

A Dance to the Death of God: The Novels of Antony Powell

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English novelist Antony Powell (1905-2000) is best known for his 12-volume novel *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951-1975) [hereafter *Dance*]. The title is in reference to Poussin's great painting of the same name – painted 1634-1636 – held in the Wallace Collection in London¹. In the painting, the standard interpretation is that the Four Seasons dance in a circle, holding hands and facing outwards while Time plays his lyre; the painting being generally taken to represent “the perpetual cycle of the human condition”². Yet as Powell notes in his memoirs, when he encountered the painting at the very beginnings of planning and writing the *Dance* sequence, the painting “expressed at least one important aspect of what the novel must be”³; that is, the “figures are dancing to Time's tune”⁴ and while they can be taken to represent the seasons, for Powell they “seem no less ambiguous as Pleasure, Riches, Poverty, Work, or perhaps Fame.”⁵

Powell's sequence is noted for causing strong reactions in readers; there are many who believe it is a snobbish cycle of upper-class Britain from just before the Great War to the early 1970s; yet I agree with those who believe this is a deliberate misunderstanding and misreading. Interestingly, such figures of the left as Tariq Ali and Perry Anderson – and

also Christopher Hitchens⁶ – are among his admirers. As Tariq Ali observes, Powell's novel sequence is actually

a reflection of the social history of five crucial decades of the last century" and far from it being a closed qword, is actually a social comedy on creativity, continental in its ethos and culture, comparable to Proust and Musil, with Powell described as "the most European of twentieth-century British novelists".⁷

I am an unashamed fan of Powell⁸, having read the sequence six times over the past 30 years, each time finding a different novel or novel in the sequence gains central focus and emphasis. In many ways it could be said *Dance* is a type of secular Bible, a text turned to time and time again for insight as to the human condition, the dance of life itself as it is played out between those who focus on the pursuit of power and that who align themselves with culture and creativity. To deal with the raising of such contradictions is perhaps what 'the novel' does; it draws our attention and focuses our thoughts on such contradictions so that we must contend with them.⁹ As *Dance* displays, this can also be achieved through what is an extended social comedy; for we should not confuse serious intent with a serious style.

Dance is also a novel of observation, narrated by the mainly dispassionate observer Nichols Jenkins who records his impressions, memories, observations and conversations – and gossip gathered – over more than five decades, from school days to late middle age. We do not gain access to interior lives of these participants, except when they are expressed in conversations, or more obliquely, by their actions. However these actions may not necessarily be observed by the narrator, rather they may be observed by others, recorded, passed on in conversation or gossip and so our knowledge – as relayed by Jenkins – is as episodic and incomplete as that of Jenkins himself. Jenkins too, is rather reticent of his own life; we get sufficient details that a life can be sketched of an only child in a military family, education at school much like Eton, university at an institution much like Oxford, work in a middling publisher then in the British film-quota production sector as a screenwriter, service in the army – but in liaison and staff roles, not in combat, marriage into an aristocratic family, children, a life spent in journalism and writing after the war. This mimics in many ways much of