusion, although his personality is quite rounded and plausible: Powell neatly

subjects the central character of the volume to such humiliations as he has been specifically designed to undergo. The procedure is circular: harshly put, Powell has succeeded in imposing a pattern on – rather than deducing one from – the events in this volume, with the aid of this half-tragic comedian. What Powell does in *VB*, essentially, is a continuation of the comedy in the first and second trilogy. The comedy in this volume is well done in its own right; as the opening of the new attempt that is the war trilogy, it aborts the chance by its smallness.

It is quite natural that, with the disappearance of Gwatkin, the volume comes to a close and Jenkins has to start for a new destination, through the pillars marking ‘the entrance to Nowhere’ (237; we are reminded of the door standing amid rubble that appears at the beginning of *CCR*) and to an office where the voice of a serious and efficient military administrator, recites the impersonal text for the maintenance of the military system. In the next volume, Jenkins finds himself in circumstances where it is extremely difficult to have a ‘good laugh’, under the power of Widmerpool, an egoist who is never able to laugh at himself. The enactment of comedy becomes more difficult in the Div HQ; the system’s persecution of the individual gets much more imminently felt.

2. *The Soldier’s Art* (1966)

The greatest problem about Powell’s war trilogy, especially *SA*, is the fact that it has little room for the actual enactment of war – because it is not so deeply concerned with the war *qua* war. The battle-front seems to be as far from the Div HQ as possible; readers cannot imagine that any of the soldiers go into some war-zone to kill or to be killed, or that they hope for, or dread, that opportunity. And since it is far from clear what the soldiers at the garrison do or are meant to do in relation to the pursuit of war (maybe Jenkins’s explanation as to what he doesn’t understand in Balzac [‘technical descriptions’, 48] can be read as a tacit apology), it is not easy to see, or care, whether they make any contribution to the pursuit of the action against the Axis. The question of what the war is for, or why one has to be a part of it, is never once asked.

One might reason this way, even if a little desperately. Powell is really engaged in an operation of quite a different nature – that is, to observe and analyse the human relationships in a particular quarter of society called the army, and represent the patterns of discordance between the individuals and this huge system of power in such a way as to shed some light on the power politics of relationship in civilian

circles both before and after the war. The hour-glass exchange of soldiers in civilian life in the first and second trilogies and civilians in military life here was probably designed for such a purpose. The particular circumstances of the Second World War are incidental to Powell's purposes. The central aim here is to attempt an analysis of the perennial relationship, sometimes comic, sometimes bleak, between servitude, personal ego and power-seeking in a war-time military environment, rather than an account of the World War. The war provides Jenkins, a civilian, with a good chance for such observations, but little more; hence the trilogy has its peculiar gaps on the one hand, and on the other hand detailed (though sometimes laborious) reflections on the effects the military system has on people.

But aren't I shooting myself in the foot – and Powell in the head – in making this kind of excuse, which reduces the war trilogy to a mere continuation of the preceding six volumes? Patrick Swinden's opinion in his 1984 book is cutting:

What Powell has done, in short, is to overlay the horrors of war with descriptions of sub-farcical trivialities on one hand, and vivid but fanciful pictorial artifice on the other... It [the air-raid scene at the opening of *SA*] is beautifully done, but it makes the war seem curiously remote. (121)

The Second World War could hardly have been better timed from Powell's point of view as a novelist, especially when one regards *Dance* as a new enterprise which goes beyond the limitations of the pre-war comedies. The reality of mass warfare would naturally have required a new, more explicit commitment to certain moral and political values (Waugh's *Guy Crouchback* openly shows one, even if in a crazy way). Many of the old characters would have been re-defined in the new context of war: bores might prove heroes, peacetime dandies might have been revealed as cowards (again, Waugh's trilogy is full of such moments of truth). In short, the pre-war *Dance* of the world could, and should, have been put in a new perspective, adding to the polyphonic roundness of *Dance*'s representation of society. Powell and Jenkins aggressively dismiss such possibilities. Does the urbane detachment and reticence Powell always demonstrates in *Dance* imply a moral myopia which is incapacitating in its effect on the comic realism of *Dance*?

It can safely be said that *SA* is, on the whole, the bleakest volume in the war trilogy. *VB* had Gwatkin, whose ludicrous vulnerability and idiosyncratic dignity were cut out for the Powellian mixture of comedy high and low. In *MP*, with the end

of the war in view and a far better job for himself than being an overage lieutenant in Divisional HQ, Jenkins can afford to take the necessary distance from events to have a satirical view of the power-struggle in the military hierarchy. But in *SA*, most of the components of the HQ, whom Jenkins has to mingle with, are failed comedians: they are either would-be wits like Hogbourne-Johnson and Soper, lacklustre bores like Pedlar, or characters of very low farce that lose fire (Bithel having too much drink and causing trouble for Jenkins and Stringham, his vomiting described by Jenkins in a precise, candid language; Biggs' vulgarity never rising to the level of being material for humour). Jenkins himself is mired in the atmosphere of mediocrity. He grumbles, 'There seemed no reason why I alone, throughout the armies of the world, should not be allowed to feel that military life owed me more stimulating duties, higher rank, increased pay, simply because the path to such ends was by no means clear' (24). This comes at a moment when his low spirit and resentment recall Uncle Giles. The sense of comedy and humour, or (as Lyautey would have put it) gay endurance required of a good officer, seems quite remote.

Nevertheless, *SA* remains in the realm of comedy, because the farcical events there refuse to rise to the height of tragedy. When Biggs meaninglessly kills himself at the ending, Colonel Pedlar tells Jenkins that what has happened is 'a very unfortunate thing...A tragedy, in fact. Most unpleasant' (226). The description is surprisingly appropriate for the situation, when we hear it from the mouth of this dull man. He is unconsciously pointing out that the incident is just 'unpleasant', there being no element of the sublime (the pillar of the classical definition of tragedy) in it; that, in fact, his suicide is nothing more than a melodramatic gesture. Biggs' suicide can be classed among the ready-made stock-in-trade of human conduct – theatrical in its inclination toward the obvious, but ruled by the principle of bathos rather than aspiration towards the sublime. Biggs dies the death of a clown, grotesque, but refused entry into the realm of tragedy. In the 'theatre of war' where Jenkins is given 'a walk-on part', life seems to have been made 'so utterly out of joint' (16) by the necessity of carrying on the hackneyed, banal comedy.

The bombardment, which opens the scene in the Div HQ, well epitomises the situation Jenkins finds himself in. The German planes come 'announced by the melancholy dirge of sirens' which sounds like 'ritual wailings at barbarous obsequies' or the musical instrument inadequately mastered' of a street musician (5-6), and are 'metamorphosed into all but stationary lamps, apparently suspended by immensely elongated wires attached to an invisible ceiling' (11). The theatrical implications are all too apparent here, but no one can tell the principle according to which the play is performed. The searchlights move 'purposefully' in 'methodical

fluctuations', apparently to no practical effect but an aspect of the staging of the battle. The planes are hung from this 'resplendent firmament – which, transcendently speaking, seemed to threaten imminent revelation from on high'; but the 'threatened' revelation of the reason why this huge waste has to be made, never comes. Coming instead, pottering about in a mackintosh, is Bithel, director of the Divisional Concert Party, who is exclusively concerned with a minor matter in his daily material life that might lead to a court-martial and expulsion from the army, namely the precarious status of the cheque he has signed. Everything about the bombardment has the appearance of a 'spectacle' (12), Wagnerian if you like, governed by well-prepared stage directions; but the show is really nearer to an indifferently banal knockabout comedy. The appearance of Bithel, who as the commander of Mobile Laundry Unit clearly has nothing whatsoever to do with the battle, finally confirms the fact. The reference made by this low comedian to the cliché of boys' adventure stories ('coming under fire for the first time', 14) strikes a note comically out of place in the circumstances. But at the same time, his attempt to define the situation thrust upon them all in a displaced cliché (in contrast with Gwatkin, who attempts in vain to create an obviously dramatic circumstance around him definable by such clichés) serves as the conclusive note of the introduction to life in the Div HQ and F Mess. Life there is carried out on the principle of ill-directed banality – as represented, at HQ level, by the idiotic exchange about port between Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson and Colonel Pedlar (whose names are respectively Derrick and Eric, suggesting a comic duo), and at Mess level, by Biggs's incessant grumbling about the food. Every member of the Div HQ and the Mess has to cope with this setting of a low comedy quite badly put together; many just sink into the malfunctioning military system, while a few others attempt to rise above it with the help of disciplined will-power.

The conspicuous examples of the latter are General Liddament and Widmerpool. There are traits common to them as persons who command others in the army. They are efficient, hard-working, conscious of the effect of power in a large organization, and of the fact that in total war every organization has to maximise its effectiveness. On the other hand, there are things that distinguish them decisively from one another. While Widmerpool totally lacks humour in his obsession with the game of military procedure, the General enjoys, and profits from, being a 'buffoon' (Widmerpool's word), or a humorous character performing in a comic situation. For example, his inclination toward archaic vocabulary, seemingly and perhaps basically an unconscious habit, is deliberately used as a means of mocking Widmerpool's use of military texts for their own sake. It is evident that he

has ordered Greening, the ADC, to literally quote his own verbal text (he 'bade' Greening 'discourse fair words' to him, 87), when he summons Widmerpool 'anent' the traffic – a subject concerning which Widmerpool succeeds in practically rebutting Hogbourne-Johnson's attack by minutely reciting the necessary procedures he has gone through. More important, his 'buffoonery' works as an expression of his interest in human beings as such (an interest which Widmerpool, as another advocate of the efficiency of organization, totally lacks), especially their existence in the world as a stage of comedy. The scene in which the General finds that Jenkins is not keen on Trollope and violently kicks away the chair in front of him (which, a moment later, he carefully restores to its former position) is one of the very few in the volume that genuinely make readers laugh; but at the same time, though the General himself never makes clear why he regards Trollope as worthy of careful study, it is highly probable that the General draws a parallel between army life and the novels of Trollope, in which people are confined in a bathetically comic world dominated by materialistic considerations. When Jenkins, interrogated by the General, refers to the author of the *Comédie Humaine* as one he admires (and one appropriate in the context), the General half teasingly tells Jenkins that he has been 'very patient with us here' and suggests a possible transfer for him, not as 'a personal matter' but as a means to help the army function more effectively. The General is not necessarily a moral critic of the fact that human beings are confined in a comedy based on material considerations, in the army and in this world. But he does believe that the production of the comedy should be efficiently organized and kept as far as possible from the comedy of the absurd, and that, for that purpose, the individual human existence must be accounted for.

However, when Jenkins tries to give Stringham some better job than that of a mess waiter, as a small attempt of such consideration, Stringham ticks him off, saying, 'My dear boy, are you forgetting our difference in rank?' (77), when Jenkins tries to fix a meal with him; as if he were the superior, which in a sense he is. As Rosemary Colt argues, Jenkins 'persists in thinking of his friend as he was – or, significantly, how he seemed' (63). In other words, Jenkins still wants to regard him as a symbol of the persecution of the elegant (a theme pursued through the first trilogy) – while Stringham himself attempts to reconcile his thwarted old longing for a meaningful or graceful action with his present ignoble state in the world of power, in a humorous but sincere acceptance of the latter.

'You look a trifle harassed...Not surprising, working with Widmerpool' (82), Stringham goes on, himself not looking harassed at all. Jenkins hangs on to Widmerpool for fear of being sent to the ITC, hacking for Widmerpool's perpetual

movement of paperwork for its own sake and melodramatically continuing to toy with Vigny's idea of self-denial. (In these senses, Jenkins' failure in the interview for the liaison job is doubly well deserved: he fails to translate a military document written exactly in Widmerpool's style as heard when he dictates at the end of *VB*, and when Finn the examiner offers another chance for him, he also fails to produce an 'enjoyably dramatic' harangue in French.) Stringham, by contrast, tries to perform the ignoble part he is given in the comedy of army life with as much gaiety and efficiency as possible, refusing to retreat into parodies of melodrama or to let the comedy degenerate into that of malfunction – something on which he used to be an authority (see his trick on Le Bas in *QU*, or his one-man performance in *CCR*). Despite a mode of speech that seems to be as loaded with dramatic irony and panache as ever ('awfully chic to be killed', 78), his principles of action, though certainly confined to the minimal, are now quite straightforward and free from the coat of melodramatic cynicism that was designed to barely protect them against destined failure in a certain social stratum. As James Tucker points out in his monograph, Stringham 'has emerged from almost everything he was taught, whether at home or school' (172). Such a sense of the rounding of (not to call it growth in) people's personalities is one of the positive effects time's movements can give in *Dance*'s generally deterministic structure ('Everything alters, yet does remain the same,' 110).

The problem of 'drama' is further featured in the second chapter, which takes place outside the Div HQ. Here, Powell strains the probability of events to the border of the absurd: the climax of this chapter is the death of Priscilla and Chips Lovell that takes place on the same night at different places, both caused by the tip-and-run bombing of a single plane. This is certainly something that savours of melodrama. When Priscilla becomes suddenly discomposed and leaves Odo Stevens (her lover), Jenkins, Moreland and Audrey Maclintick (now living with Moreland) at their table in the Café Royal, Jenkins considers the possibility of her leaving for Chips (who Jenkins told her was waiting for her at Café Madrid) and abandons the idea as 'more dramatic than probable' (142), but what is waiting for them is far more 'dramatic'. Their double deaths, like that of Biggs, are too devoid of consistent meaning to be accounted tragic; indeed they are nothing more than incidental products of the badly directed 'boisterous farce' of war.

All the same, it cannot be denied that their being killed on the same night has, as an event, a kind of (melo)dramatic conspicuousness that would have appealed to Lovell, a 'romantic about being a realist' who tends to doubt that 'anyone could think or do [anything] but the perfectly obvious' (90-1). Indeed, the situation that leads to

their deaths comprises exclusively 'obvious' things. The unrealism in Powell's narration is at its most aggressive at the Café Royal scene (there is not the slightest attempt to represent a meal: not a fork raised, not a mouthful consumed), but that is in accordance with this section's deep concern with theatrical contrivance in human relationship. Priscilla and Stevens are having a very public love affair, not minding at all being the object of other people's gaze (the Café Royal is certainly 'an obvious enough place to dine,' 124). After toying with the idea of becoming an easily definable 'hero' or getting killed to retrieve Priscilla's love (thus echoing both Bithel's reference to the 'hero' in boys' stories and Stringham's sentiment that it is 'awfully chic' to be killed), Chips goes off to stage a dramatic patching-up by surprising her at Café Madrid, a restaurant-cum-theatre where the comic singer Max Pilgrim is performing. All is laden with theatricality, and not only Chips but his rival have elements of an actor/ director. As Chips reflects somewhat amusedly (109), Stevens is certainly 'not unlike' him in that both have a smooth character and are keen on women. But the most notable trait common to them is their belief that life is a performance of repertoire comedy, in which desirable goals can be attained by using 'obviously' stylised clichés in behaviour. In Stevens, that takes the form of taking up *personae* all put on 'with a reasonable lightness of touch' (127) but also with a forcefulness of performance that Chips, the bland husband, lacks in his relationship with Priscilla. While Chips hopefully waits for her in the theatre he has set up, Stevens transforms any place he finds himself in into a theatre of personal charm, and drags other people into it.

But Stevens' co-performance with Priscilla before the audience in the Café Royal collapses when she breaks down and flees the stage. At the same time, the other theatre, Café Madrid, is literally destroyed. Jenkins shows dumbness which is rather too gross even for him, when he interprets Max Pilgrim's phrase, 'The Madrid is no more,' as a whimsical reference to the termination of his contract there; but Pilgrim is really telling the simple truth in a style 'not in the least dramatized' (154-6). Thus, the haphazardly organized knockabout comedy of war has killed two of the performers of the consciously but feebly organized comedy of the 'obvious'. The conclusion to this chapter, in which Eleanor Walpole-Wilson, a person who has never been able to belong to the obviousness of performance and *personae* ('big and broad-shouldered, she was not exactly a 'mannish' woman. Her existence might have been more viable had that been so,' 162), undertakes and sticks to the materially obvious duty of clearing up the mess of the theatre of the indifferently directed comedy of bombardment, is very appropriate, and quite (though, again, not absolutely) moving. It also works as a good preparation for the next chapter, in which

Charles Stringham, a man who (despite his talent for impersonation) has always been a cynical performer who knows that he is destined to failure, barely sustaining his appearance with melodramatic panache, stages his final performance before starting for the Far East to fulfil the simple role of a private in the Mobile Laundry Unit.

The conduct of Stringham when he finds Bithel, now his commander, dead drunk on the street, is a conscious reminder of the Braddock alias Thorne incident in *QU* (Stringham himself mentions Le Bas's name while explaining the situation to Jenkins). He rings up F Mess in the character of ADC to General Fauncefoot-Fritwell and, succeeding in getting Jenkins' whereabouts from Biggs, Stringham summons him for help. His pleasure in the comic entanglement is apparent in both incidents; however, there is a radical difference too. The call to the police station in the character of Le Bas was done to express Stringham's own self-conscious wit by putting the ineffective housemaster, who cannot even manage his own existence, in the frame of a knockabout comedy; in the second impersonated call, he tunes himself in to the disjointed low comedy played in the Mess (his choice of an impossible name for the general shows his confidence that Biggs is not sharp enough to detect the former waiter he loathed so violently) to save the face of the drunken, ineffective low comedian who must go sooner or later.

This is in sharp contrast with the attitude of Widmerpool towards Bithel, whom he bumps into while Jenkins and Stringham try to walk him to his Mess. He, once the student fatuously staggered by Le Bas's arrest, is now capable of disposing of the individual member of the army very efficiently; indeed, in a far more effective way than when he physically put the drunken Stringham to bed in *AW*. He has gained a position accessible to the authoritative power in the military system, and he knows how to use it. There is no ineffective comic melodrama as when Gwatkin vainly tries to arrest Bithel: Widmerpool simply throws him away by an administrative trick, just as he disposed of Stringham by transferring him to the Laundry. At the same time, he carries the two disposals out as much to confirm his consciousness of power as an able administrator, as for the good of the organization. He applauds his own 'forethought' in transferring Stringham when he is found with the drunken Bithel, and his own clever way of disposing of the useless officer; as if to echo Stringham's self-applause at his own dexterity in disposing of Le Bas ('Neat, wasn't it?' *QU* 45) over the gap of twenty years. More than that: Widmerpool can never for a moment have his self-conscious superiority as a schemer doubted. (This is what makes the seesaw game between him and other schemers – Farebrother and Hogbourne-Johnson – depicted in the latter half of the chapter so genuinely effective as comic relief in this grim volume.) In contrast, Stringham doesn't mind enduring,

and even conscientiously performing, a very ignoble role in the theatre of comedy that is the army.

'Here, sir, Stringham of the Mobile Laundry, present and correct' (181) Stringham tells the barely conscious Bithel, as if he were the 'hero' of the boy's story Bithel indulged himself in his boyhood. The phrase is comically out of place (Stringham himself laughs a lot as he says this). But at the same time, this ironically comic declaration is also a sincere expression of his resolve to stick to the Mobile Laundry, rather surrealistically – or sous-realistically – ignoble in a military system, primarily designed for fighting. ('Quis Separabit?' 223; he flatly refuses Jenkins' suggestion that he should get out of the business on the ground of his age and health.) He is going to the Far East to wash the clothes of others, according to his own choice. That has nothing to do with nihilistic or melodramatic gestures of self-denial; as he himself admits, he still is an 'insufferable' egotist (82). But he is prepared to take on a minor role in the comedy; at the same time, he, as an individual in a huge organization, never stops thinking, as simply and earnestly as he can, how to make his own infinitesimal role as near to that of a divine comedy, and as far as possible from badly directed knockabout or melodramatic comedy ruled by bathos. As Stringham points out, the line from Browning quoted by him and in the title of this volume ('Think first, fight afterwards – the soldier's art') can be interpreted in myriad ways; on a literal plane, his quotation is even rather out of place, because he is going to the Far East to wash clothes, not to fight. The Mobile Laundry Unit can certainly not be a symbol of bravery in the battlefield. But, in the last resort, the idea remains that only thinking (for the sake of an earnest, even if minimalist, acceptance of one's utterly inglorious duty) can lead the soldiers, who are to be consumed in the huge military system, to the thin hope that their comedy of army life can be saved from being an indifferent slapstick lacking in principle and beauty.

In a sense, Stringham's simple resolution is a small saving grace in the overall atmosphere of unchanged, bathetic triviality in the war trilogy: here, at least, readers can see that the war added a new aspect to a character's personality. This kind of growth is something that is functionally unattainable in the next volume; because *MP* is devoted, of necessity, to putting the loose ends of the war in order, and to bridging the gap made by the war in the whole *Dance*.

3. *The Military Philosophers* (1968)

MP is far more lacking in structure than the former two volumes of the war

trilogy: Jenkins' narrative skips from one episode to another, without adhering to any particular character or event. Readers might sometimes even think that that this volume is nearer to a book of miscellaneous memoirs or a collection of character sketches: an impression reinforced by the fact that this volume suffers also from spanning a considerable period, and doesn't hold together in terms of time, action or location. Though it includes many good rapid sketches, those of Alanbrooke and Montgomery among the best, the two thinly disguised life sketches in turn raise a problem: as Michiko Kakutani pointed out in her review of *MP* ('The Novelist as Memorist'), 'the weakest sections of "Dance", in fact, are those least transfigured by the imagination' (19). The parts of Powell's memoirs dealing with the war are sometimes disturbingly similar to the descriptions in *MP*. This concluding volume of the war trilogy is apparently lacking in a plot that climactically builds itself; instead, there are the last-minute ponderings at Westminster Cathedral. To put the case harshly, the novelistic quality of *MP* oscillates between weakness and desperate contrivance.

I don't say that such defects happen wholly without reason. As the former two volumes deliberately adopted a narrow (sometimes even rather too minimalist) scope to pursue the relationship between the existence (and will) of particular individuals and the roles given to them in the 'theatre of war', it is quite natural that Powell and the narrator Jenkins feel, at the end of hostilities, a need to have a wider view of the war in order to connect that period with the pre- and post-war stages of the whole sequence. In doing so, they choose to assemble a sequence of descriptions of apparently trivial episodes and characters, from which the principles of the relationship between the military system and the individual are expected to be induced when the passages concerned are read consecutively and collated. Jenkins's job as liaison officer, which involves communicating with people of various nationalities and backgrounds and putting together the information he has gathered, is just the one for such a purpose.

And there is another element that counts. When the war ends, so few of the characters from the first and second trilogies are remaining that readers may wonder how *Dance* can go on. However, if *Dance* had finished with the closure of the Second World War, it would have ended up as something more akin to an elegy for a generation that had died out, than to what it purported to become (though increasingly desperately in the fourth trilogy, as Jenkins ages and his engagement in the events decreases). As Mrs Erdleigh appositely remarks under the first onslaught of the V1s (a weapon that prophesies a new mode of war), 'there is no death in nature; only transition, blending, synthesis, mutation' (137). Individuals die and age,

but people's struggles in the world never end. With the war drawing to a close, *Dance* rapidly begins to take in various new tunes, but the steps of the perennial human Dance of power politics do not really change; war is an intensified form of the struggle, but its principles are not so different from those of the battles of will over money, love and fame in the societies before and after the war. To prove that by filling the gap made by the war, the narrator Jenkins has to put many lost things in a perspective, track the survival of the old elements that hasn't died, and assess the new elements that are going to come centre stage in the fourth trilogy; hence the apparently peripatetic construction of the volume, which is really intended as an exchange of information. In other words, the original task given to *MP* was to become a bridge that connects the war volumes to the after-war ones: Powell's gravest mistake is that he half-heartedly attempted to give a sense of 'conclusion' to the war trilogy, focusing on Jenkins's rather lugubrious musings at the Cathedral. Jenkins has not gained the right to generalize on war (or to weep at the oncoming of peace, as he does during his trip in France) in the former two volumes: the Cathedral scene is one of the places in *Dance* where Powell's habit of indulging himself in downright thematic statements gets really out of hand.

In this volume, Jenkins's scope is certainly widened: he is transferred to the Intelligence Corps and Finn's section, for a job with a better overview of the process of the war (naturally so, as liaison officers, by definition, liaise, interrelating the small field of war for the better organization of the whole). However, his relationship with the army remains passive. Indeed, liaison officers are required, by the nature of their job, to maintain a passive relationship with the progress of the war. Their duty is to suppress their personal selves and concentrate on observation in order to put together the information in a presentable form; which resembles the primary work required of a realistic novelist. This is in marked contrast with many of the main characters of this volume, who impose their subjective wills throughout the war: Widmerpool, Farebrother, Odo Stevens, Szymansky, and, in her own way, Pamela Flitton, the angry angel of destruction and death who is going to play an extraordinary role in the fourth trilogy and has her first major appearance in this volume. They make their wills penetrate into various corners of the war, dodging the regulations and privatising the pieces of information they get. They steal the roles, originally played by liaison officers within the limit of legality and for the sake of the progress of the war as a whole, and illegitimately perform them for their personal profit or for the satisfaction of their own egos. Thus, they connect the war of information, which is the main subject matter of this volume, to the perennial theme

of the *Dance*: the relationship between the egos of individuals and social systems.

The most notable feature of Jenkins' section is its efficient powerlessness. Unlike the confusion of Gwatkin company or the glum redundancy of F Mess, the section has the established and self-contained role of a processing machine, in good working order, of information: there, pieces of information are put together and analysed as reasonably as possible, and quickly offered to the quarters that may need them. At the same time, the section has nothing to do with self-empowerment. Colonel Finn, the head of the section, is a figure that symbolizes its attitude. He is certainly an officer with much strength of personality: he is repeatedly compared to Punchinello, and his behaviour is in fact sometimes comically Punchinello-esque (see the scene in which he guards the secret sub-ocean pipeline from the eyes of foreign officers by standing in front of them in a position of relieving himself), but at the same time he is, again like Punchinello, endowed with sufficient power to control the comic scene he is featured in. He is far from incapable of exercising power over others (he can even hold Farebrother, that smooth operator who moves anything for the sake of his own plots, in check). But, nevertheless, he does not allow himself and his section to traffic in power in the process of the war, and sees to it that the section sticks to the strict limitations of the position of a go-between bearing information between various powers. (Ironically, Jenkins' largest personal contribution to the war – his help in transporting the furious young Belgian Resistance members that might have been the cause of a civil war, to England to train – is achieved by scheming through Sir Magnus Donners, against the nature of a liaison officer's duty.) As the head of an Intelligence section, Finn can, if he wants, use the information he possesses in order to gain power in the system, but he prefers to operate as a disinterested distributor of information, or in Pennistone's words, 'a completely uncommitted individual, a kind of ideal figure' (7); an approach based on the renunciation of the quest for power in (and behind the back of) the military hierarchy. This reasonable negativity of the role Finn chooses to play – something that might be the apotheosis of, or an apology for, Jenkins's self-effacement in the whole series – becomes a foil for those two eminent figures who plan and carry out the whole war, both of them phenomenally powerful in their own (and contrasting) ways. Alanbrooke's 'exceptional magnetic impact' is achieved 'quite effortless[ly]' (54); while Montgomery's 'will-power, not so much natural, as developed to altogether exceptional lengths' is stressed by features suggesting 'some mystical beast, say one of those encountered in *Alice in Wonderland*, full of awkward questions and downright statements' (184; we are here reminded of Jenkins' former reference to Carrollian world in the opening of *SA*). It is obvious that Jenkins' liking is more for

Alanbrooke, but the resource of Alanbrooke's natural magnetism is really as mysterious as that of Montgomery's will-power. Their role in this volume is more like that of mythic figures symbolizing power, suddenly incarnated in the daily struggle of the world when it is intensified by wartime conditions. But their introduction into the scene can be seen as a major tactical error for Powell. He is no more able to account for their will leading Britain to victory, than for Widmerpool's will always leading him to comic disasters; which makes readers suspect the ultimate absence of the standard of comicality in *Dance*.

Finn's (and his section's) attitude is also in contrast with those of Farebrother and Widmerpool, both now concerned in the secret side of the foreign business. Farebrother's 'charm' and 'holy face' hide a willingness to 'get right up the arse of anyone he thinks likely to help him on' (Pennistone: 48); while Widmerpool makes no secret of his power as a dealer in important information in the Cabinet Office, in which capacity he can create documents that go directly up to the Prime Minister (the first time he appears in this volume, he looks 'like a dog delighted to show ability in carrying a newspaper in his mouth,' 15). A common feature of these self-assured traffickers in power is that they never tire of the continued state of war and power-struggle; on the contrary, they thrive on it, never for a moment seeming to feel the burden of the passing of time. Finn, although immensely efficient in his genial and reasonable way, is sometimes incapable of hiding his fatigue from ages of self-imposed powerlessness (in his first appearance he is 'heavily descending the stairs with the tread of Regulus returning to Carthage,' 2); Templer derisively refers to his own 'beefing about age' and realization that he might not have been such 'a success with the ladies' as he used to think (23); but Widmerpool and Farebrother are always fresh in their quest for power. Farebrother's smooth surface barely conceals his readiness to indulge in any form of military bohemianism required at the moment; Widmerpool, in contrast with Finn, 'make[s] it [his] business to be involved' (111) in the secret business around Szymansky in order to get [a] personal revenge on Farebrother. Their attitude is summed up in Widmerpool's insistence on the general liberties that should be permitted in times of war, squarely denying the small good Jenkins' section attempts to build up. 'That's the point. It's war. Just because these deaths [the massacre of Polish officers at Katyn] are very upsetting to the Poles...it's no reason to undermine the fabric of our alliances against the Axis', Widmerpool maintains [106], while Finn, the businessman-cum-warrior who believes in the obsolete principle of good manners, helplessly deplores the 'bad business'. Widmerpool's attitude here has much in common with Montgomery's 'shoot 'em up' principle, but while in Montgomery this peremptoriness is inseparably

connected with the needs of the commander of a modern war, Widmerpool's and Farebrother's belief in military *realpolitik* is largely directed towards their personal empowerment in the system of the army: in Frederick Karl's phrase in his 1972 book, they 'hope to make the war come to them and lend itself to their personal needs' (319). They are always fresh and 'young' in war, in that they never tire of making as much use as possible of the incessantly changing conditions of this intensified human power-struggle.

Their 'youth' is emphasized by their unexpected marriages at the end of the war with women they met in the course of duty; but the conditions of the respective marriages are different. Farebrother's shrewdness makes readers quite convinced that he, as a man in his fifties, can settle into an almost sedately respectable married life with the 'gorgon' Geraldine Conyers (nee Weedon), whose much older husband has dropped dead in his quixotic defiance of age. In fact, Miss Weedon herself is, and has always been, a powerful supporter of the conventional mode of life, with a decided taste for a comfortable corner reserved for her: a feature she has in common with a certain aspect of Farebrother. When we encounter him after the war, we cannot but admire the way he has fitted into the role of a rose-growing gentleman living happily with his beloved wife, while at the same time successfully plotting to kick Widmerpool out of a banking board. Widmerpool's case is far more problematic, because the woman he chooses (or is made to choose) is Pamela Flitton, a female warrior driven by her Fury from place to place, and from one affair to another, bringing disaster and even death to her lovers, Widmerpool among them. Pamela's role here is not unlike that of Bithel, the persecutor of Gwatkin, in *VB*: their importance is not in their (extremely hollow, two-dimensional) personalities, but in their role as an apt cause of the fall of others. Robert R. Selig says in his book, 'the revelation of his [Widmerpool's] guilt concerning Templer's death has strengthened her resolve to become Mrs. Widmerpool – a conjugal avenger, a wifely tormentor, a tenacious household nemesis' (126). That sounds rather psychologically implausible, though Powell will certainly endorse such an interpretation; but what is more important is that Pamela functions as a perfect foil for Widmerpool's one-upmanship in human relationships, a nemesis for his philistinism empowered by the war.

Widmerpool now regards himself as a practitioner of sexual license (he jeers at Tomsitt's and other bureaucrats' sexual primness, boasting of '[p]lenty of pretty little bits in the black-out' for himself, 109), just as he insists on politico-military liberty to be allowed in wartime. Widmerpool has found a good match in Pamela, a soldier in the area of human relationships who thinks of love in terms of battle. (When she first appears as a driver for Jenkins' section, she is wearing not the ATS

tunic but a soldier's battledress, her feminine attraction somehow being enhanced by its military drabness.) She can get around to all the fields of war to devour men, and in some cases women too. She can escape from any place, and get into any place she wants to. But there is one thing that fundamentally distinguishes her from Widmerpool, Farebrother, Szymansky, Stevens and other operators of power and information. While the others try to get around the regulations for the promotion of their own advantage or the satisfaction of their own egos, she has no obvious motivation except the destruction of the career of the people she has affairs with. In contrast with the men, and especially with Widmerpool, who, for all his awkwardness, never fails to be self-promoting and constructive in his ideas, Pamela is always negative in her fight. She is a power conspicuous in its utter denial of the world and the necromantic reversal of the principles that keep it going, as shown in her treatment of Templer. While she is the person who drove him to the mission that kills him, she accuses Widmerpool publicly of killing 'the nicest man [she] ever knew' by helping Britain switch from Mihailovich to Tito; making us suspect she can really love only men who have passed away, in reversal of the principle of self-projection for future love in the *Dance* market. Odo Stevens, another of her lovers, puts it in his typically unabashed language. 'She's cross all the time. Bloody cross. Chronic state. Thrives on it. Her chief charm. Makes her wonderful in bed...She's the hell of a girl' (128); Pamela reveals the 'hell' hidden under the surface of the *Dance*. Mrs Erdleigh, whose fortune-telling is based as much on the realistic sense of the politics of human relationships as on mystical obscurantism, is quick to detect that. She points out the existence of 'the dark unfathomable lake over which you glide' (133); which, when reread, makes us think of the secret reserve of dark, self-destructive forces in *Widmerpool*, one of the axes of Jenkins's personal mythology, whose persecution by Pamela provides one of the main plots of the fourth trilogy.

Pamela becomes one of the major components of the remaining volumes, but she is primarily a device who is filled with a deathly impulse to devour and destroy men, and is given little room for development of personality. She is a time bomb installed for the destruction of the order of the *Dance* world from within: she helps *Dance* go on after the departure of many of the main characters caused by the war, but through her introduction, the stage of the self-promoting *Dance* is rapidly changed into a *danse macabre* of self-destruction, suppressed (however inelegantly or incompletely) in the social manoeuvres in the pre-war world. The end of the Second World War doesn't, and can't, denote the coming of peace; people return to their lives, but that is in fact nothing but the resumption, in a more candid form, of

the perennial human battle, often bitterly comic (especially to the eye of an observer) and sometimes heartbreakingly grotesque.

In that sense, it would have been irrelevant if the war trilogy ended with a sense of climax; which it doesn't. What awaits Jenkins, guiding the tour of the Allied officers in France, is the 'dull flat country, designed by Nature for a battlefield, over which armies had immemorably campaigned' (172). There he encounters his old regiment and Kedward, who served with him under Captain Gwatkin; but Jenkins has completely gone out of Kedward's memory. For efficient soldiers of Kedward's kind (far more efficient than poor Gwatkin, the complete collapse of whose daydream of military glory is 'cheerfully' reported by Kedward), Jenkins's sentimental memory means nothing. What matters for them is present survival in the perennial battlefield and things that can be obtained from it. We see the same attitude of sticking to the present in former Jean Duport, who is now married to a South American attaché and appears in the flesh before Jenkins, her former lover, after a long absence. She comes onto the stage in the last chapter of this volume, just after the end of the Victory Service that officially marks the closure of the war, as if to serve as a bridge between Jenkins' youth before the war and his present middle-aged self and to round off his past emotional life. However, what Jenkins and we readers really find in her is the same amnesic indifference to the past. Jean, a warrior of love who dealt with a sequence of men with great success, is serene in her amnesia ('We exchanged conversational banalities. Formal and smiling, Jean too [beside Flores] was perfectly at ease,' 234). This is the common feature of soldiers fit to survive in the perennial battlefield that is the world – which also applies, though in somewhat different way, to the case of Widmerpool. Wasn't his ability to forget his own disasters the greatest element in this ontologically awkward person's survival? When Jenkins meets him a short while before the encounter with Jean, '[t]he scene with Pamela had been altogether dismissed from Widmerpool's mind, as he had risen above failure with Mrs Haycock' (231). Thus, the *Dance* world keeps its rounds, even in the war.

But can one possibly say that the Second World War has been properly accounted for? The Service in the last chapter is supposedly a 'great occasion' for the conclusion of the war, but it is really nothing but an anti-climax for Jenkins, some of whose allies in war are already banished from the ceremony for political reasons – and from the war trilogy itself. Jenkins, in his meandering reflections during the service, thinks that the expression of hope for a simple and true law of human relationships ('O Lord our God arise/ Scatter his enemies...Confound their politics,/ Frustrate their knavish tricks') is 'much the best' verse in the Anthem, but he, at the

beginning of the Cold War and his middle age, cannot close his eyes to the fact that, in this world where 'freedom from one sort of humbug' very probably implies 'thralldom to another' (227), human beings are dancers who have to endure the marathon dance of 'strange adulteries' and at the same time soldiers who have to survive in the battlefield of 'knavish tricks'. So far so good; but has Jenkins gained the right to such reflections in the three volumes of the war trilogy? Mouthed by a man who has apparently spent the war in maintaining the observation of minor farcical happenings in life, such an attitude obtains an unsavoury overtone of irresponsible cynicism.

The reappearance of Archie Gilbert, the 'spare man' of the evening dance years of Jenkins's youth, in the last scene of the volume as a portly artillery officer who seems to have endured much danger and stress is not wholly unenjoyable for readers who have kept pace with the ups and downs of the series. But the slackness and moral weakness of the war volumes can't be vicariously atoned for by a brave soldier who randomly surfaces in the flow of time. At the closure of the war trilogy, readers are faced by a disturbing question: have there been limitations in Powell's new comic enterprise of *Dance* that prevents it from being taken too far – from being adapted to large issues of history or life?

Chapter Five

*A Dance to the Music of Time: Fourth Movement*1. *Books Do Furnish a Room* (1971)

It is undeniable that the last six volumes of *Dance*, especially the three volumes of the fourth trilogy, taken together, are something of a let down: they fail to contribute to the building of an organic whole as opposed to a collection of disparate stories, though each of the six volumes is not without its own merit. The promise of the first half of the series that *Dance* would be something more than the sum-total of twelve consecutive volumes seems to dwindle and finally disappear; making readers doubt if Powell's enterprise really required twelve volumes' expansion.

To put the matter on a crudely functional plane, Powell is running out of characters: many of his old favourites, who appeared and reappeared to give a sense of recurrence and pattern, have aged or been killed in the war. He is therefore obliged to introduce a number of new ones, but they are either feeble and unmemorable (like the obscure people of letters in this volume) or fantastically eccentric without having enough core of personality for readers to be fully convinced of their existence (Pamela Widmerpool, X Trapnel and Scorp Murtlock: see the crudeness of the naming of the last two).

However, this is not a purely technical matter. Powell's failure to create characters plausible enough to be a part of the society he is proposing to deal with, might indirectly suggest that he has no grip of it – or worse, that he is losing interest in the reality of human life. Jenkins seems to be completely oblivious to the great social change that was taking place just after the war. It is hard to believe, from Jenkins's narration, that the fall of Churchill's wartime cabinet and the transformation of the country by the Labour government really took place; which makes Jenkins appear a political and social illiterate. Powell's stock-in trade – people's inner drives to be 'successful' – seems to have lost the social background against which success or failure is to be measured. At the same time, the tone of Jenkins's narration is now more infected with melancholic lethargy than ever before; while X Trapnel impersonates Boris Karloff, borrows money, leads a hopeless love affair with frigid Pamela and prepares his novel that is to be destroyed by her, most other characters are represented as ignoble, obscure and two-dimensional. The *Fission* editorial office is nothing more than a den of ineffective freaks such as Sheldon and Shermaker. If this setting were for one of Powell's pre-war novels, the

place might be regarded as an island of pleasantly absurdist gestures, but in *Dance*, where Jenkins's account of events aims at something more concerned with reality, it can certainly not be. There is no room here for a glimpse of unexpected depth of personality in apparently uninteresting social 'types' (as there was for Uncle Giles, Ted Jeavons or Bob Duport).

This new volume evolves around one character, the writer X. Trapnel, as did *VB* around Gwatkin; but while the comedy around Gwatkin more or less succeeded in functioning as a small part of the worldly patterns of power, ambition and desire for self-realisation, the farce around Trapnel seems only to demonstrate forcefully that life is a doomed camel ride to the tomb. As James Tucker argues in his monograph, readers might even feel 'that the coincidences turn up not to represent the drifting, recurrent patterns of life, but to make a sensational and emphatically "meaningful" read' (182). In groping towards a conclusion, is *Dance* at risk of falling into self-parody or self-destruction? Or is it that the central moral hollowness of Powellian comedy – the infirmity of the ultimate distinction of the 'comically deviant' and the 'seriously meaningful' in life in overall concession to general nullity (moral, political, artistic...) – has been revealed in *Dance*'s failure to account for the social upheaval during and after the war, and that Trapnel's completely unsubstantial personality is one of its extreme outcomes? Powell's sense of comedy was able to give an extra half-dimension of humanity in the characters that appeared in the first half of *Dance*; but it seems unable to make any substantial explanation for the social and moral change in time, which would have thrown a light of three-dimensionality on the incomplete existence of the survivors and the newcomers.

In *BDFR*, great stress is laid upon the idea of Time pushing everything to extinction and oblivion. People age and die, or their lives are cut short by circumstance, while the Dance of the world goes on in a superficially new mode, forgetful of the dancers who have disappeared from the floor. This theme, which first appeared as early as *BM* ('[Mr Deacon was] a visible proof that life had existed in much the same way before I had begun to any serious extent to take part; and would, without doubt, continue to prevail long after he and I had ceased to participate,' 14), is going to inform the entire fourth trilogy and in Ariosto's concept of time in *HSH*. *BDFR* takes up as its main subject matter people's various efforts to ward off the dark chaos of things that have become meaningless in the present circumstances of the Dance. In this context, Neil Brennan's point in his book *Anthony Powell* that 'it is less the fates of the characters that are traced [in the final review of the minor characters] than of the books they have written' (121) is worth hearing. The act of

writing, one of this volume's main topics, is a specialized and intensified form of people's struggle against the eroding effect of Time.

The novelist X. Trapnel says of the title of his novel, *Camel Ride to the Tomb*: 'I grasped at once that [the call of an old Egyptian tour guide]'s what life was...Juddering through the wilderness, on an uncomfortable conveyance you can't properly control...towards the destination crudely, yet truly, stated' (109). Here, readers will be reminded of the metaphor of Ghost Train in *CCR* (219, 229); there is the same sense of lack of control, of ignorance as to the significance of being conveyed in such a fashion.²² The difference is that death, the final collapse of all human efforts into insignificance, is blatantly designated as the destination, thereby attracting our attention to the existence of a living grave of significance, a chaotic underworld of obscurity and oblivion that exists beyond (or beneath) the patterns of the Dance.

BDFR begins with Jenkins's expression of his strong sense of being left alone in the meaninglessness of the world. 'As the forlorn purlieus of the railway-station end of the town gave place to colleges, reverie...turned towards the relatively high proportion of persons known pretty well at an earlier stage of life, both here and elsewhere, now dead, gone off their rocker, withdrawn into states of existence they – or I – had no wish to share' (3). It is one of the rare occasions in *Dance* for the protagonist Jenkins to be allowed by his narrating self to express what he is feeling about life in comparatively direct terms. There is a similar moment in *VB*, when, in reply to Gwatkin's assertion that he has learned a lesson from the hopeless love for Maureen, he declares that people never take lessons to heart; that few, if any, of us are able to achieve real progress in, or find the 'real' meaning of, life, that we just drift indefinitely from the unconsciousness before birth to the oblivion after death, or dementia in life. Jenkins alights at his former University in order to achieve something in the present world, that is, complete a book on Burton. 'Rather a morbid subject', Le Bas, his former housemaster, says, and he is right in a sense; Jenkins' aim is to find 'borage and hellebore', a cure for the disease of melancholy in a world that has gone for a Burton. But he is just one of the 'dim, disembodied, unapproachable entities, each intent on his own enigmatic preoccupation' (3) who find a 'soothing drug' in books of the past.

It is no coincidence that the first chapter opens and ends with a railway station (a place of transit), and that the final scene prepares the appearance of

²² In this context, it is interesting that many of the descriptions of real vehicles in *Dance* – Templer's Vauxhall in *QU*, Widmerpool's Morris in *BM*, the embarkation to a ship in the dark in *VB*, and more – convey a sense of discomfort or loss of direction.

Books-do-furnish-a-room Bagshaw, who lends his nickname to the title of the volume and becomes the editor of *Fission*, whose editing office is the metaphoric main stage of the volume. Books is a vagabondish wayfarer in the media world: he has the absolute ability – in spite of, or rather because of, his past as a failed Leftist – to produce any kind of text in a consumer society, from music review to agony aunt column. His character is certainly quite featureless for a role of his importance (especially when put beside Trapnel's glaring dandyism). But the featurelessness is enhanced to such a level that he becomes the type of the obscure underworld, literary and otherwise, which is decidedly featured at this stage of the *Dance*. What should be emphasized here is that Books is not a tragic character, however meaningless his Sisyphean struggle is: his endurance in the meaninglessness of life keeps him within the realm of comedy. He is a man endowed with a talent for never having to face extinction, spontaneous or otherwise: a journalistic Captain Grimes without the original's vividness of character. He is able to maintain a peculiar standard in a life that forever drifts from one place to another. Naturally, even Books is mortal as a person; but the world he symbolizes keeps going on – seedily and indefinitely.

In contrast, Erridge, the absent hero of the second chapter, is a man who failed to endure. But his death and the funeral featured here can never be called tragic events either, however gloomy: they lack the sense of inevitability necessary for a tragedy. His death is merely untimely and inconvenient for everyone. Its very incongruity supplies just another scene in the enduring comedy of the human struggle to enhance one's own profit. Erridge, like Books, was continually and indefinitely driven from place to place as a Leftist, in his case internationally, never achieving anything. Even his last attempt at obtaining a social mouthpiece in the form of a magazine edited by Books, is left undone by his death. Widmerpool, 'the greatest bourgeois' who has taken up a Leftish position for his promotion in the world of politics ('there was a room [for an MP] for City men who'd be sensibly co-operative, especially if of Leftward turn to start,' as a bureaucrat explains, 14), comes to the funeral to hijack the magazine as *his* mouthpiece, a means to let the world notice his own existence.

The reason for Widmerpool's presence at the funeral is thus quite inauthentic, to say the least. But no one present seems to make a serious objection in the funeral's atmosphere of lifeless repetition of social protocols. Frederica Tolland regards him as a natural representative of Erridge's Leftish friends; Alfred Tolland, the ghost of conventionality who seems to have 'risen from the dead to reach the funeral of the head of the family', approvingly remembers him as a man who talks business in resistance to the '*Eheu Fugaces*' motif of Le Bas' Old Boys dinner. The only

exception is Pamela, Widmerpool's wife, who has the 'grace' of 'an appropriate attendant on Death' (46). Her escape and, especially, vomiting, which is performed with 'almost sublime' grace, is clearly a gesture of rejection of all the lethargically comic and fatuous ceremony which is taken over as the stage of the struggle of will power.²³ Pamela's most conspicuous feature – more harshly put, the *raison d'être* of this novelistic device without substantial personality – is the fact that she defies comedies: she tries to escape from the unending repetition of the comic pattern of people's egoisms, which has defined the *Dance* world up till now. But the paradox is that Pamela has an extremely strong egoistic drive that forces her to take part in the unending comedy. Although – or because – she rejects this world, she cannot stop herself alluring men she despises, and ruining them.

The launching party for *Fission* is another, and even more obvious, arena for such micro-politics of will. Everyone there is a politician in one sense or another – for many, in multiple senses – with a common focus on publishing and publicity. For instance, Widmerpool is now an MP who badly wants public recognition and attempts to gain the position of an author of political articles. Odo Stevens, an ex-soldier of unusually self-promoting ego, who is at pains to attract the attention of anyone at any place he finds himself in (see the scene at Café Royal in *SA*), is now trying his hand as an author of a book exposing the seamy side of war. (His act of insinuating himself into publishing business is put by Powell in the thematic order of drifting, in an explicit metaphor which connects itself to the scene at the canal in the last chapter: 'The war had washed ashore all sorts of wrack of sea, on all sorts of coasts...Among the many individual bodies sprawled at intervals on the shingle...the more determined ...crawled inland,' 130-1.) But it does not matter what quality their writings have: all that matters is winning the political battle to obtain public notice. The barrenness of the situation is epitomized in the combination of two minor characters who complement each other to perfection. Sheldon is a critical factotum whose readers never buy books; Shermaker, who believes in the utter superiority of critics over the work of novelists, is certainly published but read by nobody.

X. Trapnel comes into the scene as a strong objector to all such things. His imperial forcefulness in getting himself published should not be confused with the unabashed politics of the authors mentioned above. He takes it as a matter of course that an author of quality gets printed without any effort. That belief is based on, and

²³ Pamela was the little girl who vomited in the font at her uncle Charles Stringham's marriage ceremony. As Donald Williams Bruce points out in his 1988 essay (157), her surrogate father Stringham was twice taken away from her: once by marriage, and for the second time by Widmerpool, who was in charge of Stringham's disposal to Singapore and is now at the funeral as her husband.

in turn promotes, his solipsistic self-display (however oxymoronic that term may sound) as an artist. His firm tenet is that '[a] novelist writes what he is' (111), but that is not connected with the imposition of oneself on others. Although he is certainly an egoist of first order, his insistent monologue testifies that he is intent only on how he should look to himself. His only form of imposing his will on others, namely borrowing money, is for the sake of preserving his life and, if possible, maintaining taxis as the only possible means of transportation. His borrowing is desperate, but at the same time quite innocent; which is shown in his disproportionate dismay when Widmerpool, the kind politician he tricked into lending him a pound, turns out to be Pamela's husband.

His love for Pamela, a desperate vagabond of love whose refusal of communication is combined with a fierce drive to rule and destroy, is what staggers his solipsism – though both Trapnel and Pamela continue to lack tangible substance in their personalities. Their affair leads to the final disintegration of his collected personae, so that his personality, stripped to its hollow core, begins to drift with other debris of the world ('Now he really has become unmoored,' appositely cries Bagshaw at the moment of disaster, 223). Pamela is a woman who makes the same imperious demands in love as Trapnel does in literature. They take their power as a matter of course; they are like juggernauts, thinking nothing of stamping upon those admirers who are inferior in writing (Alaric Kydd to Trapnel) and in love (Trapnel himself to Pamela). The difference is that, while Trapnel's urge to be a 'good writer' is motivated towards attainment (though in a paradoxical way; after all Trapnel is trying to demonstrate life is nothing but a 'camel ride to the tomb'), Pamela's drive for love is directed to sheer destruction without aim. Powell guides readers to appreciate Trapnel's motives, but Pamela's desperate sexual pilgrimage remains a black hole in *Dance*. It is true that most of the female characters of *Dance* are given rather fewer chances to express their ideas than the male ones, which might prompt a criticism against thinness of characterization; however, Pamela's case is on a different plane. Powell is at great pains to characterize her by description of her savage conduct; but there is a dark, fundamental hollowness in her motivation. Other warriors of love in *Dance* carry out their love affairs for the fulfillment of their egos; but there is no such hope in Pamela's. Her frigid body is something from the dark underworld of death in its refusal to be assimilated into the formal, repetitive comic patterns woven by sexual drifters. But the paradox is that Pamela is the most sexually avid character in the whole *Dance*; which forcefully throws her in the midst of such drifting patterns, and makes her the most desperately fugitive drifter of all.

Her verdict on Trapnel's unpublished new novel, 'I'm not satisfied', has a

distinct sexual overtone in context. But here, too, she does not or cannot designate the reason why. She just flatly and utterly denies all Trapnel's efforts toward attainment, amatory or literary. There is no falling back upon panache and dramatic gestures for Trapnel, as the two fundamental elements of his life, writing and loving, are encouraged and at the same time denied by Pamela. When he falls in love with her, this literary tyrant can utter only the most banal of banal romance novel clichés to Jenkins ('I've never known what it [love] was before,' 160). Widmerpool's visit, with Jenkins as the audience, is a rare chance for drama for Trapnel, not to be missed, but he fails miserably: it is Widmerpool who rises above ridicule here. Trapnel attempts a show of formality, but Widmerpool, the 'greatest bourgeois', is more naturally formal. Trapnel draws the death's-head swordstick, the glaring symbol of his panache, but Widmerpool's response ('No dramatics, please', 203) could not be more damaging. Though in his usual stilted and awkward attitude, Widmerpool even commandeers Pamela's greatest weapon, contempt ('[I came here] to express my contempt for the way you live and the way you have behaved,' 202). This *cocu* helps his wife strip the armour of panache from Trapnel's existence, and the wife dexterously closes the scene. After Widmerpool goes out with Trapnel's desperate vulgar shriek ('Coprolite! Faecal debris! Fossil of dung!'), she thanks Jenkins for looking in, 'formally, like a hostess' (205) This scene has a symphonic effect with the one at Erridge's funeral in which she makes Jenkins admit he is a social formalist ('I just enquired [after your health] as a formality. Don't feel bound to answer,' 69); but then Pamela suddenly steers into vulgarity ('Bugger off – I want to be alone with X'). Pamela is a better hand than Trapnel even at acting. She can shuttle at will between vulgar truth at the core of the world and the formalistic panache of an actor-novelist.

At the beginning of the last chapter, Jenkins evokes Robert Burton, an author quite different from Trapnel's attitude expressed in his deranged but sincere talk on the art of novel: '*T'is not my study or intent to compose neatly...but to express myself readily & plainly as it happens. So that as a River runs...doth my style flow*' (206, my italics). This fits well in the imagery of fluids in the volume (Pamela's vomit into the urn with the pattern of boats sailing 'on calm sheets of water'; she forever running the shower to disguise her desertion of Widmerpool; and of course the canal into which Trapnel's work, 'what he is', is thrown); indeed the whole *Dance* as a *roman fleuve* is full of such imagery (Widmerpool's name; Gypsy Jones as a 'grubby naiad' [BM 164]; pale hands loved by the cool waters [CCR 2]; the sea, '*toujours recommencée*', which opens the war trilogy [VB 1], and Burton's 'torrential passages' that closes *Dance* [HSH 271]). It is worthy of note that this imagery of water is connected with the loss of self, whether in temporary pleasure, or in the

disintegration of our personality – expressed in our formal and reasonable outlook of the world – in the dark, chaotic underworld into which Time incessantly pushes people back. But at the same time Jenkins, as a novelist, has to order his narration according to ‘priority’ – in this particular case, guide the events of the volume in his own novelistic perspective toward the extinction of *Fission* and Trapnel’s disaster. He does so as if in response to Trapnel’s assertion that the events of the world (‘Naturalism’ in the true meaning of the word) are funny, exciting, anything, but that they cannot be art; that human beings’ lack of subtlety in their role-playing must be complemented by art.

However, Jenkins does not comply with the law of climactic structure toward the catastrophe, which gives the beauty of form to tragedies; his art is directed toward the anti-climax and repetition of comedy. He deliberately places the burlesque version of the liquidation of Trapnel’s manuscript, namely the loss of Odo Stevens’ *Sad Majors* caused by Gypsy Jones, in front of Trapnel’s disaster, diluting its tragic originality and incapacity of repetition. And at the same time he takes care to compare Pamela’s disappearance from their flat with her former escape from the Widmerpools’ flat, the rescue of the almost deranged Trapnel with that of Stringham and Bithel in former volumes; thus weaving the incident into the infinite repetition of the world. Though Trapnel is certainly unable to write *Profiles in String* again, his life does not end with it. He does not cut his throat or scoop out his eyeballs with the swordstick; he gallantly throws it into the canal in a gesture of tragic sacrifice, but it does not sink, but just bobs downstream. Trapnel himself drifts into the underworld pool of obscurity and oblivion he came from, continuing his life indefinitely in Time’s senselessness.

In the last scene of the volume, at Eton, Pamela is probably having just another affair while Widmerpool is made to wait outside. ‘Where is this “Iron Curtain”, I ask myself?’ Widmerpool, a Labour MP, challenges Jenkins who also happens to be there (237); but the Iron Curtain is there before him. Beside this man who never admits his defeat, we meet there, after all these years, Le Bas, on the wrong side of eighty, acting as a substitute librarian. There is something moving in the persistence against Time of this awkward man; but he acknowledges Time pushing the world around himself into oblivion. His question to Jenkins, ‘Do I know you?’ has a characteristic logical contortion (no one but he himself can answer it), but at the same time it is a testimony to the disintegration of people’s identity in Time. Le Bas should know Jenkins as his former pupil, but he plainly admits his inability to remember if he used to know him or not. Widmerpool tries hard to impress this old man with ‘Time...on his side’ (235) with his attainments. Le Bas’ writing ‘Widmerpool’ and ‘Balkans’ on

a sheet of paper, drawing circles around them, and then connecting them with a line, can be regarded as a small triumph of this cuckolded husband sitting dejectedly on a wall. 'It looked more than ever like some form of incantation,' Jenkins says (234), but it is an incantation against Time: Time that destroys people's worldly Dance of power and ambition.

BDFR is designed as the thematic introduction to the fourth trilogy, which evolves around the torrent of Time pushing the world toward disintegration in obscurity, and people's (especially Widmerpool's) resistance to it. Now, the development of *Dance* gets more bizarre and demented toward its final self-exhaustion.

2. *Temporary Kings* (1973)

TK is the volume in which the problems of the after-war volumes of *Dance* are condensed. The foremost objection against them would be that they are contrived for contrivance's sake. Until the war trilogy, generally speaking, people danced out (so to speak) their personalities. The dancers were driven by certain primal longings in their lives (for instance, love; sex; money; power; fame; social rightness) and acted out and re-enacted certain basic patterns of human relationship. There was no arch-choreographer who ruled the whole picture: the patterns of the dance were inherent – and to be found – in the personalities of the people who try to choreograph the life around them according to their own principles, and the situations they find themselves in. Powell's task was to make the characters and situations rounded, plausible and interesting and convince readers that the forces that drove the dancers were recognisable and, probably, universal. For that purpose, the elaborate network of allusions to historical facts and works of art, metaphors, and thematic 'placard' scenes nudging readers seemed acceptable, if sometimes overcooked. However, in the fourth trilogy – where the temptation for Powell to give *Dance* a sense of conclusion of one kind or another was probably stronger than anywhere in the series – the author himself appears on the scene as a strong choreographer. The characters and their inter-involvements are contrived and compelled to enact certain pre-determined patterns that are often flippantly farcical rather than comic. True, the situations Powell dealt with in the former volumes were also often farcical; but there were hidden, intently serious impulses and motives in the personalities of the actors that gave a sense of inevitability, coherence and (ultimately) beauty of design to the farces enacted. But, in the fourth trilogy, Powell is running the risk of letting *Dance*

sink into self-parodical portentousness. The subjection of the characters to fantastical debacles – though such an attempt is not utterly impossible to understand, if we look upon it as a way of forcibly bringing the huge but unprincipled worldly Dance of power-struggle to a temporary stop – undermines the interrelationship between the farcicality of the world's movement and people's serious intentions in their actions, which was Powell's unique stock-in-trade. In *BDFR*, the saving grace was that the plot evolved around the extraordinary character of X. Trapnel, who knew that he was a hollow construct but couldn't help, for the sheer purpose of keeping his life going, obsessively piling up the shallow role-playing; so that, at least in this instance, the dark farce was not without a rewarding sense of inevitability. However, in *TK*, when Widmerpool – the would-be 'greatest bourgeois' of the series – is arbitrarily made a communist spy with no conceivable motivation,²⁴ Powell's sustained attempt to build up his personality in the tension between the comic stereotypes and unexpected honesty, even dignity, is suddenly deflated. Widmerpool is 'dead' before his death in the outlandish occult circle of Scorp Murtlock. Pamela, his persecutor, fails to rise above the two-dimensionality of a device, although it certainly is an extraordinary one. (James Tucker's suggestion in his monograph that she is a kind of compensation on Powell's part for the series' lack of female characters with weight, and that that makes her 'a woman and a half, who needs a plot and a half' [184] is interesting, but does not explain Pamela's total lack of convincing, rounded personality.) The *Dance* world here almost implodes, deconstructing its own edifice by a fancy, or burlesque, version of it, ruled by a principle of death that has been forcibly introduced rather than intrinsically generated.

In contrast to the polyphonic structure of the earlier volumes, *TK* moves quite schematically along two clear-cut plot lines. They are:

- (1) Russel Gwinnett's attempt to retrieve X. Trapnel's life from oblivion, and his peculiar relationship with Pamela Widmerpool.
- (2) The near-fall of Widmerpool, now kicked up to the House of Lords but maintaining a secret sympathy for the Communist Party.

Now that Trapnel is dead, his biographer has only a very restricted view of his life

²⁴ It would have been more plausible if Widmerpool had chosen to become a founder member of the SDP, surviving into the Nineties to supply soft money to the New Labour apparatus, as Tariq Ali suggests in his review of *A Writer's Notebook*.

and personality. Yet from the first, Trapnel's personality was without firm substance, little more than an assortment of roles ('a writer, a dandy, a lover, a comrade, an eccentric, a sage, a virtuoso, a good chap, a man of honour, a hard case, a spendthrift, an opportunist, a *raisonneur*,' *BDFR* 144). The integration of these roles might have created a vision of omnipotence, a 'complete man', if only Trapnel had been up to it. Pamela now tries to reconstruct him in her own (and only her own) way, claiming to command a full and authentic view of the dead man's life as his supreme lover and sole mental repository of all his major works.

Now, it had become Trapnel's turn to join the dynasty of Pamela's dead lovers. Emotional warmth in her was directed only towards the dead, men who had played some part in her life, but were no more there to do so...It was Death she liked...Would Gwinnett be able to offer her Death? (102)

Thus Jenkins reflects. But Gwinnett is also obsessed with Death: indeed, from the start, his bearing strongly suggests necrophilia, when he talks with an unusual passion about the Dogdene Iphigenia and the dignity of a woman who sacrifices herself. Gwinnett is attempting to retrieve Trapnel's life from death and oblivion, but at the same time he is fascinated by the fact that Trapnel was an artist with a vision of the ridiculous hollowness of life and the certainty, even grace, of death.

At the same time, when we consider this theme of the disintegration of human personality and its fall into impotence and death, we can find a peculiar parallel between the case of the late Trapnel and that of the living Widmerpool. We realize that we know almost nothing about the latter's 'true' personality, in spite of his predominance in the whole sequence. He has always been at pains to fit into the conventional roles required by circumstance. His craving for power is obvious enough, especially after he has realized it himself ('I have come to the conclusion that I enjoy power,' *MP* 205). But the power does not come from his own personality (except on rare occasions, as when he makes a taxi appear out of nowhere, apparently by sheer will-power, to convey the drunken Stringham home in *AW*)²⁵ but from the strength of his belief in the conventions and systems of the places he finds himself in. He is repeatedly referred to as a 'freak', but freakishness is not so much in the substance of his personality as in the lack of it. In the general inclination

²⁵ Such magical power is denied him in this volume. Outside the Stevenses' house, Widmerpool has to wait for the administrative bureaucrat Short to pack him off in a car (ordered by Short) to his flat after the confrontation with Globber.

of *Dance* towards farce and in the collapse of his own conventional 'getting on', Widmerpool in this volume begins to look once more like the malfunctioning automaton he used to be compared to at the beginning of his career. In *QU*, he was an ambitious boy whose ambition was hollow because of its total and automatic reliance on convention; here, he is a 'successful' man and life peer whose public career is a two-dimensional cartoon. He is a living person, but his personality is as good as dead, in parallel with his wife's frigid body. Widmerpool comes to life only in his revealed voyeuristic moments, supplied by the author and Pamela his agent.

What forcefully binds this volume together is the 'temporary king' motif, and its visualisation, *Candaules and Gyges*, a Tiepolo invented by Powell; or more accurately, the formulaically symbolic scene in which the picture is shown to readers. What is most conspicuous about the scene is the consciously orchestrated crossing of people's gazes, concealment and revelation, and sense of power. In the picture, Candaules, the King to be usurped, waits in bed for his naked wife, looking at her with expectant eyes, satisfied with his power both as a king (who obliges one of his subjects to watch himself and his wife making love) and a husband. The Queen looks back over her shoulder, frigid with the sudden awareness that someone is watching her from behind the curtain. Gyges, the usurper-to-be, notices that the Queen is aware of his existence and tries to escape out of the frame, his face hidden. Out of the picture, Louis Glober, the omnipotent Hollywood king who seems to have realized X Trapnel's dream of being a 'complete man', Pamela, and the intellectuals tenaciously look up at the picture (rarely shown to the public), while Gwinnett steals a look at Pamela, whose unsuccessful affair with Ferrand-Sénéchal (fatal for the man) is suggested in a scandal paper. The Queen in the Tiepolo picture is looked at by Candaules, Gyges, and the watchers outside the picture; in the real world Pamela is the object of the gaze of Gwinnett, Widmerpool (who comes into the scene later, looking for her) and the Queen whose gaze over the shoulder sends her a message about the parallel between the situation in the picture and that around herself, Widmerpool and Ferrand-Sénéchal.

It must be noted to Powell's credit that he doesn't make the painting illustrate the relationship point by point, leaving it in the interaction of gazes and interpretations at various levels. In reality, Widmerpool (the 'temporary king') is the one who looks from behind the curtain, not the one who has intercourse with the Queen. But Pamela, loyal to the author's purpose, single-mindedly reads her own situation into the painting; at the same time, she is rightly aware that the picture is concerned not only with sex but also with power symbolized by the intertwining of people's gazes ('I didn't say having an affair. I said watching – looking on, or being

looked at,' 89). Now, she is at once the featured-star-to-be of the planned Trapnel/Glober film (another implausibly fanciful turn of the plot round which the volume must evolve), and the potential centre of attention in the 'real' human relationship in the Tiepolo room. She is very competent in both fields. Her hold on Glober, the producer of the Trapnel film and her present lover, is apparently strong enough; she does not miss the chance to drag Widmerpool's secret voyeurism, and the Ferrand-Sénéchal affair only very vaguely hinted at by the paper, into public view. Her word to her husband ('The subject of this particular picture might catch your attention – for instance remind you of those photographs shut up in the secret drawer of that desk you sometimes forget to lock... I didn't even know you'd taken them,' 110-11) proves that Pamela is well aware that seeing and being seen, concealing and revealing, are forms of human relationship in which power is strongly exercised. And she also knows how to turn people's involved gazes to her advantage.

She can express the farcicality of Widmerpool's voyeuristic practices from the viewpoint of a disinterested onlooker who has complete command of the scene. Her frigidity does the trick: her body is there in the scene, but at the same time her consciousness is excluded from it. However, Pamela's attempt to represent Trapnel's life in her own absolute, one and only version is in itself farcical and burlesque. That is because she is too passionately necrophiliac, too much in love with the past history she concocted. That is the story of the dead, 'poor' X as a man who sacrificed his life for a sublime literary attainment that was not to be, and of herself as Trapnel's one and only ultimate mistress who made the absolute sacrifice of his novel to save his status as a genius. As always, she is pure aggressiveness in her assertion: she grabs Trapnel's biographer 'by the balls' in the Basilica to put him under her command, throws her luxurious handbag (presented to her by Glober) into the canal to represent the intensity of the 'sacrifice', and hammers the unconvinced Gwinnett on the chest. But, in the first place, her vision of the 'sacrifice' of Trapnel's life is something that cannot be verified. It might have been *almost* sublime, as was the scene we have already witnessed in which Trapnel throws his swordstick into the canal near Little Venice; but not quite: Trapnel did not perish on the spot with his genius, but his literary life lingered indefinitely on a diminished scale, culminating (again, almost) on the night when he assumed burlesque kingship in *The Hero* and died depraved. He has even left behind a *Commonplace Book*, nothing much, but from which the outline of the destroyed last novel can be gathered: Pamela's is not the only version of Trapnel's life. Pamela's ignorance of that fact makes her convinced that she has every right to embrace the image of the dead Trapnel within herself. But to Gwinnett, who commands a better view of the situation around the deceased writer, she is not

the heroine of a tragedy who has the right to sacrifice her life, but that of a farce of delusion who has to continue her not very graceful life. The game is virtually over when Gwinnett tells her that hers is not the only version ('I entirely believe you [that she will destroy the *Book* if it isn't worthy of Trapnel], but you don't have the *Commonplace Book*,' 172). Desperate, she performs the 'sacrifice' before Gwinnett, but he coldly points out that she isn't able to make the staging of the past anything but burlesque ('You said just a short while back you didn't think all that of the purse,' 173). Isabelle Joyau rightly argues in her book that, in *Dance*, 'the importance of the contrasts between surface and depth is... explained by the crucial role devoted to the theatrical metaphor' (111), but in Pamela's case, there is only superficial performance of aggression: which makes her at once an insoluble mystery and a shallow device.

Pamela is passionately in love with her dead lovers. As she was in love with dead Templer in *BDFR*, so she is with dead Trapnel here (for no conceivable reason; this void in her motivation being one of the drawbacks of this volume that makes it look unreal). Or more accurately, she is in love with the stories of her own sublime, tragic love concocted by herself for the satisfaction of her own egotism. On the other hand, Gwinnett is consciously necrophiliac and has a latent strong self-promoting will (though, once again, his lack of roundedness of personality makes readers suspect that he might be an invented device). If Pamela is to preserve her self-esteem as a lover, she has to prove that by conquering, with her own frigid body, Gwinnett, who is now attempting to retrace Trapnel's life by actually re-experiencing his dingy mode of existence at down-and-out London hotels and 'Books' Bagshaw's house. This attempt of hers is farcical in itself, because, as always, it is a solipsistic, deluded love affair without love. And here, the farcicality is enhanced as the failed attempt is narrated through the restricted viewpoints of the tellers and re-tellers, leaving intact only the fact that she couldn't 'make it'. Jenkins' narration of the incident ('Mr Bagshaw had risen in the night to relieve himself. He was making his way to a bathroom in, or on the way down to, the basement. This fact at once raises questions as to the recesses of the Bagshaws' house...' 192) attempts precision in an obsessive, detective-story-like way, but at the same time is glaringly absurd and farcical in its effect, like a huge, intricate but useless machine. In the latter half of the volume, where her movements are charted through hearsay that cannot be ultimately verified, Pamela becomes as flatly objectified as her husband (who, as we have seen, is already reduced to the position of a machine that has gone out of order). Her body is driven here and there, divested of feeling, emotion, and motive. Here, at the centre of confusion at the Bagshaws', Pamela stands as an intractable object, rather than as a woman who has just attempted seduction ('What seemed to have caused his father

most surprise was not so much lack of clothing, but extinction of all movement,' 193). Next, at the Stevenses' Mozart party, having already lost Globber's favour and the chance to be featured in his film, her bitchiness gets out of all proportion and reason when she makes a consecutive revelation of Globber's habit of keeping a thread of pubic hair of the women he seduced, and of her husband's getting acquitted by supplying information about his double, the late Ferrand-Sénéchal.²⁶ And at last, she offers her body as the *object* of Gwinnett's necrophilia, apparently taking an overdose before going to his room in the hotel where they are staying. This may be the consummation of her sexual pilgrimage with a frigid body, an appropriate end to her life as a puppet of hollow sexual desire and a device for inflicting a maddening persecution upon Widmerpool, the most tenacious dancer. Indeed, as Jenkins reflects, 'The sole matter for doubt...was whether, at such a cost, all had been achieved. One hoped so' (269). No one knows, including Pamela herself. How can she know if Gwinnett could 'make it' with her dead body?

'You know, you know, you know', Pamela shrieks at Mrs Erdleigh at the Stevenses' Mozart Party, when she knowingly admonishes her ('Knowledge is the treasure of our unsealed fountains...Court at your peril those spirits that dabble lasciviously with primeval matter, horrid substances, sperm of the world, producing monsters and fanatic things, as it is written, so that the toad, this leprous earth, eats up the eagle,' 260-1). Mrs Erdleigh's claim to omniscience is, as always, hard to take at face value: she may know the whole thing, but her cabbalistic, obscure way of speaking leaves room for a suspicion that she is only sensitive to transitions in the dynamics of human relationship, in the present case its inclination towards bizarre developments. However, the point is that Pamela accepts, under the author's tacit agreement, Mrs Erdleigh's omniscience. She feels that the mage can magically chart her freakish dancing in the dark as if in clear daylight; that is what directly causes her to reveal her own and her husband's grotesquely farcical movements in public. Pamela here clearly conceives, before others do, the image of the precipitation of the whole Dance to the Music of Time into a dark farce featuring 'monsters and fanatic things', among which she will have to be counted. The organically patterned, serene Time of Poussin is crumbling into a hysteric battle of freakish wills, as 'things draw to a close' for the participants of this particular Dance.

In this context, and in the development of the whole *Dance*, the Mozart party

²⁶ Indeed, Ferrand-Sénéchal's personality absolutely lacks substance, except that he is a looking-glass image of Widmerpool (or a photograph, if Widmerpool is the negative). Widmerpool wants to look at himself successfully at sexual performance; as if to substantiate the narcissism attributed to him by General Conyers.

has another function. It is a finale of the old and passing show where all the remaining characters gather and take a final bow before retiring to the wings where 'the Dead wait their cue for return to the stage' in another incarnation to keep the show going (Mrs Erdleigh quoting Thomas Vaughan, 246). It is thoroughly overcrowded by the characters from the first and second trilogies: the ramifications of past relationships (dead Sir Magnus – Matilda – Moreland and Carolo – Audrey Maclintick – her dead husband) are consciously over the top, revealing what a farcically intricate world it has been. But most of the participants in the affairs have already died or become mere shadows of themselves, ready to be swept away from the stage. They have completely sunk into oblivion like the former genius Carolo, been relegated to a premature retirement from the scene like the once promising Odo, or developed a fetish for the dead past – like Moreland, for whom the return in conversation of Mopsy Pontner, an extremely minor character from the bohemian London before the war, is a fatal attack of nostalgia. Things are really drawing to a close, with only Widmerpool sustaining his frantic *danse macabre*.

The whole process of *Dance* is driving itself into the realm of the past and oblivion, as symbolized by the last scene in which Jenkins and Widmerpool watch a row of vintage cars pass them by, driven by people in Edwardian clothes (including Odo, Jimmy Stripling from the first trilogy, and Louis Glober whose death has already been announced). The cars are objects of fetishism for time past without actual meaning in the present world. Jenkins' first words to Widmerpool, who has just buried his wife ('I'm glad I'm not driving a long distance on a day like this in a car liable to break down,' 279), are farcically, almost grotesquely irrelevant and flat for the situation. There can be no meaningful comment from one who has detached himself from the Dance of the world; he can only disengage himself from Widmerpool's dance. ('I must be getting on. There's a lot to do. I want to get home before dark'; this is the only occasion Jenkins makes a strong rejection in the whole sequence.) But Widmerpool is not hearing: he has developed a mania for clear-cut 'truth' in the gathering obscurity of the Dance ('I am called upon to serve the purposes of political truth, I shall continue to assail the limitations of contemporary empiricism'). The final volume is going to be devoted to the dissolution of the Dance world of Jenkins and others, and to Widmerpool's deluded dark slapstick comedy in it.

3. *Hearing Secret Harmonies* (1975)

Powell insists that Widmerpool is not the only central character of *Dance*; and yet, it is with his death that it comes to a close. Bithel – the drunken officer of Jenkins' former Battalion, now reduced to a half-mad alcoholic disciple of a religious cult – brings the news of Widmerpool's fatal collapse in the cult's ritual run to Jenkins and Henderson (former member of the cult, now an art dealer) sitting in Henderson's gallery where Mr Deacon's resurrection exhibition is being held. Then, the scene suddenly reverts to Jenkins' bonfire which he lights with a sheet of newspaper reporting the exhibition. Smoke rises, metaphorically connecting this last scene to the comic-looking workers' bonfire in the very opening of the twelve volumes. No major character other than Widmerpool (for instance Stringham, even if he had clung to life) would have been quite able to carry the weight of this forceful scene-change. When readers are informed that Widmerpool is dead, they are somehow convinced that *Dance* cannot go on any further. However, Widmerpool has really been a comic 'hero', a character who lives on his aberrations. He might be insufficiently 'representative' to carry the thematic weight put on his shoulders, unless what he is representative of is made clear – and the question remains generally unanswered. If he is the 'symbol' of people's struggle for survival, then surely his extremely, consciously 'flat' characterisation will be an undermining factor. Harshly put, Widmerpool's weight as the 'ending' character derives from the violence and formality of his death. That he dies, as first seen, when running for an unattainable goal is neat, but not particularly illuminating. Powell explains, in an interview with Edward Whitley, that some people prefer to have the power to boss around in a minor way and that 'it is really in the hope of getting more worldly power that he joins this commune' (44). But since the Widmerpool-Murtlock power struggle is played off-stage, it cannot really carry much weight in the 'ending' narrative of this volume. Worse, Powell's final usage of Widmerpool as a gaudy *Dance*-stopping device may, as Kerry McSweeney argues in his 1977 essay, 'violate the aesthetic frame of reference within which Powell has chosen to create, with consequent damage to the unity and symmetry of his work' (55).

The fact is that the *Dance of the world* Powell describes doesn't necessarily come to a full circle after three thousand pages. What began as a fresco-like, very large and varied panorama of social comedy ends, almost collapses, in grotesquery, in the final trilogy – the disintegration of the fearfully incomplete and hollow person of X Trapnel; the death of Pamela, the almost implausibly vicious, malfunctioning sex-machine, caused by her love for Russel Gwinnett, whose sole significance in the

sequence is death; and Widmerpool's death under the power of Scorp Murtlock, the leader of the outlandish cult whose apparently quite complex personality can barely be described to the full in the space of a single volume. Comparing this list of grotesque farces with the firmly based and smoothly though sometimes capriciously conducted comedies in the first trilogy (for instance, the arrest of Le Bas at the school, the drawing-room politics at the Foxes', the bedroom knockabout at the Templers', the irregular sexual battle at La Grenadière, and the parting of the ways at the university, in *QU*), readers cannot but wonder at the distance they have travelled and the greatness of the transformation of *Dance*. The realistic comedy of manners has changed into a wilfully stylised fable demonstrating the lugubrious hollowness of life. This can partly be underwritten by the increase of the only too obviously 'symbolic' scenes (Trapnel throwing his death's-head swordstick into the canal in *BDFR*; Mrs Erdleigh's schematisation of life at the Mozart evening in *TK*; and Jenkins' 'funeral pyre' in this volume). It is as if Powell had needed graphically obvious metaphors to support his idea of 'things drawing to a close'.

This is mainly, I think, because Powell's original intention was to write about the eternal patterns woven by life, which has no inherent ending; as clearly shown in young Jenkins' reflection about Mr Deacon ('[he was] a visible proof that life had existed in much the same way before I had begun to any serious extent to take part; and would, without doubt, continue to prevail long after he and I had ceased to participate,' *BM* 14). Even in this volume, a reverberation of that theme still rings, as if to prove the persistence of Powell's original intention ('while a dismantling process steadily curtails members of the cast, items of the scenery...simultaneous derequisitionings are also to be observed...The touching up of time-expired sets, reshaping of derelict props, updating of old refrains, are none of them uncommon,' 36). Indeed, as Mrs Erdleigh, Dr Trelawney and his 'reincarnation' Scorp Murtlock say, there is no such thing as death, only transition in the 'vortex of becoming'. In theory, neither Powell nor Jenkins can put an end to the Dance of the world: they can cease to take part in it (as I argued Jenkins prematurely did in *TK*) or just stop writing about it, but the Dance goes on.

Comedy is the best form to express that sense of continuation, because it emphasises the circular movement of life without definite beginning or ending; there is no such thing as 'coming to a full circle' there, because it's impossible to define exactly where the circle began. But the tradition of comedy in novelistic forms – those by Fielding, Austen, Thackeray or Meredith (I have some reservation about Dickens) – inevitably introduced artificial beginnings and endings because the form they adopted called for a sense of climax (it would have been somehow irrelevant

and even embarrassing if they had described the lives of Sophia and Tom, Elizabeth and Darcy or Laetitia and Sir Willoughby after their marriages). Powell, too, must have felt the dilemma of writing an unending comedy and introducing a sense of ending, a full circle being attained. *Dance* as a piece of work, a mimesis of the real Dance of the world, cannot just peter away— without going beyond the limits of the traditional novel into the realm of Samuel Beckett. That was not what Powell intended: he took pleasure in finding repeated ‘patterns’ in life; but each pattern is at once a part of the unending flow of life and an independent entity with a sense of beginning and ending. However, Powell knew that Jenkins was too shadowy a character to introduce that sense into the whole *Dance*: Jenkins’s life can indeed peter away, as those of most people in the world do. Powell needed a more obvious conclusion, and he found it in the character of Widmerpool as a monster, in whose hollow but strongly armoured personality any deed of grotesquely outlandish significance can be contained. Indeed, that was very probably why Jenkins/ Powell chose to see him as a ‘recurring milestone on the road’ which ‘helped to prove something rather consolingly, that life continued its mysterious, patterned way’ (*LM* 44). For Powell and Jenkins, Widmerpool is a character capable of forcefully ending *Dance* with his own grotesque death. The very grotesqueness can introduce, however temporarily, a sense of the final closing of things described in this preposterously large comic fresco, whose general principle remains mysterious despite all the efforts of Jenkins and others to see patterns in it. In this sense, in terms of plotting, Murtlock’s cult should be regarded as a prop for Widmerpool’s final solo performance, with Murtlock as a competent stage director but little more; as Neil McEwan appositely points out in his book (120-121), he is quite outside the comedy where Mrs Erdliegh and Dr Trelawney had their being.

Jenkins’s first connection with Murtlock – that his niece Fiona Cutts is a member of his cult, and the group’s charabanc comes to spend a night at his house in the countryside – is rather fragile. But the ponderous style of the opening scene (in which, at first, readers can’t see who is doing what; even when they see that some people are crayfishing, they can’t, for some time, understand who exactly the crayfishers are and why they are pursuing such a pastime) serves Powell’s purpose well. As Jenkins admits, ‘This visit, well defined in the mind at the time, did not make any lasting impression, Fiona and her companions manifesting themselves as no more than transient representatives of a form of life bound, sooner or later, to move into closer view’ (29). Jenkins is trying to draw a metaphoric description of Murtlock as the stage director/ director of the ceremony of Widmerpool’s fall from a casual event in his daily life. Murtlock’s character can only be inferred tangentially

from his conduct on the crayfishing afternoon, which is, so to speak, blurred in the accumulation of apparently insignificant daily events. Murtlock is living in the present time, but here his behaviour can only be assessed in the incessant flow of time which pushes everything in our daily lives towards the past and oblivion. Thus filtered, Murtlock's character is more effectively and – paradoxical as this may seem – more realistically presented to readers than if, say, he had been introduced to us as an already notorious 'counter culture' guru we see every day in the newspapers and TVs met by Jenkins with an ardent curiosity. Powell is always good at describing powerfully sinister characters, because he doesn't forcefully convince readers of their sinisterness. Rather, their competently practical sides – for instance, Mrs Erdleigh 'neatly detaching that half of the sheet' (on which the planchette has written a 'monosyllabic and indecent' word), 'tear[ing] it into small pieces' and 'throw[ing] them into the waste-paper basket' (*AW* 98) – are emphasized, making readers feel that they must be also competently authoritative in the sinister circumstances they mainly belong to. That also happens here: instead of Murtlock's 'rather run-of-the-mill outlandishness' (4), his competence, authoritativeness and wilfulness as the leader of the crayfishers are emphasized, preparing readers for accepting, when the time comes, that he is at least a very efficient director of the show in which Widmerpool makes a grotesquely desperate effort to stay abreast of Time and to unify past, present and future under a vision of his own.

The introduction of the Time image of Ariosto at the opening of Chapter Three is, to say the least, forcefully schematic. One of the greatest complaints about the latter half of *Dance* would relate to the rash use of 'explanatory' or 'thematic' scenes and ideas – for instance, the juxtaposition of the costume of a clown and a military one in *SA*; 'God Save the King' in *MP*; Tiepolo's Candaules and Gyges in *TK*. In them, there is no room for cultivation as was there in the Poussin image at the opening of the sequence. They may create an impression that, as 'things drew to a close' with little hope of *Dance* ending tidily (which, as I have said, it didn't really have to), Powell got more and more intent on subjecting the whole thing to a clear-cut explanation. Even dedicated Powell readers might cry out, 'Don't speak so crudely; we fully appreciate what you want to say.' But, nevertheless, Ariosto's Time image, in which the harmonized Time of Poussin is abandoned and instead a frantic interchange of Past and Present is adopted, is valid in the context; though Widmerpool lacks an Astolpho to retrieve him from oblivion. In Poussin's *Dance* image of Time, the Seasons are 'stepping slowly, methodically...in evolutions that take recognizable shape: or breaking into *seemingly* meaningless gyrations, while partners disappear *only to reappear again, once more giving pattern to the spectacle*'

(*QU 2*; my italics): there is a strong sense of secret continuation, a harmony hidden behind the scene. On the other hand, in the carnival of Time we see in the three festive occasions in Chapters Three to Five, there is no sense of continuation, but only of separation: the burial of the past in oblivion, and the wilful alteration of the past from the viewpoint of the separated present, in particular, Widmerpool's desire to separate himself from his own history of sordid toil and scheming, to repaint the past in his own image, and to fabricate its connection to the present time which he desperately clings to.

That Jenkins watches Widmerpool for the first time in some years on some TV news footage in which he is spattered with red paint by the Quiggin twins seems, on the one hand, a novelistic laziness. However, on the other hand, the very fragmentariness of (and the according flattening of significance in) the TV footage fits well into the frantic and baseless kaleidoscope of the past and the present Widmerpool has thrown himself into. The conduct of the Quiggin twins – throwing red paint over the chancellor of their university – is just stupid; at best, it is nothing more than a not-too-ineffectively operated practical joke, just as Barbara Goring's pouring sugar on Widmerpool was. If the twins intended it as a political demonstration, it is too fragmentary, too lacking in message. But Widmerpool forcibly reads the 'actuality' of the present world into their horseplay and his misadventure. He declares to the guests of the Magnus Donners Memorial Award:

It was the right thing to do. It was the only thing to do....*Even now* there are marks of red paint on my body, that may remain *until my dying day*, as memorial to a weak spirit. (111, my italics)

In the general collapse of things into the past and the severance of the past from the moving present, he clings to the present by re-viewing his past in a meaning backwardly projected from the present. He fabricates a portrait of his past self as an innocent victim of bourgeois society (as he admits to his 'hard work, work scrupulously done' under Sir Magnus), a tragically deceived patsy; while he has never been anything else than a consciously determined, aspiring bourgeois, whose occasional misadventures were nothing other than comic. Thus his past, which occupies so much of *Dance*, is resurrected from oblivion with meanings wholly unconnected with the real past. The resurrection of the Trapnel-Pamela-Widmerpool-Gwinett relationship is extremely embarrassing to those who are going to give the Donners Award to Gwinett. But, for Widmerpool, the dark sex farce is merely an example of 'the wrongness of the way we live' that has to

be blasted by the young generation. While other attendants at the ceremony, with the possible exception of Gwinnett, still behave according to the principles of social comedy (for instance, see *Members* – how comically unchangeable he is! – gloating over Quiggin's embarrassment to find his twin daughters at the venue), Widmerpool is rapt with joy at the 'transcendent beauty' (116)²⁷ of the twins' very unoriginal practical joke with the stink bomb.

It is noteworthy that Widmerpool approaches Murtlock's cult as another, and a more powerful, 'representative of Youth', rather than because he is attracted by their beliefs. (Incidentally, the beliefs are in themselves basic, almost naïve: Dr Trelawney's 'simple life', or 'Harmony' in the circular recurrence of the world, plus the spice of sex ritual, would be the concise description of the 'religion' created by the self-styled reincarnation of the Doctor – another baseless resurrection of the past from oblivion with a new meaning). Widmerpool, who has spent his life in successive attempts at utilitarian planning towards future gain in bourgeois society, now wants his name preserved against the eroding power of Time as the champion of eternal youth in the actuality of the eternal present. But in his attempt to realize that new ideal of becoming a 'holy man', he is as utilitarian as he was in the past: he picks on a would-be guru he assesses as promising, and tries to put him under his power. 'I think I can assert, by this time, that I am something of an expert on the ways of young people as tricky to handle as Master Murtlock' (138), Widmerpool boasts. He conforms to the cult's doctrines because he is sure he will easily be able to take it over after becoming an expert member of the circle, just as he did, or nearly did, in *Donners-Brebner*, in the *Acceptance World*, or in the *Army*. And here, too, he is almost successful; he soon rises to be Murtlock's second-in-command, a competent administrator of the group (as Henderson later reminisces: 'I was afraid Ken would take over. He picked up the doctrinal part so quickly,' 260). The comic bourgeois utilitarianism supposedly left behind in the past, lurks in this would-be saint. In the general inversion of the system of the comedy of recurrence symbolized by Poussin's picture, Widmerpool is revenged by the sudden, baseless and violent revival from oblivion of his severed past as a bourgeois comedian.

What happens on the night of the naked dance at the Devil's Finger, when Murtlock's supremacy over Widmerpool is established, is an obviously perverse parody of what we have seen in the *Dance* world up till then. 'Scorp said that – among the ones taking part in the rite – they should have been all with all, each with each, within the sacred circle' (167) is the report made the next morning by Gwinnett,

²⁷ Though it is Jenkins' epitomized expression, Widmerpool's own gibbering words underwrite it.

who was invited by Murtlock as an observer and a resource of 'better vibrations' on the basis that he once experienced sex with the dead. 'Everybody having sex with one another' would be a not too bad way of summing up the plot of the whole *Dance*, though certainly crude. In the comic *Dance of the world to the music of the grey-bearded man in Poussin's picture*, the changing partners for dancers 'unable to control the melody, unable, perhaps, to control the steps of the dance' was done by easy stages, 'slowly, methodically, sometimes a trifle awkwardly', but always according to the inevitable melody of passing Time. Here, by the Devil's Finger, everything is inverted. The sexual dance is performed to cause the resurrection of the dead Dr Trelawney, within a limited time. The recurrence of the past is wilfully forced, or arbitrarily fabricated, rather than naturally taking place: it is not part of a continuous flow, but something that fortuitously pops up from the chaos of the world. The chaos of the power-struggle between people's will-power, hitherto suppressed by the patterned dance, finally gushes to the surface with full force in this metaphoric parody dance. Widmerpool is stabbed in the struggle; which is apparently planned beforehand (its sexual implication is only too obvious), but the ceremonious simulated battle gets out of control in the struggle of will-power between Widmerpool and Murtlock. Thus, the stage is ready for the final fall of Widmerpool, which will lead *Dance* to its ending or collapse.

The marriage reception at Stourwater looks, on the surface, like a repetition of the Stevenses' Mozart party in *TK*, in which all the remaining social dancers from the past (Moreland, Stevens, Rosie, Matilda, Mrs Erdleigh and even Carolo – none of whom appears again) take a final bow. But at this new social occasion, those who take the centre of the floor are the ones whose past is either fabricated by madness, nullified in the eternal present and solipsism of delirious senility, or severed from the *Dance* world from the start. Flavia Wisebite's necrophiliac canonization of a fabricated past happiness (her sublime love for Stringham as a brother and Umfraville as a lover) makes a good coupling with Widmerpool (her son-in-law)'s near deconstruction of the death of Sir Magnus, former owner of the castle and his past employer. After rashly accepting that Sir Magnus is dead, Widmerpool says he will do penance for forgetting the cult's doctrine that there is no such thing as death, that only eternal transmutation in Harmony exists. Then, as if to deride his awkward attempt at Harmony, a song from the past randomly comes from the mouth of Bithel, who is the greatest cause of Widmerpool's persecution by Murtlock because it was Widmerpool's former self that kicked the weeping Bithel from the army, a gross violation of Harmony. Bithel's mind, never very clear, is now suffocated by alcoholism. He is in no state to be responsible for the authenticity of his past; he is a

man who has suddenly, quite fortuitously and without much purpose popped up from oblivion with a new, arbitrary meaning which Widmerpool has no means to refute. Finally, when Widmerpool becomes aware of the presence of Sir Bertram Akworth – the Akworth whose name appeared (without substance) in the opening of *QU* as a boy whom Widmerpool kicked out of the school by reporting his sending a note to Peter Templer – Widmerpool jumps at this opportunity to amend his past by publicly doing penance before him. But in vain: Sir Bertram, once expelled from *Dance* world, has completely nullified the existence of this youthful lapse ‘by a career of almost sanctified respectability (189), making it impossible for Widmerpool to alter its meaning now without resurrecting this past event in public. He might even have done that, clinging to his melodramatic gesture of atonement; but this wilful resurrection of the past is hindered by the present of this carnivalesque mingling of the guests of the social occasion and members of the cult. Bithel has become helplessly drunk, and Murtlock has come to the scene to accuse Widmerpool of negligence in supervising Bithel, the man who, in his eternal present of senile unconsciousness, embodies Harmony. In the anti-Poussinian, grotesquely chaotic discontinuity between past and present which he himself chooses to live in, Widmerpool is thus completely stuck; he is now about to collapse in his final frantic run in this chaos, ready to collapse the geometrical *Dance* world of the former volumes along with his life.

Widmerpool’s case is not exclusive. As if to keep pace with him, Jenkins, historian and narrator of the *Dance* world, has to face his past – what he has written as the text of *Dance* – being severed from the present, some of it resurrected with a completely arbitrary new meaning (which has nothing to do with him) and most thrown into the fire of cremation and the ash into the Valley of Lost Things. The ‘funeral pyre’ Jenkins sets fire to in the last chapter may strike readers as a little too schematic; but I think Powell should be allowed to be schematic here, because he, who chose to stay a child of the tradition of novelistic form (however illegitimate), must have felt that it was his duty to put the final collapse of the sequence he has written, the stoppage of the Dance of the world, into some recognizable form from the viewpoint of the narrator.

The newspaper with which Jenkins lights the cremation of his own past reports Mr Deacon’s resurrection. But Edgar Deacon, that stupid, egotistic, touchy, irrelevant, yet somehow awkwardly noble and peculiarly lovable painter, has now become an advocate of ‘a fearless sexual candour that must have shocked the susceptibilities of his own generation [which was far from the case, as we saw in *BM*], sadomasochist broodings in paint that grope towards the psychedelic’ (245). Even his name is now changed to Bosworth Deacon; and when Jenkins offers to correct it, Henderson, now

severed from his past and transformed into an efficient gallery owner, flatly refuses. 'Are you sure you aren't confusing your other Deacon man?' (249); which, in a sense, is the case. Mr Deacon has gone beyond the borders of the *Dance* world; as has Jenkins' past love Jean Duport, met at the gallery, who has now been completely transformed into 'a foreign lady of distinction'. Jenkins' past, the text of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, is now brought to the funeral pyre wholesale, as Widmerpool's death is reported – by Bithel, who refuses to admit that he and Jenkins share the past of having Widmerpool as a superior in the army. Bithel has brought a drawing by Modigliani, rescued from another funeral pyre, in which the dead Widmerpool's belongings were ritually burnt. The drawing once belonged to Stringham; then to Pamela; and, after her death, to Widmerpool. But now that Henderson has got hold of it, it is no doubt going to be bleached of its past and be sold to somebody else in the eternal market that is the world. Its 'marvellous economy of line' (270) is in sharp contrast with the enormous, eternally winding texture of the Dance of the world, now forcibly brought to an end in the novelistic enclosure of *Dance*.

HSH cannot, regrettably, be counted among the best volumes of the sequence. But that cannot be helped, as Powell's attempt to paint an unending literary fresco was destined to end in a failure, if it had to be forced to end at all. The smoke of the 'funeral pyre' seems to bring the narrative full circle to the opening and the image of Poussin; however, what puts a temporary end to the text is not Poussin's classical image, but Robert Burton's chaotic, 'torrential passages' that suspend 'even the formal measure of the Seasons...in wintry silence' (271-2). *Dance* ends not in a climax but in a debacle; a proof, in itself, that it is a freak, happily or otherwise, in the tradition it belongs to.

Chapter Six

Aspects of *A Dance to the Music of Time*1. *Dance* as a novel of society

In *Messengers of Day*, the second volume of his memoirs, Powell records an occasion when he danced with the actress Tallulah Bankhead. The account concludes as follows:

She moved with incredible lightness, holding her was like holding nothing at all, a contact with thistledown, which at the same time controlled my own steps, as she glided across the floor. The story, I'm afraid, ends there...the impression remained of much fun and charm, as well as a very decided toughness. The period flavour of the incident must excuse its triviality. (96)

The last sentence, I think, neatly explains the reason why Powell's memoirs are regrettably unsatisfactory. Their weakness lies in the fact that, though they are full of materials that might have inspired characters or scenes in *Dance*, such materials mostly remain unprocessed jottings down of events from the past, vignettes whose 'period flavour must excuse the triviality'. (Even the last volume of the memoirs, dealing with things more or less contemporary to the period when Powell wrote it, is pervaded with an oddly remote, 'period' atmosphere.) That becomes evident when we compare the passage above with the scene in *QU*, in which Jenkins is employed by Lady McReith as a dance 'dummy':

I had become aware, with colossal impact, that Lady McReith's footing in life was established in a world of physical action of which at present I knew little or nothing...[T]he sensation that we were holding each other close, and yet, in spite of such proximity, she remained at the same time aloof and separate, and above all, the feeling that something further, some additional and violent assertion of the will, was – almost literally – intoxicating. (92)

The settings, protagonists and Jenkins's and Powell's feelings are so similar that it wouldn't have been surprising if Powell had got a hint for the McReith scene from

the Bankhead experience (though, in reality, it was Powell who asked Bankhead to dance). Tallulah Bankhead and Lady McReith are both women who live in the world of histrionics: Bankhead was a professional actress whose dashing screen and stage persona symbolized the Twenties, while Lady McReith is an exhibitionist in real life, almost a buffoon ('demonstrative kissing took place between them [her and Templer's elder sister] at the slightest provocation,' 82), whose fits of hysterical laughter conceal her promiscuity (she is sleeping with young Templer behind the scenes). And both passages mention the sensation of holding something light or remote, and at the same time tough or wilful. However, the writers' attitudes to the respective events differ radically: while the experience offers Jenkins a lot of food for thought about the region of action and will lurking behind the façade of polite society, dancing with Tallulah Bankhead 'at the height of her fame as embodiment of the Twenties' is dismissed by Powell in his seventies as a mere 'period piece'. The significance of the incident is fixed in nostalgia; it is a vignette with no possibility of either physical or reflective development: something that seems to suggest that Powell gave up, at least in the memoirs, his life-long struggle to capture the dynamics of society, the movement that is caused by the tension between people's social personae and the individual's quest for power.

Nostalgia over a lost beautiful society is one of the things that *Dance* (or indeed any of Powell's novels) has nothing to do with, though such a label is often attached to the series. Even in the fourth trilogy, where the long way *Dance* has come might be expected to allow some indulgence, those who incline to nostalgia are given sharp punishments. In *TK*, nostalgia over an obscure, seedily promiscuous woman of the past becomes Moreland's death; the vintage-car bores at the end of the volume are grotesque enough to be a parade of the dead. And in *HSH*, when Norman Chandler is shown the Seven Deadly Sins photos and tritely says, 'I think they're wonderful...What fun it all was in those days' (readers cannot tell how serious Chandler is being, himself in Claudette Colbert fringe and Boutique of the Impertinent Bachelor suit), Matilda Donners, producer of the photos, retorts in a bitterly serious way:

Oh, it wasn't. Do you truly think that, Norman? I always felt it was dreadfully grim. I don't believe that was only because the war was going to happen. (64)

Dance's British society does not allow nostalgia. The *zeitgeist* does not provide

readers with a fixed filter to colour the scenes they witness; rather, the shifting social *zeitgeist* is the field of the dynamics of human relationships. It formulates people's conduct, and at the same time it is formulated by people's efforts to relate to the society of their time in their chosen ways. The society of the past is not seen in terms of a fixed standard of values, but as an arena of the interaction between the movements of time and people's efforts to interpret and take refuge in, or make maximum use of, them.

The function of Dogdene in *LM* is an apt example here. In Britain nowadays, scarcely anybody would want to be admitted into a country house as a legitimately invited guest, in order to use it as a place for sexual performance (something that is completely different from booking a 'romantic' week-end at a country house hotel). Widmerpool's scheming to be admitted to such an environment is going to be inconceivable later in his own life, when he becomes a left-wing peer, the chancellor of a redbrick university, and a would-be guru to a cult of youth. Dogdene does not represent, like Brideshead Castle, a seductive and sadly never-recoverable past. On the one hand, it symbolises the way the stolid, lethargic aristocracy represented by Lord Sleaford half-heartedly cling to the rapidly evaporating legacy from the affluence of the Edwardian era; but on the other hand, it also symbolises the way Widmerpool, a social climber and clumsy but opportunistic follower of trends, interprets the social movements of the time just after Hitler's rise to power. As a successful stockbroker in the mid-thirties, he believes in the economic and social 'planning' of the National Socialists (he never explains why he dropped his pro-Hitler sympathies at the declaration of the war), approves of the Moscow treason trials, but at the same time estimates that it will gain him a long-term profit to become a member of the social stratum Mrs Haycock marginally belongs to – an attitude that culminates in his posing as a 'Beau Brummell of the new reign [of Edward VIII]' (*CCR* 195). While Lord Sleaford – the unimaginative second son who stumbled upon the title at his brother's death – grudgingly takes up, purely for the sake of formal survival, the persona of a traditionally established aristocrat, Widmerpool eagerly adopts the persona of a promising young member and future re-invigorator of the system.

The Dogdene incident is a 'period piece' in that the particular setting is unthinkable in the present world; but the structure of the interaction between people's social personae and the trends of the time has been repeated endlessly since time began. The incident is, so to speak, an example of imprint of the eternal, universal structure upon a particular period and particular social milieu. Widmerpool's life is a huge accumulation of such imprints of the same structure. At school, he

unsuccessfully identifies with the persona of a House sportsman. In the early stages of his business career, there is Le Bas's Old Boys dinner, where 'drunk with his own self-importance' (*AW* 192) as a major member of the congregation, he delivers his interminable speech about the principles of economy. In the army, he becomes the embodiment of the secretive, esoteric paper-work of the section he belongs to; and after the war, he opportunistically identifies with the Left and Murtlock's cult. Widmerpool always tries to belong to a social group he deems to be in power or likely soon to be so, and to adopt the appropriate persona. Widmerpool functions as an archetype – the main point of reference in, and the purest essence of, the Powellian world. It is a world of endless power games and the formation and destruction of social personae, essentially farcical in its unprincipled movements.

People interpret the circumstances they find themselves in according to their outlook on the world and their aims or preoccupations in life (e. g. getting on in society, gaining money, revelling in sensual pleasure). But while one person interprets life in one way and tries to gain as much profit as possible from the interpretation, others are also struggling for future gain according to their own interpretations. There is no such person in the world as the one and absolutely authoritative choreographer; rather, every person is the choreographer of his or her life, and at the same time wants to choreograph not only that individual life but human relationships at large, in situations minimal (lovers' relationships or the sex war) to maximal (world war). However, even in the maximal battle that is world war, the characters Powell chooses to take up as his main subject matter (in contrast with such mystical characters of huge power as 'Montgomery' or 'Alanbrooke', briefly glimpsed) stick to gains in the immediate neighbourhood of themselves; they can have no comprehensive view of the war as a whole, but have to look up to the huge military machine from the viewpoint of small cogs, and try to increase their gain by choreographing their small battles according to their partial views of the machine. The same can be said of the world or society as a whole: no person can have a legitimate view of the whole world or society, so that the world or society inevitably becomes a site for the battle between the various small choreographies of life. The multi-layered process of the accumulation and cancellation of such social choreographies, forever amorphously moving, is Powell's time; society is the arena for time's effects on people.

People feel the passage of time most acutely when their own, once seemingly valid, social choreography is found meaningless, engulfed in the changing scenes of the discordant Dance of the world. This concept of time as something treacherous, something that betrays people, is epitomized in Jenkins's response to the collapse of

his view of his own past affair with Jean. The affair was given a sad but romantic place in his mind according to his interpretation of their steps – that it just tapered off through his inaction; but the fact is that Jean, an avid and extremely realistic amatory combatant, had scheduled and managed her multiple love affairs (including that with Jenkins) so that she might get the largest profit from them. Jenkins reflects:

For the moment, angry, yet at the same time half inclined to laugh, I could not make up my mind what I thought. This was yet another of the tricks Time can play within its folds, tricks that emphasise the insecurity of those who trust themselves over much to that treacherous concept. (KO, 181)

The movement of society, as unreliable as ever, incessantly corrodes people's efforts to make their lives meaningful, and pushes everything into an obscure past. 'The processes of life and death... are always on the move' (BM 224), in accordance with which people live and die and generations change. But people never give up their essentially futile struggle to impose choreographies of their own on society, and to project themselves toward the future according their plans. What counts in *Dance* is people's social reactions to the corroding power of time, and the sometimes comic, sometimes grotesque, and very rarely (and quite irrelevantly) dignified deportment they show in their eternal losing battle to impose an authentic choreography, or sense of purpose, on the huge, irresponsible movement of society. It is noteworthy that Powell's social comedy has very little element of the aristocracy elegantly frowning at the vulgarity of upstarts (which is roughly what Charles Ryder, spuriously identifying with the non-existent, beautiful, aristocratic tradition, does in *Brideshead Revisited*). The doomed efforts of Widmerpool, for instance, to break into some supposedly privileged social circle has the oblique effect of demonstrating the hollow pretensions of that very circle. This mutuality of insignificance is one of the essential sources of Powellian comedy.

The major objection to such a representation of society would be something like: 'Well, are we all destined to nothing but automatic pratfalls? Have you spent 3,000 pages to prove that we end where we start?' Powell seems to evade this question, but the fact remains that he cannot take any true achievement in account, in the format of his social comedy. Isn't this a serious drawback to *Dance*'s promise to become something more rounded than the farcical denunciation of society in the pre-war novels? Powell isn't able to explain (not merely adumbrate in a passing glance, as in *MP*) the emergence of a Churchill, an Alanbrooke, or a Montgomery.

Dance isn't able to account for the artistic achievement of a Benjamin Britten, or a George Orwell (the theory, sometimes put forward by addicts of *roman à clef* games, that Erridge is Orwell cannot escape the accusation of flippancy).

One oblique defence might be put this way. It is true that *Dance* is a novel of empty 'circular progression', as indicated in the title of Walter T. Rix's essay: at the opening, Widmerpool appears from the mist, running for the unattainable goal of getting into the House team; at the ending, he runs off the stage in his deluded effort to 'lead' the members of the cult. Widmerpool ends where he starts. He, who has the largest share of the pages of *Dance*, 'never learns from experience'. However, the cumulative effect of his repeated, similarly structured social efforts and failures does harden him in his quest for power and for social personae suitable for wielding it. The ineffective boy subserviently smiling when hit by a ripe banana thrown by the House cricket captain grows into a full army colonel who declares, 'I have come to the conclusion that I enjoy power. That is something the war has taught me' (*MP* 205), and considers governorship his most suitable social persona. His personality is consistently hollow: as Neil McEwan says in his book, '[w]hat Widmerpool is "like" remains mysterious' (64), while his life keeps on being defined by the social personae he chooses in an opportunistic, unprincipled way. However, the momentum of his unprincipled movements does pile up. And, as the momentum gathers, the counter-point effect of the comparison with other people of will deepens, and makes readers realize the vast range of ramifications of the Powellian idea that no one can wield power in this world, for good or evil, without recourse to a social persona.

For example, let us consider General Conyers, one of the most sympathetically depicted and most rounded persons of will and action in *Dance*. He is assured and dexterous; he understands humour; in every respect the opposite of Widmerpool. But when we compare his conduct with that of Widmerpool, we find a common consciousness of the use of the right kind of social persona for the smooth and profitable functioning of social conventions. He is a soldier turned courtier, who has a long experience in observing and maintaining the heavily burdened social conventions of the places he belongs to – places where conventions, costumes and personae predominate. Indeed, his general appearance is that of 'an infinitely accomplished actor got up to play the part that was, in fact, his own' (*LM* 71). But at the same time, he has an efficient veteran's awareness that all kinds of social conventions are artificially constructed and have inherent limitations, and so need to be consciously and alertly defended against the outbursts of the human ego, rather than naively relied upon. This is where the General differs radically from Widmerpool. Widmerpool completely loses his personality in social personae chosen

for the sake of his own advancement, and shows no concern for the fact that other people are also wearing social personae for the sake of smooth survival in society. The general's treatment of his own – and other people's – social personae is lucidly pragmatic, and at the same time more considerate and humane. In this respect, Conyers is the archetypal professional soldier – despite his extraordinary interest in psychoanalysis, Virginia Woolf and other things. Professional soldiers are essentially conservative and disillusioned, however up-to-date they are in their skills; for, if the world is really progressing towards mutual understanding and peace, there is no need for the army. They accept the futility of the repetitious battles in the world, and give priority to efficiency of action (and to gaiety in perseverance, Lyautey and Umfraville would have said). When the Jenkins's housemaid Billson, driven by the Fury of her thwarted love, discards the persona and costume of a servant and appears nude in the drawing-room, he shows the reflex and disciplined will of a long-experienced supporter of social conventions:

General Conyers took in the situation at a glance...He rose...quite slowly from his chair, made two steps across the room, picked up the Kashmir shawl from where it lay across the surface of the piano. Then, suddenly changing his tempo and turning quickly towards Billson, he wrapped the shawl protectively round her.

‘Where's her room?’ he quietly asked.

No one afterwards was ever very well able to describe how he transported her along the passage, partly leading, partly carrying, the shawl always decently draped round Billson like a robe. The point, I repeat, was that action had been taken, will-power brought into play. The spell cast by Billson's nakedness was broken. (61)

Jenkins, absent when the incident happened, gives the elegance of a professional ballet dancer to Conyers's movements in his narrative representation (‘He rose... *quite slowly* from his chair, *made two steps* across the room, picked up the Kashmir shawl...Then, *suddenly changing his tempo and turning quickly* towards Billson, he wrapped the shawl protectively round her’). They are choreographed economically. But the purpose of his movements is nothing more than to conceal and remove ‘the spell cast by Billson's nakedness’ and to restore the drawing room to the daily round of personae, costumes and conventions – and to save the deranged Billson from further embarrassment. Conyers, as an efficient soldier, is well versed in the technique of dealing with the anomalies of human behaviour, when people throw

away their polite social personae and appear with naked egos that are at once aggressive and vulnerable. He perceives that Billson is in such a state, and performs exactly what is required in the situation: he wraps her up with the makeshift costume, quickly removes her from the scene, and saves both the Jenkinsons and Billson from disaster. Jenkins wonders ‘how much the General’s so successful dislodgement of Billson was due to an accustomed habit of command over “personnel”, how much to a natural aptitude for handling “women”’ (62); but Conyers puts command over personnel and handling of women under the same heading of action dually disciplined by will power and social artifices. When he hears about the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, he rightly estimates that the world is in a disaster far beyond the reach of drawing-room conventions, and returns to the persona of a personnel commander who believes in military ‘mobility’; driving quickly away from the scene in his car, probably already in preparation for the coming world war and the action required there.

Conyers’s use of social personae is enlightened, quietly efficient and has no trace of exhibitionism, in contrast with Widmerpool wielding his military persona at the onset of the next world war. However, by that time, Widmerpool has also learned about the power that is gained by putting on social personae that are appropriate in the movements of the world. Certainly, as Marcia Muelder Eaton argues in her essay ‘Anthony Powell and the Aesthetic Life’, ‘[n]ot comprehending subtle, intricate moves of the dance he chooses to perform in, he intentionally wills himself into stereotypical parts’ (138); his uniform looking like that of a music-hall army officer. But at the same time, his rough-and-ready, opportunistically taken up military persona has gained enough power in the circumstances of the period to upstage the pallid burlesquers of the Seven Deadly Sins (who are posing before Sir Magnus Donners’s camera at his castle as an escape from the oppression of the European situation), and to flourish throughout the wartime.

‘Well, Nicholas,’ he said, ‘I did not know you were a Stourwater visitor. Can you explain to me why everyone is clad – or unclad – in this extraordinary manner?’...

‘I have been staying at my mother’s cottage,’ said Widmerpool... ‘I spent most of the afternoon with one of the other units in my Territorial division. I was doing a rather special job for our CO. There seemed no point in changing back into mufti. I find, too, that uniform makes a good impression these days. *A sign of the times...*’ (135-136, my italics)

Bernard Bergonzi rightly points out in his short book on Powell, 'Although Powell is acutely interested in the past, he does not lament it; change and even decay are seen as inevitable and something to be endured with as good a grace as possible' (21). The word 'endure' is particularly apposite here, because in *Dance* people's personalities have to undergo an incessantly repeated process of the exchange of social personae in the flow of time. Society is where people's various incomplete, incongruous and incompatible choreographies of life collide with each other; it is inevitably prone to endless shifts in power-balance and values. Hence people's need for a reliable social persona: in the unpredictability of the movement of society as a whole, people aspire to social enclosures where a common choreography, or a common interpretation of the purpose and meaning of life, prevails and assures them that life can be ordered according to a principle. People gather at such enclosures, putting on the social personae that they think are appropriate for those who belong there. However, such personae are never completely appropriate. Putting on a social persona inevitably entails interpreting the significance of the scenes one chooses to take part in; but there is no absolute standard of interpretation. The basic arbitrariness of the choice of personae makes it necessary for those concerned to fight for the smooth operation of the system: as Eaton neatly puts it in the essay quoted above, '[p]eople position themselves to accommodate the parts others play or attempt to play, and in order to force the accommodation [of their own parts] by others' (174). The workings of such makeshift systems ultimately lack a universal purpose; but people adhere to the systems, because they know that their survival is impossible outside places where a common social convention prevails. This lack of common purpose of life is, Powell suggests, the source of the comicality of our struggle in the world – and at the same time, of the unexpected neatness and beauty of the often unintended parallels and patterns drawn by our eternal struggle for a convincing format of life, in which every *zoon politikon* is involved. Jenkins often compares social conventions and people's personae with the theatre:

On the stage...masks are assumed with some regard to procedure: in everyday life, the participants act their roles without consideration either for suitability of scene or for the words spoken by the rest of the cast: the result is a general tendency for things to be brought down to the level of farce even when the theme is serious enough. (*QU* 52)

I have absolutely no histrionic talent, none at all, a constitutional handicap in almost all the undertakings of life; but then, after all, plenty

of actors possess little enough...too much personal definition at such a point would have been ponderous, out of place. Accepting the classification, however sobering [here Jenkins is in a shop to buy a military greatcoat, but is taken for a knockabout comedian]. I did no more than deny having played in that particular knockabout. (SA 2)

People who have in common a life-choreography that is dear or inevitable to them (pursuit of money, fame or love, to name but a few) get together to form an enclave for a common code of behaviour. The most obvious example is the money-game: in order to make money on the stock market, people have to be admitted into the Exchange and make themselves amenable to the rules of transaction, or at least make a show of following the rules. Even love, officially the least mercenary or political of all things in the world, has the same structure lurking under the surface: under the façade of romanticism, there is a power-game between the egos of the lovers. The party who is more opportunistically ruthless and less romantically indulgent wins more pleasure – or profit – from having the other party under his or her sway. All kinds of activity in human society, from small to large, include battles between egoism, universally ruled by the law of the survival of the most strong-willed (not necessarily ‘fittest’, when we look at Widmerpool). In no aspect of life, can human beings escape being political animals. People incessantly form and reform polities or societies, with agreed local codes of behaviour; according to such codes, people put on social personae in order to take part in, and make the most of, the power-game played there.

Self-realization is impossible, even unthinkable, outside the context of such political struggles for power; those who romantically aspire to nonexistent absolute standards like eternal beauty or love often receive severe punishment. However, most people cannot completely relinquish their belief in, or aspiration for, such things; for they know human beings become hollow machines when they lose themselves in their social personae and in the systems of the poleis they belong to. The comedy of *Dance* has its source in this irony in human existence; an irony that does not allow society to take a fixed form, making it an arena for the eternal militant dialectic between the human need for social personae and the egoistic, often self-destructive Furies that are built in human nature.

2. *Dance* as a comedy, and as a farce

When Jenkins is made to listen to Dicky Umfraville's life-story told by the flamboyant Sisyphus himself, in a manner full of ironic nonchalance and lugubrious bravado, he feels that it is 'hard to know what demeanour best to adopt in listening to the story', because 'tragedy might at any moment give way to farce, so that the listener had always to keep his wits about him' (*VB* 153). Jenkins attributes this effect of the juxtaposition of tragedy and farce to 'the exaggerated dramatic force employed by Umfraville in presenting his narrative'. However, readers of *Dance* encounters many such moments in Jenkins's own cool, consciously anti-dramatic narrative: moments when neither Jenkins nor readers can be sure whether a farce or a tragedy is being enacted.

There is no need for Jenkins to dramatise: the situations, and the commingling of grotesqueness, melancholy and farcical absurdity, speak for themselves, and embarrass Jenkins and readers. I use the word 'embarrass', because Jenkins and readers become at a loss as to 'what demeanour best to adopt' before such ambiguousness of genre, or absence of a system of meaning that directs our response to the scenes we witness. If there is an implied agreement between the author and readers that the scenes are enacted as pure farce, readers can heartily laugh at the absurdity of their development (an aim which Powell's pre-war novels – at least some parts of them – seem to have pursued with less and less conviction and increasing desperation, while those by his friend Waugh wildly thrived on it). If it is an authentic tragedy full of the sense of doom, we can genuinely be horrified by the ruthlessness of the superhuman power that rules our existence. But one of the strongest features of *Dance* is the fact that it eschews such categorizations: 'tragedy might at any moment give way to farce', and vice versa, so that readers have 'always to keep [their] wits about [them]'. The scenes incessantly oscillate between the farcical and the tragic, endorsing Powell's own opinion in the *Summary* interview: 'I think that quite often I could reasonably be described as writing comedy, although again I would say, speaking generally, it's simply how people behave' (133).

At the same time, it must be emphasized that the series does have a strong inclination towards the comic in human life – towards situations whose absurd development suggests the undeniable existence of the elements of comedy in our life. Most of the scenes Powell chooses to describe in detail, from the haggle over Uncle Giles's stinking cigarette in *QU* to Widmerpool's final, irrelevantly ecstatic battle cry, 'I'm leading, I'm leading now' (*HSH* 269), feature situations in which the intractable inclinations of the individuals concerned recklessly defy, or wretchedly fall short of,

the code of behaviour imposed within the relevant group of people. Such an encroachment on the agreed code of behaviour impedes the smooth functioning of the social machine that the code belongs to. It is the absurdity of the movement of malfunctioning social machines, or disorder in 'how people behave' in particular social situations, that is the main material of *Dance*. Such an attitude to the world should ultimately be called comic, despite the evident infusion of tragic elements. The representation emphasizes not the impenetrable doom of our existence but the implacability of human folly, which we can detect in others but are mostly too deluded, weak-minded or ineffective to overcome in ourselves.

In this respect, as V. S. Pritchett pointed out in his 1960 essay (173), Powell belongs to the tradition that begins with Fielding and is taken over by Jane Austen. It's the tradition of comedy rooted in the discrepancy between desirable social standards of behaviour and the individuals' intractable egoistic inclinations towards self-interest, meanness, vanity, dissipation, or humbug. However, Powell and his first-person narrator lack Fielding's or Austen's self-assuredness (which Pritchett ascribes to a 'masculine tradition,' 172) in the evaluation of the comic deviations in the characters' personality and social conduct. The comic narration of *Dance* points out the folly in people, but at the same time it hints at the possible confusion or inadequacy of artificial, social codes of behaviour people rely upon to patch up the incompleteness of human knowledge. In *Dance*, there are few, if any, characters like Blifil in *Tom Jones* or Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, who readers can rest assured are there to evoke hearty laughter (and, if possible, to provide a healthy lesson) by the deformities or inappropriateness in their personality and social conduct. *Dance* deals with a world where there is no absolute standard of evaluation – a system of value that supports the categorisation of people into 'normal' and 'comically deviating' and calls for readers' identification with the norm.

It is true that, even in *Dance*, some kind of locally accepted social protocol provides the provisional background to highlight some extremities or faults of conduct. That is what makes Widmerpool an obviously comic outsider, and Jenkins an unobtrusively accepted insider, in the social milieu *Dance* mainly deals with – a fact that might be regarded as an intrinsic weakness of *Dance* as an innovative social comedy. But in *Dance* there is ultimately no such thing as the eternally, universally endorsed social norm that counterbalances the individuals' deviations into the unreasonable, and makes the world continue its daily rounds more or less harmoniously. Surely the best scenes in *Dance* include ones in which the complacency of Jenkins is revealed and punished, as in the scene in *KO* in which he is told about Jean's ruthless promiscuity.

Dance certainly abounds with characters whose personality and conduct are deformed or inappropriate. As in the case of Blifil or Collins, it can be easily sensed that something is lacking in, or has gone seriously wrong with, such persons as Uncle Giles, Erridge or Gwatkin, who stick to strangely fixated outlooks on life. Such people's conspicuously tenacious preoccupations may certainly represent, as James Hall argues in *The Tragic Comedians*, 'the charm of giving up the process of understanding in favour of some simple solution', against the elusiveness of the multi-layered yet incomplete construction called reality; they are 'tempters to the life of delusion, geniuses of category' (140-141). In the dance of life, people try to establish and stick to choreographies of their own, so that their movements may be replete with meaning; but the development in time of the battle between incompatible choreographies incessantly erodes the meaning people think they have given to their movements, deflating their choreographies to mere eccentric antics. Many people still stick to such invalid choreographies, trying to secure a corner in life where at least eccentricity can flourish. However, the eccentrics in *Dance* can never become assuredly comic 'character pieces': in the ever-moving uncertainty of social circumstances and relativity of values, people are not even allowed to escape into the fixity of categorisation; they have to move along time's flow, or die.²⁸ This is why the comedy in *Dance* strongly inclines towards farce: people cannot rest in the eternal unchangeability of character, but have to allow their personalities to be severely beaten down in the ever-moving development of circumstances, in order to survive in the insecurity of the world.

In Fielding's and Austen's artfully ordered worlds, Blifil and Collins can remain forever the archetypal hypocrite and tuft-hunter. They have the supporting reason for their eternally comically deviated existence in the fact that their roles are fixed but replete with clear-cut meanings, in the world of comedy created and controlled by the author as the agent of organic Human Nature. But in *Dance*, there is no such sense of authorial control – no assurance that a guideline is provided by the author, according to which every character is given a categorised role contributing to the harmonized whole of the novelistic enclosure. In Powell's *Dance*

²⁸ One of the few possible exceptions is Blackhead, the incarnation of bureaucratic obscurantism who appears in *MP*. Jenkins intentionally makes his description two-dimensionally archetypal: 'It was as if Blackhead...had become an anonymous immanence of all their kind...the mystic holy essence incarnate of arguing, encumbering, delaying, hair-splitting, all for the best of reasons' (40). He can forever stay among the files in his attic-room in the War Office, 'beyond or outside Time' (42). But this, his completely categorized personality, is exactly why he cannot be a recurring element in *Dance*. His existence, mythically proof to the erosive effect of the world and time, is awkwardly out of place there: Blackhead can be the reader's (and probably Powell's) 'favourite' comic character, but little more.

world, every person's choreography of life may at any time degenerate into an absurd fixation, but at the same time such fixation doesn't, in the final analysis, give us the relief of simplified roles in life. Here, everyone is potentially an eccentric or deviant, but has to fight desperately to defend the enclosure of personal ideals, desires, fantasies or indulgences. Powell seems to share with John Aubrey, whose *Brief Lives* he holds in high regard, a sense that it is this element of individuality that gives savour to life. Is Jenkins's conventional blandness an ideal vehicle to express such a view? It is and it isn't. Blandness can mean tolerance, but it can also mean polite indifference; as the series comes near the end, the element of the latter presents itself more frequently than before.

Back in *AM*, Barlow, looking at Pringle's hopeless painting, said, 'I often think of the masters at school. Men who could have made fortunes merely by walking across a music-hall stage preferred to teach little boys mathematics' (164). In his pre-war writings, Powell struggled to maintain some music-hall-like corners in his novels that can comfortably accommodate and display for the reassured laughter of readers such facetious 'character parts' as Dr Clutch in *AM*, Pope the valet in *V* (although his employer Lushington objects to 'character' in a servant), Major Fosdick in *FVD*, Gaston de la Tour d'Espagne in *A & P*, or Hugh Judkins in his genteel madness in *WBW*. However, in *Dance*, the author has completely and consciously abandoned the effort to preserve such music-hall spaces where farce can be smugly accommodated, and give the eccentrics the protection of farce as a handy novelistic convention.²⁹

The sense of farce in *Dance* does not derive from the author's control but rises from the eternal clash between people's ineradicable egoisms under the imperfectness of social convention that rules people's behaviour. Every individual is very serious in his or her choreography of life, but the seriousness doesn't guarantee the appropriateness of the choreography. Instead, it makes the battle of will between the individuals or groups of people an inevitable element in human life; the world's movement is formed by such battles of will. But in *Dance*, there is no universal

²⁹ In this respect, Powell's unexpectedly cool response to P. G. Wodehouse, a professionally comic novelist with whom he has sometimes been compared (very erroneously, in my opinion), is of much interest, especially as the passage also contains a reference to another writer of comedy, Evelyn Waugh: 'This [Wodehouse's] un-naturalistic mode of writing] appeals to persons of set views, who do not want to have any threat to have these convictions influenced or altered by subtleties of feeling or psychological investigation. Belloc and Waugh...are typical examples who find repose in an extreme simplicity of convention when reading for entertainment' (*Under Review*, 299). When we look at this, the banal conventionality of Jimmy Stripling's chamber-pot plot in *QU* or the Seven Deadly Sins charade in *KO* can probably be regarded as a parody of Wodehousian indulgence in good-natured 'ragging' that eternally goes on in his world, itself an enclosure of fantasy.

standard of value that can judge the right and wrong in such battles. Michael Gorra is right to argue in *The English Novel at Mid-Century*, quoting a passage from Powell's first novel (*AM* 176), that Jenkins has 'the point of view of development' – observing, maybe with mild surprise, but clearly without judgment of right and wrong – towards the absurdities of the clash between people's self-centred choreographies of life, relinquishing 'canons of behaviour' to judge others' conduct (*English Novel* 82-83). Powell's comic scenes always incline toward farce, a literary form that primarily deals with the absurd development of a situation trampling down human emotions and even human identities. But I cannot agree with Gorra's point that Jenkins's 'comic appreciation' depends upon people's 'continued "avoidance of...major issues"' as in the case of Uncle Giles (83). What makes *Dance*'s comic viewpoint unique is the idea that even 'major issues' in life such as love, marriage, ageing and death often cannot escape farcical absurdity. As Jenkins notes, looking at 'what Uncle Giles had left behind him' (*KO*155), 'facile irony at my uncle's expense could go too far' (159). Even such an apparently pointless life as Giles's invokes the 'major issues' of life, although they are incessantly reduced to mere farce by the ruthlessly irresponsible movement of the world. People aspire to a rounded life replete with meaning, but their efforts are always betrayed and flattened in the farcical development of the battle with other choreographies of life, as baseless, and at the same time as wilfully serious, as one's own. People's self-image and self-esteem are worn away, trampled upon and reduced to ridiculous wreckage in the process. Laughter in *Dance* comes with the realization of the relentless absurdity and inhumanity in the development of people's battle to enlarge or defend the space in which their own choreographies of life are valid. The world eternally keeps on its absurd, farcical movement, incessantly pushing people's efforts to give it a meaning into the past and oblivion.

What makes Widmerpool the greatest, most enduring comedian in *Dance* is the fact that there is no such consciousness of the comic in him. John Bayley rightly argues in his essay published in 2000 that 'Widmerpool's function is not only to give life while seeming to lack any serious existence of his own, but to cause narrator and reader to reflect on the meaning of this very phenomenon'. I should add that the point of Widmerpool is the paradox that he *is* dead serious in his philistinism – extremely unselfconsciously so – for all the absurd hollowness of his existence. He has absolutely no capacity to pause for a moment in his struggle to consider the absurdity of his own activities. He is always fresh in his pursuit for power, because he has no personality from the start: his only interest is to lose himself in the choreography ruling certain enclosures of life that takes his fancy, from the House

football team to the religious cult. He is the most grotesque character in *Dance*, because his 'seriousness' makes his life full of pure determination and will (and a fair amount of social advancement), but at the same time totally devoid of any vestige of meaning. Powell rightly insists that Widmerpool is not the hero, or anti-hero, of *Dance*: rather, he functions as an archetype, the main point of reference in the Powellian world of endless power games. Widmerpool is the essence of farce in *Dance*, in its purest form. His life 'develops' in an extremely mechanistic way: there are no moments when he attempts to rise from materialistic calculations to mental three-dimensionality. Widmerpool's greatness as a comic creation lies in his total identification with the absurdity of the movement of the world. Such dogged adherence to the irresponsibility of the world sometimes causes – quite ironically – moments of unexpected dignity or individuality. They can have considerable force, but they are the exceptions that prove the rule. He is the world itself: the ruthlessly farcical world represented in *Dance*.

It is hardly surprising that, as Walter T. Rix points out in his essay 'Anthony Powell, *A Dance to the Music of Time*: Circular Progression', 'the basic material on which the novels thrive is the myth of Sisyphus' (39). Jenkins never directly refers to the myth, but *Dance* abounds with Sisyphean characters, with such diversity from the eternally grey, grumbling Uncle Giles who is always "'starting at the bottom" on an ascent from which great things were to be expected' (*QU*, 65) to the nonchalant Umfraville who 'once more set[s] out becoming a general, just as [he] was before being framed by Buster' (*VB*, 156). Rix goes on to argue that 'nothing of the heroic and perhaps even romantic element with which Camus associates the myth in "Le Mythe de Sisyphe" is left in Powell' and that the dancers are nearer to Beckett's Estragon and Vladimir, Clov and Hamm, than to Camus' 'embattled warrior' (39). This, I think, is only half right. Powell's representation of their eternal toil is certainly without Camus's heroism; nevertheless, the dancers themselves – especially those egoists who are in pursuit of power in human relationship – are 'embattled warriors', forever ready to begin their battles of will all over again. However, it should be noted that they lack the clear self-consciousness of Camus's Sisyphus. While the Camusian Sisyphus is paradoxically motivated by a full awareness of his hopeless repetitions, Powell's warriors are driven by delusion and forgetfulness. Never learning from bitter defeats, they keep on designing incomplete choreographies for themselves, in order to subject the choreographies of other people to their own, and to enlarge the area ruled by their own choreographies. Powell's time, constituted by the accumulation of such battles, is characterised by its ruthless forgetfulness that flattens people's worldly efforts into farce: new choreographies, as

incomplete and deluded as ever, keep on pushing the old ones into oblivion.

In *The Strangers All Are Gone*, Powell quotes ‘the Nietzschean dictum that the comic is artistic delivery from the nausea of the absurd’, noting that ‘one touch of Nietzsche makes the whole world kin’ (86). The dictum well applies to *Dance*. As the artist Jenkins finds solace in seeing the farce of the world in as unsentimental a light as possible, so rare moments of human dignity and release from delusion visit the characters when they realise the farcicality of their situations in life and learn to laugh at it. The possible redemption is, Powell suggests, the fact that we can sometimes accept, with good grace, that our existence in the world cannot escape from the absurdity of farce. For example:

The scene was so grotesque that I began to laugh; not altogether happily, it was true, but at least as some form of nervous relief. The two of them wrestling together were pouring with sweat...The bed creaked and rocked as if it would break beneath them. And then, quite suddenly, Stringham began laughing too. He laughed and laughed, until he could struggle no more. The combat ceased...

‘All right,’ he said, still shaking with laughter, ‘I’ll stay. To tell the truth, I am beginning to feel the need for a little rest myself.’ (*AW* 208)

‘My God,’ said Gwatkin, ‘you’re bloody right.’

He began to laugh. That was one of the moments when I felt I had not been wrong in thinking there was some style about him...

Gwatkin shook my hand too. He smiled in an odd sort of way, as if he dimly perceived it was no good battling against Fate, which, seen in the right perspective, almost always provides a certain beauty of design, sometimes even an occasional good laugh.

‘I leave you to your galantine, Nick,’ he said. ‘Best of luck.’

I gave him a salute for the last time, feeling he deserved it. Gwatkin marched away, looking a trifle absurd with his little moustache, but somehow rising above that. (*VB* 230, 234-235)

The movements of the world society as an arena for battles between wills, between people’s imperfect choreographies of life, are absurd and farcical. But the heartless ‘beauty’ of farce is in its inevitability – in the fact that people can’t help harbouring choreographies of life that are destined to be worn out and flattened in time. When people realize and accept such ‘beauty’ in farce, their flattened personalities are

given a passing dignity (though not quite three-dimensionality), which momentarily allows them to rise above the farcical absurdity of the world.

Probably the same thing can be said about Jenkins's attitude in writing – the one he maintained before *Dance* began to fall into a self-parodic series of fancifully grotesque farces that float away from the process in which people try to give 'serious' social signification to their conduct. The quiet astringency of the comedy in *Dance* is derived from the narrator Jenkins's unsentimental attitude in observing the formation and dissolution of people's incomplete choreographies of life; but at the same time, Jenkins is fully aware that, while his description of small, local battles between choreographies can keep a high level of matter-of-fact accuracy, their meaning is incessantly blurred and countermanded as the choreographies accumulate to constitute society, the world, or time's flow. His attempt to choreograph history in the enclosure of narrative is incessantly betrayed by the movement of time, and reaches not a conclusion but final exhaustion in *HSH*. This adds an element of astringent irony to Jenkins's writing: his act of writing itself constitutes a comedy of a battle doomed to defeat. Probably, it is Jenkins who stands nearest to Camus's Sisyphus among the characters of *Dance*: he is aware of the ultimate futility and spuriousness of trying to fix the world in the choreography of story-telling, but that awareness paradoxically drives him forward in his Sisyphean labour of endlessly recapitulating his representation of the world. The effect is not explicitly comic, but at least bitterly humorous; which grants the narration of *Dance* the necessary distance from the absurdly comic events in society it deals with.

3. *Dance* as a meta-novel

It is perhaps inevitable that people compare *Dance* with Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*; also, that *Dance* comes second best, at least as a treatise on the nature of time. Certainly, Powell shows open admiration for Proust in his own writings (there is even a Proustian pastiche in *MP*); in any case, the sheer bulk of the two novels, and the word 'time' in both titles, invite us to make the comparison. However, I don't think such a comparison, or calling Powell an English Proust, as many critics have done, is very fruitful – at least, to an understanding of *Dance*. For a self-consciously – almost egotistically – intricate philosophy of time, Powell is no match for Proust.

When we look at Powell's references to time in the sequence, we can see that the core of his image of time is really expressed in quite a straightforward manner.

Representatively:

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

Or,

‘One never takes lessons to heart. It’s just a thing people talk about – learning by experience and all that.’

‘Oh, but I do take lessons to heart,’ he said. ‘What do you think then?’

‘*That one just gets these knocks from time to time.*’

‘You believe that?’

‘Yes.’

‘You really believe that everyone has that sort of thing happen to them?’

‘In different ways.’ (VB, 233, my italics)

In *Dance*, time is presented as something that moves behind the scenes unsuspected and, at some point, suddenly provides the space in which such ‘knocks’ are administered and force people to realize that their views of, and purposes in, life are no longer valid. The ‘significance’ they give to the world gets secretly corroded by the passage of time, making them pay a bitter price at a certain point.

The fact that the title of the series was changed from *The Music of Time* to *Dance to the Music of Time* halfway through,³⁰ and that Powell himself always

³⁰ The addition appeared as early as in the Heinemann 3-in-1 edition of *QU*, *BM* and *AW* that

referred to the series as *Dance* in his later memoirs and *Journals*, is suggestive. It seems to show that the dance steps driven by thirst for power, desire, and insatiable passions often inexplicable to the dancers themselves, came to count rather more than, or at least as much as, the nature of time, in the sequence. The dancers, and their choreographies small or large, incessantly collide with and contradict each other, calling for battles of will between the dancers. As the collision of billiard balls brings a complete change to the arrangement on the baize table, so the collision of choreographies can give 'a significance previously unsuspected' to a given scene. But the dancers often keep on dancing until the passage of time brings them a bitter realization that their choreography – or the system of signification they applied to the world – is no longer valid. The main subject of Jenkins's narration is the eternal process of the formation and cancellation of people's choreography of conduct in society.

However, Jenkins's narration can never attain absolute authority in *Dance*. When we plunge into this ocean of words, probably the first thing we recognize affirmatively is Powell's talent for describing small comic scenes from people's daily struggles. Such comic vignettes as Jenkins' dismal dinner with the Widmerpools at the ending of *BM*, the battle over a bottle of champagne at Thrubworth in *LM*, or the confrontation of Captain Gwatkin and Private Sayce in *VB* are particularly impressive. Take, for example, the last of these scenes:

'You know why we are all here, Sayce,' said Gwatkin again, louder this time, his voice shaking a little with his own depths of feeling, 'Come on, Sayce, you know.'

'Don't know, sir.'

'Yes, you do.'

'Don't, sir.'

'Come on, man.'

Sayce made a great effort.

'To give me CB for being on a charge', he offered wretchedly.

It was a reasonable hypothesis, but Gwatkin was greatly disturbed at being so utterly misunderstood.

'No, no,' he said, 'I don't mean why we are here in the Company Office at this moment. I mean why we are all in the army. You must know

was published in 1962, the year when *KO* appeared. For some reason, Heinemann continued to use the former series title for the newly appearing separate volumes, but it was also changed in 1973, at the publication of *TK*.

that, Sayce. We are here to repel Hitler. You know that as well as I do. You don't want Hitler to rule over you, Sayce, do you?"

Sayce gulped again, as if he were not sure.

'No, sir,' he agreed, without much vigour.

'We must all, every one of us, do our best,' said Gwatkin, now thoroughly worked up. 'I try to do my best as Company Commander. Mr Jenkins and the other officers of the Company do their best. The NCOs and privates do their best. Are you going to be the only one, Sayce, who is not doing his best?'

Sayce was now in almost as emotional a state as Gwatkin himself. He continued to gulp from time to time, looking wildly round the room, as if for a path of escape.

'Will you do you best in future, Sayce?'

Sayce began sniffing frantically. (*VB*, 63-4)

To give Sayce, a delinquent soldier, CB is exactly what Gwatkin, as Company Commander, is expected to do: that is 'why he is there' in the social setting of power – the Company Office. But Gwatkin, unable to cope with the small necessities of administration, instead harangues him on 'why we are all in the army'. The discrepancy constitutes an almost absurdist comicality; and Powell's sharpness of observation and good ear for conversation in scenes where there is a conflict between the flimsiness of social artifice and the intractability of human nature, are evident here. The direct cause of the comic scene is evident; the farcical antics of the characters are depicted with such accuracy of insight into the infinitesimal fluctuations of human egoism, fear and desire that scarcely any other course of events is thinkable. Readers cannot but be charmed by the precision of Powell's description of such a minimal encounter. Nevertheless, when it comes to the 'meaning' of such comic scenes – what they are enacted for –, neither the participants in the scene, nor Powell/ Jenkins can fix it with absolute authenticity. All attempts to impose a 'meaning' on the scene – each character for the satisfaction of his or her own ego, Powell/ Jenkins for the comfort of finding formal, aesthetic patterns in life's struggle – are destined to come to grief.

Human beings have a tendency to seek a general 'explanation' of the world, or their life in it. But, the more effort they make to empirically sum up the world on the basis of the materials they have gathered, the more is betrayed about the limitations of their vision. Jenkins, as a meta-empiricist who empirically follows the formation of people's world views, is fully aware of that. Nevertheless, like all of us who need

a temporary summing up of the world to assist our survival in it, Jenkins cannot help imposing a vision, or interpretation, of his own on the world's doings, small and large.

In that respect, Powell's way of putting up a kind of thematic or 'explanatory' placard in the form of an image or a scene (for example, Russian billiards in *BM*, the ghost railway in *CCR*, or the Army greatcoat scene at the opening of *SA*)³¹ can be regarded as an almost crudely forceful attempt on the side of Jenkins, the aesthete who finds comfort in seeing perennial patterns in life, to impose a *Gestalt* on the world and on the mind of readers. And of course, the most glaring among them is the Dance image, evoked at the beginning of the whole sequence:

For some reason, the sight of snow descending on fire always makes me think of the ancient world – legionaries in sheepskin warming themselves at a brazier: mountain altars where offerings glow between wintry pillars; centaurs with torches cantering beside a frozen sea – scattered, unco-ordinated shapes from a fabulous past, infinitely removed from life; and yet bringing with them memories of things real and imagined. These classical projections, and something in the physical attitudes of the men themselves as they turned from the fire, suddenly suggested Poussin's scene in which the Seasons, hand in hand and facing outward, tread in rhythm to the notes of the lyre that the winged and naked greybeard plays. The image of Time brought thoughts of mortality; of human beings, facing outward like the Seasons, moving hand in hand in intricate measure: stepping slowly, methodically, sometimes a trifle awkwardly, in evolutions that take recognisable shapes: or breaking into seemingly meaningless gyrations, while partners disappear only to reappear again, once more giving pattern to the spectacle: unable to control the melody, unable, perhaps, to control the steps of the dance.

That the Dance image is put at the very opening of the bulk of *Dance*, almost in capital letters, introducing the whole of Jenkins's recollections, might lead us, at first glance, to assume that it is the metaphor that rules, from above, the world Jenkins

³¹ This technique is much loved by Powell, even in his pre-war *A & P*: see the street performer with a chain, or the gorilla in the Berlin zoo. After *Dance*, there is *FK*, which is, in itself, in a sense a 'thematic' picture, with its characters and scenes heavily charged with openly 'symbolic' gestures.

describes. However, when we look back at it after reading through the whole of *Dance*, two questions inevitably arise: (a) does this 'classical', 'ordered' image of the Seasons, conceived by Jenkins and Powell, really hold together the nearly 3000 pages of *Dance*? And (b) indeed, can this image be called 'thematic' at all?

The impression we get from the huge canvas of *Dance* sometimes evokes paintings of Hieronymus Bosch rather than the 'classical' image Jenkins tries to present to us. Numerous people appear on the canvas, intent on their own preoccupations, most of them scarcely realizing what small but grotesque figures they are cutting, far less whether they belong to an ordered whole or not. And Jenkins himself often seems unable to fully believe in the ordered image of the Poussin painting. *Dance* abounds with images at odds with the Poussin dance: the Ghost Railway used by Moreland as a metaphor of life; Bithel's idiot dance that goes on and on, until the secret observers just lose their sense of control; Murtlock's cult dance that 'was not quite the scene portrayed by Poussin, even if elements of the Seasons' dance were suggested in a perverted form' (*HSH*, 173). Especially, the scenery, presented at the opening of *CCR*, where messy rubble occupies the centre, is notable in its un-classical lack of regulation and order:

...pondering the mystery which dominates vistas framed by a ruined door, I felt for some reason glad the place had not been rebuilt. A direct hit had excised even the ground floor, so that the basement was revealed as a sunken garden, or site of archaeological excavation long abandoned...In the midst of this sombre grotto five or six fractured steps had withstood the explosion and formed a projecting island of masonry on the summit of which rose the door. Walls on both sides were shrunk away, but along its lintel, in niggling copybook handwriting, could still be distinguished the word Ladies. Beyond, on the far side of the twin pillars and crossbar, nothing whatever remained of that promised retreat, the threshold falling steeply to an abyss of rubble...(CCR, 1)

If this is a thematic image, as it appears to be, what is its 'theme'? There is a ruined door that 'frames' a vista, as this paragraph seems to strongly, glaringly frame a large part of the *Dance* in its bleakness. We can easily read themes like 'the destruction of a civilization' into the 'framed vistas'; they openly invite us to do so. However, the things framed there, and indeed the frame itself, elude such attempted interpretation. In the frame are five or six surviving steps, passage to a 'site of archaeological excavation long abandoned' (the ruin of people's attempts to find a meaning in the

past). On the frame itself is an explanatory caption, elaborately rendered but completely irrelevant: *Ladies* [toilet] in 'copybook handwriting'. These are conspicuous but hollow signifiers that signify nothing. The paragraph seems to work as a strong explanatory frame, but it doesn't explain anything; if it does work as a pictorial metaphor, it is a metaphor of a place where various signifiers struggle with each other for the position of the 'legitimate meaning' but can never attain that purpose.

When we look again at the Poussin image in the light of such reflections, we come upon a strange, even disturbing, question: if the Poussin image is the pictorial explanation of the whole *Dance*, what does that explanation signify? What, indeed? 'Yes, life is a bit like dance,' we might say, 'partners disappear only to reappear, and so on. But what's the meaning of all this? Why do we dance?' The Poussin image answers none of such questions. On this point, Marcia Muelder Eaton argues:

Powell sees life aesthetically; and so do the characters – most especially Jenkins – toward whom he is most sympathetic... What he [Powell] wants to do, I think, is to show how life is already, or at least can be handled like, art. (169)

I think her phrases, 'wants to do' and 'at least can be handled like' shows her reservation; and that reservation is the essence of Powell's and Jenkins's aesthetic agnosticism. They 'want to' 'handle' life like art, because that gives them comfort and satisfaction; but they can't clarify why life *should* be handled so, or how appropriate such an approach might be.

The idea that life is like a dance provides the canvas of *Dance* with a kind of picture frame, but the frame does not tell us the meaning of the framed dance or dances, or the principle that holds the scene together. Instead, the dancers featured in *Dance* attempt to give a meaning to the scenes they perform, each according to his or her principle, obsession, or even delusion; but no one ever knows whose 'explanation' is ultimately right, or indeed whether there is any one explanation that is ultimately right. In their description of the painting, Powell and Jenkins point out that the Seasons are dancing 'hand in hand' but 'facing outward', and emphasize the fact by repeating the phrases, when they proceed to regard the Poussin dance as a metaphor for life. This dance image of life Powell/ Jenkins present to us has a hollow centre: the dancers have no eye contact with one another, nor can they see the centre of the dance ground, even if there is a centre.

The dancers are signifiers in the textual portrait of the world that is *Dance*. The

picture is not really a stable one, but rather a motion picture record of an ever-changing dance; as the dancers move along, making various gestures that may or may not signify something, they at the same time attempt to 'fix' the picture, as it were, by imposing an interpretation of the significations of their movements. But their vision is limited by their circumstances, prejudices and obsessions. Each of the dancers struggles to become an effective signifier in the picture which features them (for instance, 'a successful businessman', 'a leading Left activist', or 'a good soldier'); at the same time, these struggles are based on their own interpretations of the system of signification in the picture. But the dancers are ultimately incongruous as signifiers in the ever-moving multilayeredness of the world; and they are erroneous as interpreters due to the limitations of their vision. Nevertheless, they cannot stop the Sisyphean work of incessantly attempting to impose their own interpretation on the picture and to be congruous, powerfully meaningful signifiers (in Powell's favourite phrase, 'serious persons') in the world according to them. The effect created there is more of a palimpsest than of the fixed canvas of an oil painting.

Jenkins is essentially no more than one of such illegitimate interpreters of the picture of the world.³² He strongly refuses to allow his protagonist self to become a conspicuous or powerful signifier in the picture he interprets, and indeed comes near being a nullity as a person by confining himself to the position of mere eyes, or a camera; instead, he has his more 'serious' being in his interpreter self, in the process of incessantly reading significations into the struggles of the world caught by his 'camera' self. Powell intentionally makes seeing, collating and interpreting the essence of Jenkins' life; but this seer, collator and interpreter created by Powell knows the incompleteness of his own field of vision and the ultimate fallibility of his interpretation. He tries to find recurring elements in life and to read significations into the patterns he thinks he has found in the events – a task that gives him temporary aesthetic satisfaction. But his giving of significations to the world is not privileged, even in his own textual representation of the world. His interpretations are put side by side, on equal terms, with those of other people, no less illegitimate and limited than his; the world incessantly betrays the interpretations imposed upon it, and at the same time betrays (in both senses) the underlying human desires for

³² Lynette Felber points out in her 1988 essay, 'With each new incident, the reader hopes to understand Widmerpool's significance in the pattern that Nick finally at the end of the novel perceives. But for the reader, as for Nick, the pattern emerges without a full elucidation of its significance' (582). I should add that, nevertheless, characters including Jenkins (and also the reader) can't suppress their need to read a flawed 'meaning' into the patterns they think they have found.

such interpretations. Jenkins as an aesthete is one of the people who are betrayed in the perpetual, incongruous movement of the world.

The collapse of their world interpretations is essentially comic. It is undeniable that elements of futility or meaninglessness lurk there, but people's seriousness in their never-ending recapitulations of the world makes social mechanisms function, even if their workings are comically awkward; that barely prevents people's failing attempts to give the world a signification from falling into pure meaninglessness. In the social artifice we need for our survival in this world, the tragic, fatal solitude of each human being has been diluted in the profane, banally comic, ineffective patchily working system of communication. Human beings are bound by the limitation of their vision, and are caught in an eternal comic dialectic between the formation of an incomplete, only partly communicable interpretation and its dissolution in the ever-moving unreliability of the world. The accumulated total of such half-interpretation/ communication is the artifice of any society, small and large; their provenance is the 'meanings' of life people conceive. Here again is the problem of the level of interpretation: people's interpretation of their movements can be relatively more valid when applied to the small niche they create, inhabit and are eager to maintain by having an interpretation in common. Tragedy is evaded there, because that artifice is created for people's 'meaningful' survival, however incomplete and bathetic. *Dance* is inevitably a comedy, in that it is a text without an end that becomes a verbal mimesis of the eternal, bathetic but serious movement of human beings who have banished themselves from tragic solitude of existence into survival in the essentially incomplete artifice of society. Laurie Adams Frost's argument in her monograph – 'There is a sense that the ending does not matter... What matters are "the bulk of unread middle pages"' (7) – is quite right, but it is not that 'We trust that Nick is telling us meaningful stories because it is his life he is describing, and we accept his authority' (7). We trust, not the validity of Jenkins' interpretation of life but the sincerity of his attempt, because he knows and admits that 'the bulk of unread middle pages' is the never-ending, never-fulfilled process of people's attempt at a fixed reading of the meaning of the life they are living.

This perpetual process constitutes another kind of humour in *Dance*. On one plane, *Dance* is a huge panoramic novel full of striking vignettes firmly etched in the mode of traditionally 'realistic', observational and autonomously enclosed comedy; but on another, it is a never-ending humorous meta-novel about the perpetual formation and destruction of the limited and incongruous artifices of society, which is the inevitable condition of human life – seen and narrated by an

upper-middle-class narrator with an inclination to 'apolitical' aestheticism, with the limitations peculiar to such a position. It is mainly because of the cohabitation of these two qualities – (a) a reliance on the traditional process of comic observation and representation, which is working quite well on its own plane, and (b) an honest admission of the ultimate failure of the 'realistically' novelistic form to represent the world in a summing-up, in a novelistic microcosm – that *Dance* occupies a unique, embarrassing position, essentially that of a freak, in the tradition of English fictional comedy.

Dance is a novel that cannot end well: any hope of rounding up the world – fixation of the meaning of life – is engulfed in its eternal movement. However, as it is intended as a novel, it had to, sooner or later, have its end. It had to create a sense of ending, an ironic illusion that things can go no further in the enclosure of *Dance*. (Probably, the author of *Tristram Shandy* would have faced the same *aporia*, if Sterne's writing hadn't been interrupted by his death; what kind of ending would that novel, primarily dealing with 'opinions' or people's various incomplete views of the world, have had?) In the fourth trilogy, especially in *TK* and *HSH*, Powell tries very hard to bring *Dance* to an ending, satisfying both to him as a traditional novelist and to readers expecting a traditional experience of reading a novel with a congruous plot, beginning and ending.; but he pays dearly for it. Roy Thomas wondered at the 'steady intensification of his taste for the grotesque and fantastic' in his 1976 untitled review of *HSH* (206). It would be truer to say that Powell had to rely heavily on the grotesque and fantastic as a way of forcefully expelling the dancers from the stage. On the other hand, Michael Gorra argues in his 1990 book, 'In the novel's last volumes he concentrates on making the boundaries of the experience with which his metaphor cannot deal' (101); but wasn't that exactly what Powell tried to do, in a subtler and more rewarding way, before he felt the inescapable need to conclude the *Dance*, no matter how crudely contrived the method is?

One of the telling proofs of the deterioration of Powell's meta-novelistic experiment is the fact that the latter part of *Dance* fails to create any 'counterpoint' person who is as powerful and as socially engaged as General Conyers, capable of helping bring the enduring, militant social comedy of *Dance* to the rewarding finale it deserves, along with Widmerpool. Gwatkin is very neatly done, but his weight is just enough to carry a single volume; General Liddament might well have become a second Conyers, but he just slips off stage; Odo Stevens appears at first as quite a promising character, a go-getter who is at the same time self-consciously intelligent and melancholic, but he dwindles into being an early retiree and bullied husband; X Trapnel is as hollow as Widmerpool himself, and at the same time socially

completely unhinged. Among them, Pamela has a uniquely imposing presence as the absolute denier of social conventions. With her frigid body that refuses all kinds of signification, she negates all human struggle to give the world a socially shared meaning – thus debunking Widmerpool's enormously hypertrophied social persona and preparing his bizarre death in the cult movement. She is very competently done, and competently does her job, as an 'end-game' character who leads *Dance* to its final collapse. But, in the scheme of the novel, she should have represented something – a force, a tendency, or at the very least a recurrent destructive 'type'. Failing that, she becomes a *diabola ex machina*. Powell succeeded in bringing *Dance* to a shattering end like the crash of a jumbo jet – itself a feat not to be disregarded. But, regrettably, it cannot be denied that the symphonic effect of the ever-moving social panorama is almost completely lost in the fourth trilogy.

Isabelle Joyau's point in her book, 'The last pages of *A Dance to the Music of Time* do challenge traditional expectations by failing to provide a neat resolution, by failing to sweep mysteries away in a lightning revelation' (41) is superficially right; but nevertheless, Powell's plotting in the fourth trilogy, whose primary purpose is bringing the never-ending text of *Dance* to a temporary ending by the exit of the dancers from the stage, has the danger of undermining the uniqueness of the 'challenge'. The trilogy evolves around bizarrely hollow, two-dimensional characters, used solely for creating a sense of a deterioration of the world towards death (Trapnel, Pamela, Gwinnett, and Widmerpool as a declining buffoon), while newly introduced 'people of opinion' ('Books' Bagshaw, Tokenhouse and Dr Brightman) have none of the resilience of their predecessors (notably Uncle Giles and General Conyers). The problem is that they lack the social three-dimensionality that is necessary in the creation of plausible characters. Of course, none of the characters of *Dance* can be absolutely three-dimensional; but the problem with the fourth trilogy is that the dancers are subjected to Powell's own forceful choreography of conclusion, and are given no room for their never-ending Sisyphean efforts toward attaining a rounded 'meaning' of existence in society, in the course of which people sometimes show an unexpected, unplanned-for depth and dignity. Powell himself seems to have lost his sense of the ironic nature of his enterprise, irresponsibly nestling up to the traditional idea of the novelistic task of binding the world in an enclosure of a plot. I say irresponsibly, because here Powell also neglects the task of a realistic social novelist: to try to put the characters in a solid, plausible social perspective.

In the fourth trilogy, Powell fails to 'fail' (that is, to face the impossibility of putting the world under single system of meaning and value, or under a single novelistic plot): the embarrassment and uncomfortableness that made *Dance* unique

among traditional realistic novels is abandoned here. When the author began to give priority to the forcefully farcical choreography of his own devising, the subtle relationship *Dance* kept with people's desire to give a meaning to reality was gone. The gravest problem with the fourth trilogy is that Powell seems to have lost his early interest in the attempt to present the movement of society in a realistic way while acknowledging the limit of people's – and the author's own – sense of reality.

This abandonment of the impulse toward realism is also evident in Powell's post-*Dance* novels. They openly show an inclination towards myth-making. In particular, *FK* is a novel on Powell's greatest 'personal myth', that of artists' representation of the world. Considering that it is placed in the consciously unrealistic and symbolically charged setting of a cruiser, and that it features an artist whose power is eroded in inanity and impotence, I think it can be read as an *apologia pro vita sua* for a novelist who gradually lost the stamina to grapple with reality – the stamina that was needed in bringing the huge edifice of *Dance* to a conclusion it originally deserved.

Chapter Seven

The Post-*Dance* Novels1. *O, How the Wheel Becomes It!* (1983)

There is no denying that *HWBI* is light-weight in every respect. After the almost interminable, sprawling narrative of *Dance*, that of *HWBI* is decidedly brisker: the sentences are much shorter than Jenkins's, with almost none of the stipulations and reservations that made the prose of *Dance* experimentally self-reflective (while *HWBI* does not exactly return to the deliberately unemotional, stylized matter-of-factness of Powell's pre-war novels). The subject matter is also light. G. F. H. Shadbold's struggle over his not very spectacular past could not have sustained the length of an ordinary novel. As an egoist, he is far more run-of-the-mill than Widmerpool: the convenient definition of him would be a downsized descendant of Sir Willoughby Patterne, relegated from the country house to a cottage. And, what ultimately prevents *HWBI* from becoming a small masterpiece is the fact that, while the material is so small-scale that it requires careful and intense treatment if it is to avoid readers' cry of 'Who cares?', Powell deals with it in a offhand, almost disdainful way; which makes readers doubt the seriousness of the author's new attempt. In his 1977 essay, 'The End of *A Dance to the Music of Time*', Kerry McSweeney argues that the characters of *Dance*, like those of Thackeray's 'fiction without hero', display an 'absence of soul' (57). But it is one thing to delve into a character's lack of soul, and quite another to treat the matter in a soulless, cynically disdainful way. Powell does the latter in this novella.

Powell succeeds in describing a detestably mean fellow in Shadbold, but his personality is without any deeper element to rouse readers' curiosity (a factor which reminds us of the characterization of Pamela Widmerpool); and the final showdown, death after an ordeal for his ego, is unconvincing. Shadbold dies in rather a compromising situation, but Powell neglects to give the ordeal enough weight to demonstrate its inevitability. *HWBI* fails to engage readers because the comic narration evidently takes too much for granted: an abandonment of novelistic duties that makes us suspect the exhaustion of Powell's stamina.

However, *HWBI* is not without interest from the viewpoint of Powell's career as a novelist: it provides a footnote to the world of *Dance* and before, and at the same time serves as a bridge between *Dance* and *FK*, his final novelistic effort. The vigorous effort of bringing *Dance* to a final total collapse (as I have argued) may

well have made Powell require a period of rest and self-indulgence. It resulted in his not-so-memorable memoirs, a succession of well-remembered small episodes, some of which are – in Powellian phraseology – ‘not wholly without interest’ for both Powell scholars and general readers, and dexterously described in terse prose (for instance, his first meeting with George Orwell); while others are triviality for its own sake, narrated in a somewhat slack style. In his memoirs, Powell’s interest in details sometimes borders on becoming the smug self-indulgence of a man aware that he has lived a long, not uneventful life; a proof that he has reached the stage of life when people give up, with ‘philosophical’ abandonment, the effort to look at life from a coherent point of view, and begin to dwell fondly on their past.

However, Powell as a novelist does not end up fondling the past: no doubt getting some ideas from his own experience of writing memoirs, he attempts to analyze people’s desire to embrace, defend, and sometimes concoct their past. While most power-oriented people in *Dance* incline towards the future, especially Widmerpool till his very end, in *HWBI* the characters’ attitudes toward their pasts are no less strongly ruled by egoistic will-power: a theme that inverts the fourth trilogy’s concern with the eroding effects of time.

HWBI is an allegorical comic story about the fate of various texts in the world. As was especially the case in *WBW*, and fundamentally in the whole Powellian world, ‘texts’ mean both literary and social texts, including contexts, subtexts and pretexts. As a tough reviewer in the traditional style for the *Daily Telegraph*, Powell might well have sneered at the contemporary use of the ‘technical’ term ‘text’ as – to borrow Shadbald’s expression – ‘obfuscation’ (50); but, in practice, he devoted his literary career to the study of the production process of literary and social texts. Shadbald’s jeer at ‘culture-codes’ and such new(ish) theoretical ideas is sometimes difficult to distinguish from Powell’s own (especially when Shadbald’s sentiments are narrated in a free-indirect speech); but Powell was really always fascinated by people’s ancient, insatiable desire to weave social texts, and also literary ones: sometimes as mimeses of the former, sometimes as another and hyper kind of reality.

However, *HWBI* has a new feature: while Powell’s novels up till then mainly dealt with the production of such texts (even Pamela Widmerpool’s destruction of X. Trapnel’s manuscript ultimately leads to her attempt to create a better version of it in her memory and in the form of a film), this is a story about the suppression of texts. Shadbald, another egoistic anti-hero of the Powellian world, attempts to nullify the newly found texts that bitterly nibble at his self-esteem as a man of letters and man of society, however shabby both careers have been. On one plane, the text literally

means the unpublished diary and out-of-print novel of Cedric Winterwade; on another, the ancient text of social, amatory and literary life weaved by Winterwade, Shadbold and Isolde Upjohn, full of the 'culture-code' of the time.

It is interesting that Powell creates in Shadbold a man who has lived a long life of exploiting literary and social texts but whose own productivity of such texts has long been rather low. His early attempts at producing literary texts had practically no effects on the vast tapestry that is the world: his playwriting led to the sack from the school he taught at in his early days; his two novels were tolerably reviewed as 'experimental' and sank obediently into oblivion; and that is about it. We can even count him among such meritless, obscure minor writers as appear in *WBW* and *BDFR*. On the social plane, he seems to have led a life in which the consumption of energy in the effort to weave one's life into the texture of society as a whole is kept as low as possible. His first marriage just ended unobtrusively; during the war, he 'contrived...to steer a course...without undue personal affliction, reducing to a minimum interference with a preferred manner of life' (8). And after the war, he procured financial support by marrying a very productive detective-story writer, and enjoyed the life of a reviewer, lecturer (recycling his stock-in-trade) and TV quiz and panel-game man (making use of the vast store of texts he has read), thus exposing himself as much as possible to the media without having to commit himself. He kept surfing on and exploiting the world's various texts without himself getting involved in the process of their production. He vicariously gratified his ego by having his person reproduced by the media, but kept a distance from people's struggle to produce literary and social texts by their own activity (not necessarily original texts, but at least texts they were driven to produce: one of the main themes of *Dance*). Shadbold's preciously kept ego rests on his ability as a consumer and exploiter of the texts of the world – so that it is quite appropriate that his ordeal begins with the appearance of a disturbing text produced by another person, and that he dies not in an attempt at committed production of a social text (as Widmerpool does) but in an attempt to disengage himself from embarrassment by suppressing Winterwade's text.

Winterwade, who never appears in person – not an actual word of his is recorded, even in Shadbold's memory – seems to have been a lousy novelist and a sentimental amateur in the appreciation of literature (see Winterwade's quotation of Swinburne in his diary, 30), but an excellent diarist when he does not bother with being literary: a trait that reminds us of Captain Hudson in *WBW*. His chronicling of daily affairs is candid and unsentimental, with no scruple in describing situations compromising to his self-esteem; one of its high points being the record of his weekend in Paris with Isolde Upjohn, which unsettles Shadbold's complacency.

There were two men in love with the same girl; while one just pined for her, as Atwater did for Susan in *AM* (the period and the stage – where bohemianism meets society – coincide), the other went to bed with her, experiencing three orgasms in spite of her frigidity and the fact that he was vaguely aware of being used as a convenient chauffeur to Paris, where she was to meet another man – all of which Winterwade records in a ‘pitiless transcription’ of an ‘uncompromising realism’ with an ‘ironic detachment’ (33). The authenticity of the text, produced by Winterwade in a detached style but nonetheless with the commitment of a creator, stands out. As long as it exists, it will go on nagging at the self-esteem of Shadbold; and to make the matter worse, the text is liable to be published, thereby celebrating a hitherto unknown writer whose ability Shadbold used to hold in contempt but now cannot but recognize.

What Shadbold, as an egoist and self-styled man of will, should have done here was to secretly destroy the appropriate pages of the text with the efficient boldness of Pamela Widmerpool and Rosie Manasch in destroying the texts of X. Trapnel and Odo Stevens, and send the rest back to the publisher with a noncommittal comment. If he had done so, he would have been able to practically erase the devastating text and, at the same time, to pretend he had done nothing unjust to it. But Shadbold does not do so; he just sends the whole text back to the publisher with a diatribe by way of comment – thereby allowing the text to endure, and having it recorded that he savagely denounced it for some reason. The sheer existence of Winterwade’s text, even apart from its content, becomes a seed of retribution for Shadbold. A text Winterwade produced with no intention of making it public becomes the potential cause of devastating damage to the public image of Shadbold.

When Isolde Upjohn suddenly reappears after all these years, on the same morning as the TV crew to interview him, and begins to tell the camera about the weekend in Paris, Shadbold even uses the diary as a source of information (thinly disguised as a hearsay) to reveal Isolde’s frigidity and disloyalty before the camera, in a desperate attempt to counter-balance his disgrace with hers – secretly attesting that he has succumbed to the reality of Winterwade’s text. However, the attack has no effect on Isolde. She has produced her own text, her memoirs about her bohemian days, in advertising which before the TV camera she candidly admits her frigidity and disloyalty, explaining that ‘it was thinking years after showed me what I really felt [about Winterwade]’ (105). In other words, Isolde unabashedly admits her egoism in reminiscing: her ‘thinking years after’ has created another and more ‘real’ text of ‘what she felt at the time’, consecrating the memory of Winterwade (as

Pamela Widmerpool did concerning her dead lovers) – while the weaker Shadbold lacks the boldness to admit that ‘thinking years after’ on a hard evidence the Paris affair has made Winterwade, his forgotten one-time friend, into a ‘shit’ in his revived/ revised memory. Overpowered by Isolde’s unashamedly egoistic reminiscence and his own desire to keep a respectable façade, Shadbold is forced to admit that he and Winterwade were great friends and that he holds Winterwade as a man of letters in high esteem – thereby fettering himself more tightly in the contradiction between the fact that he tried to suppress Winterwade’s text and the pretence that the social texture he and Winterwade wove together was that of a beautiful friendship between talented men of letters. Shadbold’s complacency as a non-productive consumer of literary and social texts is punished by the power of those who set their will upon the production of literary text (Winterwade) and texts of life and memory (Isolde). Once thrown into the battlefield of the production of texts, Shadbold, a parasite of the textual world, can never hold his own comfortable niche.

The Powellian dictum that the world is a vast text woven by people’s will to secure as much profit as possible, and that the process of its weaving is what we call history, is as valid here as it was in *Dance*; the formation of past history from the present is also a matter of egoistic will. But this novella lacks the denouement its idea deserves. Shadbold’s temporary relief in finding the shadily woeful circumstances of Winterwade’s death (which will give him a pretext for having advised against the publication of his diary) ³³ and final despair to find that he has to write a preface to Isolde’s memoirs and that, at the same time, his attempt at the suppression of Winterwade diary is going to transpire, are not exactly implausible, but fail to convincingly conclude this story of comic retribution. It will be fair to say that *HWBI* fails to fully realize its plan to delve into the battle between different people’s egoistic attempts to define history to their own liking. The attempt is carried on in *FK*, with far more success; probably because Powell shows more commitment and determination in producing the text, than in the production of this pleasant but unsatisfactorily manufactured comedy.

³³ Winterwade is killed in the famous red-light district of Bombay, where, as an army officer, he went to entertain himself not with by women but with the miscellaneous, incongruous arrangement of things in the outpost of a declining empire (for instance, the picture of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra hung in a brothel): it’s the meaningless, incidental death of a detached comic observer who endures the contingent world – a fate that might well have befallen Nicholas Jenkins.

2. *The Fisher King* (1986)

FK is *Dance* in a nutshell. It has every major issues of *Dance* in it: love, sex, ambition, power and impotence (mental and material), self-projection and abandonment, and above all, methods of narrating stories that are made up of such elements in human life. But the sprawling scale of *Dance* is here downsized to a game of amorous musical chairs, with realistic detail drastically curtailed (the *Alecto*, the ship the characters travel in, totally lacks the substance of a real cruiser). *Dance*'s human relationships – the survival battle of people's will-power, plotting and cunning – are evoked in a way that is more consciously artificial than the technique of *Dance*. Because *FK* is microscopic, the patterned motifs are more strongly foregrounded than in *Dance*. The book is a meta-fiction in the form of social comedy – which was an aspect of *Dance* that was lost as it began to lay an excessive emphasis on the bizarre process of Widmerpool's fall.

That could have a double effect: on the one hand, we can have another look at the big project that was *Dance*, and its carefully constructed narration and use of metaphors and thematic devices, with fresh, alert eyes; on the other hand, the limitedness, artificiality, and fallibility of *Dance*'s narrative techniques (especially the 'close-up, slow-motion' method) cannot but be acutely felt, making *Dance* itself seem an inference on life based upon a collection of disparate snap shots. Either way, the point is that readers see *Dance*'s largest novelistic issue, namely that of the gap between the narrator and the narrated (which was always there under Jenkins's relatively bland voice) brought up and re-examined, more consciously than ever, in this novel. The narrative clearly and consciously points to the dialectic between the fluidity and continuity of the human power-struggle and the attempt to represent it in the immobility and instantaneity of *tableaux*, making it a hyperbolically stylized hypostasis of the way Powell tried to represent the world in *Dance* – the way, Powell seems to suggest, we live and perceive life with our necessarily imperfect knowledge of the world. It won't be too fanciful to regard Henchman, the wilful cameraman who wields power over his subject-matters (both in art and in relationship with them), who is damaged but often formidable, impotent but manipulative, limited but acute, as a fictional self-portrait of Powell as a flawed comic novelist: he has had the potential sensitivity to understand the folly and absurdities in human nature, and succeeded in adumbrating them in his sharp comic vignettes and character portraits; but he lacked the vigour and firm moral standpoint to tackle the evolution of society as a whole (especially during and after Second World War), qualities which were

acutely needed in his brave large-scale enterprise, *Dance*.

This novel obsessively keeps inspecting the process of narration in its myriad layers. As it is narrated in the third person, it seems natural that the author's voice should have an apparent control over the events; but at the same time, many of the main characters in *FK* are obsessive story-tellers whose voices claim places of their own in the text. Let us remember here that Jenkins in *Dance* was an obsessive story-teller of a never-ending story, but at the same time he was a character who was given the privilege of being ignored by all other characters; his very obscurity and anonymity made possible his reduction to a narrating voice, which paradoxically gave him the authority of *the* producer of text in the *Dance*: as Patrick Swinden argues somewhat acerbically in *The English Novel of History and Society, 1940-1980*, 'Most of the *élan* of the narrative [of *Dance*] depends on Jenkins's movements within a social world to which he is so acclimatised as to be invisible' (103). However, in *FK*, the story-tellers are incessantly refuted by other texts, or are the object of textualization by other characters; in other words, there is no authorized text in *FK*, at least at the level of the characters' presentation of their views of the world. Valentine Beals, a professional story-teller who earns his living by manufacturing historical thrillers flavoured by sex, is also a person obsessed by myths and archetypes and is eager to catch every opportunity of transforming his fellow-passengers on the *Alecto* into myth-figures (as if to make a parodical reference to the function of myths and archetypes in *Dance* as 'the ultimate synthesizer in the quest for formal designs satisfactory to the mind' [Joyau 46]). Mr Jack, a dilapidated and alcoholic one-time womanizer who is identified with Don Juan by Beals, is extremely deft at engaging any person who happens to sit near him at the bar in endless stories of seduction; and Saul Henchman, a crippled photographer whose identification with the Fisher King by Beals gives the novel its title, is also a refined re-presenter of such texts as the Arabian Nights and the Bible, twisting their effects in such a way that he can use them in attacking other characters. Their voices get intertwined with each other and with that of the author, sometimes even seeming to take over the authority of narration in the volume from the author himself. Neil McEwan rightly says in his monograph,

Doubt is an essential ingredient, both comic and sad, in Powell's narratives...People offer endless scope for theorising, and for story-telling. (14)

but here, people also offer endless theories and stories of their own, waiting for the chance to take over the narrative.

On that level, *FK* can be read as a meta-novel, in which the linearity of the plot is subjected to the process in which characters' own stories are formed and presented (we may count *Tristram Shandy* as a classical example of the genre); but on another level, the novel does have a plot in the traditional sense. During the cruise, Henschman, sexually impotent from the start, loses Barberina Rookwood, a young ballet dancer retired from the theatre to become his assistant; Barberina falls in love with Robin Jilson, but is deprived of him by Dr Lorna Tiptoft. Barberina's relationship with Henschman and two other men (Gary Lamont, a newspaper tycoon who is suffering from heart disease but continuing to pursue her, is on board; sharing a cabin with him is Jilson, a young man suffering from a muscular complaint and aspiring to become a photographer, to whom Barberina takes a fancy) prepares a plot of sexual comedy, fit to be acted out by the characters in the present of the novel and to be narrated by the author's voice in the past tense. However, these two levels are never completely separated, the apparently slapdash plot being given structure and meaning by the incessant story-telling of the characters, including Henschman, and the characters' ways of presenting their stories in turn being influenced by the development of the plot of the volume. In his essay 'The Epistemology of Gossip: Anthony Powell's "*Dance to the Music of Time*"', Stephen J. Tapscott points out that, in *Dance*, 'Gossip...provides Nick with several views from which to synthesize a multidimensional and relatively objective – or comic – perspective on actions and on his own experience' (112); in *FK*, the characters' various narratives in the form of stories and gossip interact with each other, and with the authorial narrative of the volume. This interaction between narratives invites readers to wonder whether there is anyone who is controlling all the strata of the volume.

The novel begins with a rather grandiose proclamation, 'Exile is the wound of kingship' (7). Readers with only the knowledge of the title of the book would suppose here that the novel is about a 'king' who is 'exiled'. When a novel is about an exiled person, the spatial centre of the novel (at least of the plot) is the place where he is exiled to; his place of origin is the exterior. However, the next sentence, 'When someone, recently *returned* from a transatlantic business trip, spoke of a man on crutches taking photographs in the back street of Oregon City, the rumour at once spread that Saul Henschman had settled in America' (my italics), seems to tell readers that America is exterior to the literary microcosm of the novel. Henschman's presence there is extremely obscure: Henschman is not the only lame man to own a camera; nothing was mentioned of the assistant, or Henschman's unusual set of countenance;

'In short, this might or might not have been Henschman.' The opening paragraph of the novel is presented to readers as exterior to the rest of the text, and is a place where the identity of the characters is yet to be fixed or has already been destroyed. The first sentence of the second paragraph, 'The Fisher King label seems to date from the second night at sea of one of the *Alecto's* summer cruises round the British Isles...' tells us that the latter is the case: that the rest and the main bulk of the book, in which characters are presented to us in person, is a process which retrospectively leads to the present of the narrative in the first paragraph. When the action of the novel is narrated, Henschman may be living, dead, taking photographs, fishing, anything. The confidence of the first proclamation in the present tense makes a strong contrast with the rest of the paragraph; but we should note that what is most certain in the paragraph is the fact that someone saw an unidentifiable person on the crutches taking photos on the street in Oregon City, a happening which is narrated in the past tense. 'Exile is the wound of kingship' is a proclamation without reference to the facts of the fictional world of *FK*; its confident arbitrariness makes manifest the existence of a voice not subject to the world it describes. After the narrative in the past tense in the rest of the first paragraph, the voice returns: 'The Fisher King label *seems* to date...' (my italics). This sentence reminds us of the existence of an unidentified person to whom the label 'seems', at present, to date from the second night of the cruise. But his lack of identity is on a different plane from that of the cameraman on the crutches. He is the source of a functionary narrative voice, always present but is never seen, sorting out the information and presenting it in the past tense to us readers. His authority is never doubted, but we can never be sure from where that authority comes. Indeed, the arbitrariness of the very first sentence can be read as a deliberate challenge to readers, who are deprived of their voices in the act of reading.

It is not we readers but Henschman and Beals who are made to take up the gauntlet; the photographer, despite his practice in optical art, is first introduced solely as a voice caught in Beals' consciousness:

Beals felt pretty sure that the responding *voice* – deep, ironic, sententious, preserving a purposeful touch of West Country speech – must belong to Henschman. The *speaker...out of sight...* commented that a no less congenial feature of this ancient Ring of Standing Stones lay in the fact that lusty trout (slightly mannered phrase) could be caught in the two great lochs nearby, adding that more than once in the past he had himself planned to fish up there, an intention never yet fulfilled. (8, my

italics)

Judging from Henchman's speeches in inverted commas appearing later in the volume, this speech, comparable to the most ponderous mood of Nicholas Jenkins' narration in the *Dance*, must be a fairly literal report of Henchman's words; nevertheless, the fact remains that it is a reported speech, and that it is heavily qualified ('deep', 'ironic', 'sententious', 'preserving a touch of West Country speech', and 'slightly mannered' in the choice of the phrase 'lustly trout'). But by whom is it qualified? The punctuation - dashes and parentheses - makes it ambivalent whether the qualifier is Beals or the author. Voices in this novel are almost fluid in their mutability: they signify (in other words, give significance to other people, events and things), and at the same time are the signified and objects of signification (in other words, receive significance from other people, events and things).

This ambivalence of voices - the oscillation between signifying and being signified - makes an intriguing comparison with the status given to people's eyes. The seers claim that their sole role is to give significance to things, to put them in a frame ('put you in the picture', a military phrase made use of by Widmerpool and detested by Jenkins in the war trilogy, is playfully quoted by Henchman); that their significance (*raison d'être*) is in the act itself of giving significance to other things, and that their act of seeing is not to be given any significance by the things caught by the eyes. In short, the gazes claim authority similar to that of the author of a novel: always present, but never seen; exempt from the interaction of signification among the characters (who are objectified by the past tense of the narrative but at the same time assert their position of givers of significance by using language themselves). The power and authority of the gaze is symbolized, of course, in Henchman's photography: when he is asked, by the amateur cameraman Sir Dixon Tiptoft, if he is a photographer, he retaliates by asking him (a retired bureaucrat) if he is a 'man of power' (reminding us of the use of the word 'power' in *Dance*, obsessively recurrent but never given a fixed meaning) and argues that, while cameras are generally regarded as a mere 'representational instrument', the sitters for portrait photography 'hand themselves over bodily just as much as when painted or drawn' (121). However, Henchman has nothing to rely upon but his camera and will-power in framing unexpected elements in other people's personalities. This solitary standpoint of his as a fictionalizer is in contrast with that of Dr Lorna Tiptoft, the domineering physician who takes over the right to take care of Robin Jilson from Barberina. She tells her parents,

Your eyes don't tell you the young man [Jilson]'s suffering from a rare muscular condition of the cranial motor nerves. If you're uninstructed in medical matters it's better not to pronounce on individual states. (57)

The masterful tone of the statement shows she is sure of her authority, but the authority has its source in medicine, a form of cognizance sustained by authorized information. In this scene, Dr Tiptoft seems to claim a power of sight that solely belongs to her ('*Your eyes don't...*'), whose presence is impossible for others to notice (until she proclaims it herself); but in fact she can be so masterful in her statement because she has information inaccessible to ordinary people: all she has to do to be the master of the scene is apply the system of information to the object she sets her eyes upon. Like her, Beals in the second chapter (when he secretly plays the game of identifying his fellow-passengers as they board; before the obsessive reference to 'so obscure a myth as that of the Fisher King' [7] is started by Henschman's voice) feels safe as a seer/ giver of significance backed up by an established system of knowledge – in his case, the list of passengers. However, when he comes up against another gazer who is invisible to all (but Beals himself), his complacency cannot but break: Henschman taking a photograph of the Tiptofts quarrelling over their luggage.

Raising the camera *almost imperceptibly*, he took a photograph of their fierce quarrelling. The movement was *so rapid as to be scarcely observable...* (15, my italics)

The imperceptibility of Henschman's gaze is obvious to Beals, who has kept an eye on Henschman; but here he has met a person whose act of gazing (it is one of the rare occasions in the novel when Henschman's releasing the shutter himself is described in the present of the narrative) is based on no established system of authority. It is true that the superficial motive of Henschman's taking such photographs is made clear near the end of the volume. By then, nearly all the plots of the volume have consumed themselves: the relationship between Henschman and Barberina is broken, Barberina's loss of Jilson for Dr Tiptoft is also made obvious, and Lamont has failed in seducing Barberina by breaking into her cabin. Henschman releases the shutter once to take a photograph of Lamont and Beals helping Jilson (who had an attack) to the cabin he shares with Lamont. He tells the others,

This will go into my private album, which few – I think only Barberina –

have ever seen. After taking what I hope will be a rather good photograph of the three of you as you now are, my conscience as an artist will be clear. (232)

The pictures are for his private collection (a fact in itself quite contradictory, photography being an especially public art owing to its easy reproducibility); but we are never told why he privately collects scenes of human conflict, or what the picture will be like. Henschman's act of seeing is caught in the eye of Beals, the betrayed voyeur (we cannot but remember the two great betrayed voyeurs in the *Dance*: Widmerpool betrayed by Pamela, Jenkins by his own act of writing), but what authorizes his act of seeing is not revealed in the narrative; its rootlessness abetting the desire of the counter-seer (Beals the voyeur/ us the readers) to give significance to it, but eluding the effort all the time. There remains Henschman's act of seeing as a pure movement of will without motive, divested of a fixed significance, despite the fact that Henschman emphasizes the function of cameras as an instrument of history that imposes its fixed interpretation as the sole valid one of the past. He says,

Photography is one of the aspects of Death and Regeneration...Nowadays a dead person depends almost entirely on photographs for the manner in which he or she is physically remembered. (122-3)

Here, we have come to a summary of the matter: on the one hand, the act of seeing can be as fluid, and as deep in the interaction of signification, as that of speaking, when it exposes itself to other eyes and it is made clear that it does not derive from any externally validated system of authority; on the other, especially when it is socially established/authorized as an optical art, the act can have the effect of crystallizing the amorphous movement of the present (that cannot really be repeated) into a particular interpretation of the past that can be reproduced and distributed – especially as photography is a form of manufactured art.

In this novel, however, the two photographers, Henschman and Jilson whom Henschman takes up as a person who can take over his art form from him, are both represented as deprived of their power of gaze. Henschman admits himself, 'I am suffering from a sense of my photographic powers running dry' (93). And, after Henschman throws away his crutches (an act symbolic of shaking the impotence away - though the crutches are to be retrieved in a short while) and goes headlong down the slope of the Wall to the other side, Jilson, following in his wake, falls and his

hand is bound up in bandages and slung by Dr Tiptoft's scarf (inscribed with the irrelevant but typically commanding slogan, *Keep the Earth Green*), so that it becomes impossible for him to handle his camera. Jilson is not too sorry to be deprived of his camera: infected by a disease which means that he '[c]an't always keep [his] eyes open for long periods of time' (90), he gladly takes refuge from Barberina's love into the commanding care of Dr Tiptoft. Abandoning the wilful creation of fictional representations of the world, he escapes (according to Beals, with 'the tenacious will of the indulged child,' 194) into the Doctor's field of sight authorized by medical discourse, to be protected by her. This is another kind of wall-building, or more accurately a wall-reparation (as Caracalla, the 'Mum's Boy' [Henchman, 173] who married a woman protecting him, repaired, not built, Hadrian's Wall): an escape into, and reinforcement of, an already well-established and utilitarian representation of the world. The restoration (or taking-over) of Henchman's photographic power is not to be done by Jilson; he abandons the frontier and retreats into the wall.

However, a consideration that should not be neglected here is that the frontier is that of representation and not (as Jilson feared) of reason: Henchman's lost power of gaze constituted, by its activity of representation, a frontier against the eroding tide of Time. His authority is that of the creator of a fiction, the controller of the interaction of signification. Nonetheless, his photography is not authorized by objective utility; his representation/ framing of the world is without any practical reward, a movement of pure will in the world of material things.

That is paradoxically proved when Henchman's activity is put into the frame of Mr Jack's endless narrative of his picaresque love affairs; paradoxically, because Mr Jack's narrative is nothing more than 'verbal vignettes' (113), a huge group of small narrative closures without the possibility of connecting with each other and with the outer world. The typical opening he uses for this episode is, 'Mr Henchman...don't for a moment expect...why should you?...just wondered...especially after some of the things you've been saying...' (183): the narrative 'I' is altogether absent; he feels no urge to emphasize the gap between the present of the narrator with the past of the narrated, because he takes his position of a story-teller narrating stories in the past tense totally for granted ('[y]ou have that strain of sanctimoniousness, essential to all womanizers of top class, one which enjoys a delicious sense of guilty horror at the thought of past adventures,' Henchman, 220). In other words, he is an ideal anonymous voice (his name, 'Jack', is well chosen: it can stand for man; a knave; a jack-of-all-trades who can somehow survive on and on anywhere in the world). His confidence that he will captivate his listeners, and ultimate uninterest in them ('prolix

in narration, sentimental in approach, heartless in abandonment, you are insensitive to the feelings of everyone but yourself,' Henchman, 220) is well contrasted with the solicitousness of Beals' Fisher King mythologization.

The essence of the story in which he falls in love with a plain and greedy prostitute, and asks Henchman (who specialized in photos of his customers' acts of 'special humiliation' [186] in that period) to frame them in an ordinary lovers' portrait, is the disinterested nature of the framing – in two senses. On the one hand, disinterested means 'without regard to personal advantage': Mr Jack tries to frame himself and a prostitute (for whom the principle 'time is money' is strongly felt in the relationship with the clients) in the timelessness of love, through the gaze of Henchman. On the other hand, the very frame of Mr Jack's narrative in the past tense settles Henchman's act of seeing, as well as Mr Jack's own sentimental attempt, in the *uninterestedness* of Time. The photograph is lost – the pocket-book in which he kept the photograph got 'swiped by another lady', and the negative is also gone. Disinterested love, once framed, is thrown into the uninterested forgetfulness of Time; so that Mr Jack can repeat the story as a part of his endless, deracinated narrative.

In the general subjection of myth to narrative in the volume, it stands to reason that, after Henchman regains his gaze in framing in photograph the plot of the struggle around Barberina, he chooses Mr Jack the story-teller, not Beals the mythologizer, as his 'male Scheherazade' (220) who should accompany him in his voyage with a camera beyond 'the edge of the known world' (256). However, as in the *Dance* the narrator was Jenkins, who stays on the right side of reason, so in *FK* it is Beals, the subjected mythologizer staying aboard the *Alecto*, who finally becomes a conspirator with the author to put an end to, and a frame of narrative plot round, everything in the volume. The climax of the situation around Barberina (it might be more accurately called anti-climax: the plot has produced nothing but an 'unspoken – in a sense even unacted out – story' [254] of her defeat), namely her dance as a valediction to Henchman, is a scene in which time apparently stops in magic; but Beals in the audience, in conspiracy with the author, fixes the timelessness of Barberina's dancing in the past tense: 'Beals...had *later* much to *recount*' (209, my italics). He certainly emphasizes the timelessness of the dance, 'the fact that... the dance seemed to exist in eternity' (210); but 'the fact' is that it *seemed* to exist in eternity, not that it really did. 'The fact' concerns Beals' cognition in the retrospect in which the dance is framed. Just after that statement, Beals/ the author carefully collects into their narrative the shout of 'Encore! Encore' '*Bis! Bis!*' (210), from Basically Bach and Marginally Mahler (who till then have been, ironically, nothing

more than salient signifiers that signify nothing, like Lewis Carroll's Tweedledum and Tweedledee), which, although Barberina does not dance again then and there, predicts her reinstatement in the theatre, in the politico-economics of gaze and signification in which the unrepeatability of performance is framed and consumed; she, too, stays on board the *Alecto* to return to London and the theatre after seeing Henchman off..

Before the two 'set off together from the narrow promontory on which The Ring had been built such a long time ago' (255), Henchman says to Mr Jack :

Come. Let us leave these pilgrims seeking forgetfulness of the Present in a Promised Land of the Past...we will make for the water. (Ibid.)

They seem to abandon the history (just before that, Henchman describes Adam – distorting and taking over Sir Dixon Tiptoft's argument about the architect brothers – as having 'the lesson of history...in front of him', 244) in favour of the timelessness of the scenery; but Henchman never abandons his camera. He escapes into the exterior of the narrative, which is the first paragraph of the book; but that is only to make the exterior a part of the representation of the world. True, I have argued that Henchman's identity is extremely obscure there, and the paragraph is presented as exterior to the literary microcosm of the novel; however, that is the narrator's trick for readers going through *FK* for the first time. When the readers have come to the end of the volume, the voice that narrates Henchman's and Mr Jack's disappearance brings us back to the first paragraph as a part of the narration of the whole world represented in the volume. At the end of the volume, the chaos beyond the border is described in the past tense, not in the timelessness of the present: '[t]he edge of the known world; man's permitted limits; a green-barriered check-point, beyond which the fearful cataract of torrential seas cascaded down into Chaos' (256, my italics). The author's voice, which made manifest its rootless authority in the deliberate use of the present tense in the first sentence of the volume, makes a return here, hidden behind the eyes of Beals, which will temporarily frame the scenery of the chaotic world beyond in retrospection, the traditional tense of novels.

FK is as time-conscious as *A Dance to the Music of Time*; even more so, as it is a novel about the politico-economics of fictionalised representation of the world. It is the last fictional self-proclamation by Powell, an author in the tradition of naturalistic world-representation. He has always self-consciously been so, in that, to quote X Trapnel's words, 'naturalism is selective,' and that the essence of naturalism is in the separation of, and interaction between, the representer and the represented. The

dialectical interaction is essentially comic, Powell seems to suggest, because it never ends and is never able to bring us to a point where our various efforts to give significance to the world finally meet the world itself.

Conclusion

An Overview of Powell's Career as a Writer of Fictional Comedy

Christopher Hitchens, one of the most ardent contemporary advocates of Anthony Powell's novels, wrote in his 1998 essay 'Powell's Way':

The success and failure of *Dance* are both of epic dimensions...An undertaking that set out to be, and was, an updating of the English novel manages to sustain itself with grace and wit over several long movements before being overtaken and outpaced by history and events... I first began to read *Dance* when it was incomplete and there was something to look forward to. The pleasure then afforded was rather greater than that which is offered by a long look back. (53)

Regrettably, I have to agree with this opinion. The promise that *Dance* would be more than the sum-total of the twelve volumes seems to have been put aside in the fourth trilogy. Each of its three volumes revolves around a character whose personality is intentionally made extremely flat, almost imploding. Their existences in the *Dance* seem quite deracinated and make little organic contribution to the whole; helping the fourth trilogy fall into a series of wilfully grotesque, disconnected farces. X. Trapnel is a construct derived from numerous bizarre role-models and gadgets (Boris Karloff, the swordstick, the taxis...); Pamela Widmerpool functions as an inexplicably alluring but frigid, death-obsessed living corpse, a glaringly powerful but two-dimensional end-game device; and finally, the very personality of Widmerpool, the greatest anti-hero of *Dance*, becomes hopelessly hollow in *HSH*. Not that his personality was quite replete from the start, but his hollowness had a paradoxically substantial plausibility, and a considerable momentum, in the earlier volumes. Although the final glow of his philistine formidability in *BDFR* when he flatly spurns Trapnel's pathetically desperate performance with his swordstick ('No dramatics, please', 203) manages to be plausible and therefore enjoyable, Lord Widmerpool's spying as the possible Fifth Man and his attempt at becoming a guru of youth culture seem fanciful, almost arbitrary. Such activities are quite out of place in the serious portraiture of the inevitable 'comic-ness' of the world *Dance* seems to purport to be. Something must have changed while *Dance* proceeded towards an ending that was twice delayed (first when Powell included the war in the series, and secondly when he decided to carry it directly into the contemporary world). Or, was

this destiny built into the very structure of *Dance* as a comic representation of the world, from the start – when Powell embarked on the ambitious task of writing a comic *roman fleuve*?

As I have argued, Powell's pre-war novels incessantly suffered from the mingling of farce and a more serious kind of comedy. In a farce, authors are free to set the rules of the little world they create, and to manipulate the grotesque characters according to such rules, as long as the outcome is entertaining enough. (Who cares that Captain Grimes, Mr Prendergast or Dr Fagan could not exist in the world we inhabit? They behave as they do because they are made that way, and brilliantly so.) The five novels of normal length by Powell sometimes seem to be content with such an attitude, as Dr Clutch, Major Fosdick and Gaston de la Tour d'Espagne perform their antics. At other times, they veer uncomfortably (and rather feebly) towards a more serious comment on the absurd futility of life. However, the problem there is that the limited settings of the novels (where bourgeoisie meet bohemianism) fetter the validity of such comments: a hostile critic could have opined that the bourgeois-bohemian life Powell depicted was seedy and futile because such was its nature, Q. E. D. In other words, the artificiality and rootlessness of the life in that milieu made the characters' doings, at least on the surface, quite readily amenable to small-scale farce. And Powell seems to have compromised with such simplification by reducing the serious motives of life – for instance, desire, power, or egoism – to a level of caricature (most obviously, in the case of Zouch's *Übermensch* determination). So, the people there, even if they were not located in the region of pure farce, could go on forever in the small cycles of seduction, abandonment and frustration, until the curtain fell quite arbitrarily – again, as in Zouch's case; or T. T. Waring's. In *WBW*, the coexistence of the elements of farce (for instance, Hugh Judkins's genteel Bedlam antics) and those of more serious reflection ('everyone wanted power,' 236) was too uncomfortable to be borne in the mode of light-hearted comedy as embodied in the figure of Eustace Bromwich as he first appears in the volume. It was evident that a larger narrative receptacle was needed for the purpose towards which Powell was gradually edging his way.

When Powell, after the war, decided that he 'was going to settle down to do something much longer – generally approach the thing more thoroughly' (*Summary* interview 129), he had in mind the creation of a receptacle that could contain not only 'a series of practical jokes' but also 'major issues' (*QU* 16-7) of life charged with powerful emotions. The contrast between 'a series of jokes' and 'major issues' is originally applied to the apparently meaningless life of Uncle Giles, but it has a wider relevance to the argument here. In the pre-war novels, Powell's main method

of comic representation was the cruelly economical outlining of the pointless lives he dealt with, based on acute rapid sketches: assured of the permanently unchanging cycle, Powell as the presenter of the farcical daily rounds had merely to provide 'human life and character...icily etched' (*BM* 152) in a glimpse. But in *Dance*, Powell's intention to deal with the comic movements of life in a more serious, deeply reflective manner ('Was it possible to take Uncle Giles seriously? And yet he was, no doubt, serious enough to himself. If a clue to that problem could be found, other mysteries of life might be revealed,' *BM* 158) required the introduction of a sequential view of life: he was going to deal with a region where expectations, speculations, development, endurance and consequential satisfaction or disappointment were endlessly in play. *Dance* is, on the one hand, distinct from farce, which is the conception of life as just a series of meaningless antics; on the other hand, it rejects the mode of traditionally 'serious' novelistic comedies in the manner of Fielding or Austen, in which the narrative comes to a definitive end with the attainment of such practical, worldly goals as happy marriage. One of Powell's initial ambitions in *Dance* was to introduce such *uncomic* elements as suffering, agony, ageing, decay and death to his world and to make them compatible with the essential comicality of his vision, while not treating them in a farcically throwaway manner as he did before the war.

Certainly, the small social milieu the first half of *Dance* deals with is not much different from that of his pre-war novels. The activities of the people examined there, who keep on being silly, vain, pretentious, ineffectual or deranged while they age towards their extinction, are without doubt farcical. However, Powell and Jenkins argue, they are serious enough in their egoistic intentions. No one can be satisfied with a flat, farcical existence; as long as they live, people cannot help trying to inspire their own doings with meaning and satisfaction, even at the cost of other existences. Under the patchy social dance of convention, there lurks an ugly, merciless collision between people's wilful choreography of their own lives. When the inelegant collisions of the dancers' steps visibly breach social convention, farcical situations ensue; but the dancers' seriousness requires something more than mere disdainfully farcical treatment. The spectators are invited to reflect why they take such steps as they do, whether there is a principle that controls – or a pattern to be deduced from – the awkwardly comic and sometimes very ugly changing of partners. Jenkins's standpoint is basically that of such a spectator, fascinated by the vain seriousness of the dancers. He does not show any anger towards the ugliness of the dance, or propose any method of improving the dancers (therefore, as Powell maintains in the *Summary* interview, *Dance* has nothing to do with satire). His aim is

to convince readers of the artificiality of social conventions, and to depict an underlying egoism, power, and one-upmanship as the natural and eternal state of our comically or absurdly incomplete existence. There, people's seriousness is made relative and flat; elements that require our sympathy – or at least our respect – are stamped out in the flux of ugly, self-centred and ultimately meaningless struggles. The distinction, never clear even in the pre-war novels, between an 'agent' and a 'patient' totally collapses here: people are at once aggressive and helpless, self-importantly active and serious but never really to be taken quite seriously, desperate to create a plausible self-image but at the same time confined within a deterministic matrix of personality. The most obvious example is Widmerpool: he is forever 'Widmerpool', that is philistine, awkward, unattractive, prone to sexual fiascos; but at the same time he is incessantly pushing forward towards an apparently unattainable goal.

In Powell's pre-war novels, there were no elements of three-dimensionality, only the flat expanse of farce (that is why the London world of *AM* could be transplanted to a Baltic – almost Ruritanian – setting, wholesale, in *V*). On the other hand, what *Dance* purports to be is a realistic, rounded account of the eternal dialectic between people's serious attempt to rise above the level of meaningless farce and the momentum of worldly power-struggles that relegate human beings to a displaced, flat, farcical existence. The essence of the enduring comedy of *Dance* is in people's inability to learn: the cause of failure is always the discrepancy between invented conventions or stories and the reality of worldly struggle, but people are too seriously intent on their own deranged choreographies to avoid it.

A few characters, like Sunny Farebrother and Jean Duport, are wise enough to abandon themselves to the sleek two-dimensionality of their personalities, with far more adeptness than Zouch 'treating life as a sort of quick-lunch counter where you helped yourself and all the snacks are free' (*FVD* 12). While Farebrother's smooth operations still have the amiable comicality of someone who cannot 'entirely conceal his own shrewdness' (*SA* 195; also see his constant fear of being overheard), Jean's philistine two-dimensionality is complete. Despite her ability to appreciate art, her real love is only for power and money: she is a cynical Widmerpool, a Widmerpool with an instinct to carefully avoid ostentatious self-promotion and therefore disappointment. That's why she is never comic, while being able to eternally swim in the flow of time, resurfacing occasionally as a symbol of the serene irresponsibility of the world. (I cannot help dreaming of an alternative ending to *Dance*. After the war, Jean marries Widmerpool – whom she once entirely ignored when he helped Duport to patch things up with her – and becomes his deserved nemesis, in place of

the wildly fanciful but ultimately implausible Pamela. She exploits him to the bone and throws him away, deranged, in the end; but their child takes up his or her father's unending struggle, beginning to quickly rise in the world, and thus bringing the never-ending Dance of the world to another generation...)

But few people can become as cynical as Jean: they have to maintain their patchy existences at the level of unintended farce. Sometimes they sink below to an obscure limbo (like Uncle Giles in his unknown daily life on the margin of gentility, or Maclintick just a step from the border of sanity), while it is not utterly impossible for them to occasionally rise above to a dignity of one kind or another, however temporary or paradoxical (like Mr Deacon's quixotic earnestness; General Conyers's tolerance of, and interest in, the anomalies of the world; Ted Jeavons's hidden charm; Gwatkin's 'style' achieved in the depth of misery; Matilda Donners's stoic fortitude in the midst of life's incongruousness). In *Dance*, as we have seen, there is no criterion of real superiority, no phase of life that completely escapes from the indignity of farce. However, these up-and-down movements give it a possibility of depth, or a tentative, elusive glimpse of the third dimension. As people unceasingly undergo unintended fluctuations in their power-struggle, hitherto unseen aspects of their personalities are revealed, and surprise Jenkins and readers alike. Powell is at his best when his characters resist the deterministic matrices imposed on them, showing that life is more interesting than it superficially looks.³⁴ At such moments, it becomes temporarily possible for us to deduce a new pattern from the Dance steps: the doings concerned come close to constituting a rounded human comedy, before being pushed back again by the eternally farcical, irresponsible movement of the world.

At the same time, however, the greatest intrinsic weakness of *Dance* is its seeming lack of purpose. As we have seen, it is not written to prove something or to reform the world in some way or other. While its existence in the history of English literature throws a light on the artificiality of the tradition of comedy-of-manners – of

³⁴ Even Widmerpool, the flattest of all flat Powellian characters, has an element of unpredictability in his personality. For instance, when he grasps Barbara Goring's wrist in *BM*, it is clear that he is not doing so from philistine reasons. Even his engagement with Mildred Haycock, when we have another look at it, seems to involve more the hope of social advancement: he could have chosen a woman with more money and amenability. Walter T. Rix validly says in his essay 'Anthony Powell, *A Dance to the Music of Time: Circular Progression*', 'Whereas Nick tends towards art, imagination and the Dionysian force, Widmerpool falls into the category of war, will and the Apollonian principle' (40); but at the same time, we can look at Jenkins as an Apollo who wants to impose patterns on everything, and Widmerpool as a Dionysus who eternally escapes definition by the furious power that drives him.

novels that were written to show modes of bourgeois or petit bourgeois survival in society (such works as *Tom Jones*, *Emma*, and *David Copperfield* instantly come to mind; and in a more ironical sense, Meredith's *Egoist*) - readers of *Dance* cannot help asking themselves, 'what do these 3000 pages teach us?' In Evelyn Waugh's Guy Crouchback series, for instance, the hero's crazed belief in an aristocratic sense of honour at least gives readers a sense of the direction in which the volumes are proceeding. In *Dance*, there is no such sense. Or worse, a charge can even be made against the smugness of the hidden standard of value that defines Widmerpool as grotesquely comic while facilely endorsing the general acceptability of some characters, most notably Nicholas Jenkins. Jenkins's standpoint sometimes resembles that of the anonymous narrators of Powell's pre-war novels - always there but never seen, belonging to the novelistic milieu but excluded from the farce enacted there by tacit agreement between the author and readers. Powell repeatedly asserts that *Dance* would have become a totally different thing if Jenkins, the transparent observer, were involved in the comedy of the world. Quite true; but readers can reasonably ask, 'Why not?'

We can regard Jenkins as the weakest link in the chain: the most serious complaint against *Dance* would be that the personality of the narrator does not have enough weight to support his extremely long narration. If *Dance* were narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator in the traditional Victorian way, such a problem would not have arisen; if it were narrated by General Conyers or Widmerpool (not that they would narrate it - but if *Dance* were written in the form of, say, their journals), it would have been a very different thing but more easy for readers to believe in, because these characters are deeply engaged in the Dance of the world. However, the personality of Jenkins is, basically, nil. His position in the world he narrates is, to say the least, very awkward: the harder he (or Powell) asserts that it is detrimental for the balanced narration to involve the narrator himself, the more readers' uneasiness at being told a story by a person whose appearance, purpose in life and political standpoint are obscure, increases. (Clearly, such *nouveau roman* uneasiness is not intended.) It is all very well for Powell to emphasize 'If you're writing as an eye you have to be very careful to keep that eye credible', but he goes on to say:

If Jenkins told you a lot about himself he'd lose his credibility as a reporter. In fact, he would build up in your mind as an appalling egotist. (1962 interview by Douglas M. Davis, 535-536)

The suspicion deepens: isn't Powell implicitly expecting his readers to accept that Jenkins's credibility rests not on his earnestness to show them something, but on the fact that Jenkins's life is his own life, or at least similar to it in kind – that is to say, a life that is established in the British upper-middle social stratum? It is understandable that Powell, as a modernist, could not possibly adopt the author-reader contract around an omniscient third-person narrator. But, if so, didn't he have to show that the narrator is a 'real' person in a fictional sense, to make his narration able to support itself?

Certainly, Powell could not have made Jenkins an appalling, self-pitying egotist of Charles Ryder/ Guy Crouchback mould, given the unique purpose of *Dance* as a comedy of eternally shifting perspectives. But didn't he miss a great chance to give Jenkins the necessary weight as narrator, when he decided to shape the war trilogy as he did? Until then, Jenkins's non-commitment in the Dance of the world has been relatively acceptable: in the circles he inhabited, it has not been so strange that he is unobtrusively accepted everywhere he goes, more often than not becoming the recipient of important confidences. In the army, his credentials must have been brought under more suspicion, especially as he does not seem to have been a particularly efficient soldier. There must have been people who would not 'accept' – or would positively reject – him, and another kind of bitter comedy that involves Jenkins might have been caused by their discrepancy. Powell ignores such possibilities, making Jenkins go on in much the same way as ever, as an unobtrusive, comfortably noncommittal spectator excluded from the struggle around him; the trick seems more mannered in circumstances where superiority in rank directly gives one the power to dominate. After the well-written but isolated comedy around Gwatkin in *VB*, when Jenkins finds himself 'in Widmerpool's power' (*VB* 243), readers may well expect that Jenkins will have an experience that makes him wonder about his own weaknesses (as did the nightmarish sex with Gypsy Jones – a very rare occasion when Jenkins is pushed to the centre of the stage). But the possibility is aborted by Jenkins's transference to the I Corps, resulting in the sketchy, peripatetic structure of *MP* and the rather off-the-cuff rounding off of the whole experience of war in St. Paul's Cathedral. When it was decided that *Dance* would be carried into the war, it was not enough simply to continue in the same mode: the change in circumstances should have been acknowledged by Jenkins. Powell should have made him come face to face with the reality of his position as a mere cog (rather a rusty one at that) in the military machine, reflecting the experience in his study of the most artificial and most power-laden of all the social organizations on earth, the army. If that had been done, one important aspect of the structure of *Dance* including the war trilogy – the

fact that it features so many soldiers in peacetime and so many civilians-turned-amateur-soldiers in war, emphasizing the omnipresence of the element of battle in life – would have been given a suitable momentum, making the whole choreography of the series more lively and clear. Regrettably, that process was avoided; instead of the artificiality of power relationships in the army, the artificiality of Jenkins's narration comes under the spotlight in the war trilogy.

After making Jenkins slither rather aimlessly through the war, Powell seems to have regressed into the very mode of deterministic farce that he abandoned when he began to write *Dance*. In the former two trilogies, people danced out their personality (and its hidden, unexpected aspects) as they took their incongruous, warring steps charged by their desires; the choreography of the dance was to be deduced from the changing scenes. But in the fourth trilogy, Powell's own choreography of the endgame dominates: he successively makes use of puppet-like characters powerfully charged with 'symbolic' functions; in *TK*, he even uses his 'thematic placard' trick not to suggest something Jenkins induces from the dance steps but to predispose the steps, when he goes headlong into the *Candaules and Gyges* machinations. Here, Powell is arbitrarily manipulative: things manifestly happen because he decides that they will happen. The incongruous farcicality of this society and this world is no longer something that he makes us reflect upon. (A telling example is the editorial office of *Fission*; there, nobody is ever serious, but everyone is relegated to the level of Sheldon and Shermaker as literary Tweedledum and Tweedledee.)

The comedy in the fourth trilogy generally fails to work because everything is predictable and functions purely at the level of device; there are few moments when the flat comedians seem to rise – or make serious efforts to rise – towards three-dimensionality. And lost in the giddy goings-on of the wildly grotesque characters, Jenkins seems to have let go, given up his effort to display the choreography of the world in ever-shifting perspectives. Thus, the ambitious, resounding last sentence of *HSH*, 'Even the formal measure of the seasons seemed suspended in the wintry silence' (272), sounds sadly out of place in the overall structure of the fourth trilogy.

Here, I cannot but be reminded of the grim, weary glimpses of Jenkins in his later life, at the rare occasions when this self-effacing man lets fall some honest remarks on life:

One never takes lessons to heart. It's just a thing people talk about – learning by experience and all that... [I think] one just gets these knocks from time to time. (*VB* 233)

Sloth means Accidie too. Feeling fed up with life. There are moments when I can put forward claims. (*HSH* 62)

These are the sentiments that *Dance* – at any rate those scenes in which the enduring comedy of our incomplete existence is presented with precision, tolerance and humanity – usually succeed in suppressing. But the cynic's sigh was never completely dispelled by Powell. At the worst moments, Jenkins's detachment smacks uncomfortably of the disdainful nonchalance of an upper middle class comic novelist, who has lost the vitality and firm belief of his ancestors – Fielding or Austen – while coming too late to participate in the innovations of modernism. Regrettably, such moments come increasingly to dominate the scene as the series nears its end.

In *FK*, his last novel, Powell completely abandons his comic realism in favour of writing a thesis on the process of artistic world representation, in the format of a contrived farce. In a sense, it is a hyperbolic commentary on *Dance* and its author is half apologetic and half satirical. Perhaps we can regard Saul Henchman as a self-portrait of Powell as an artist: flawed, insecure, deeply mired in the petit bourgeois social system but sharply critical of it, destined to wander eternally among the small stories of struggle that are daily woven and sooner or later forgotten in the flow of time.

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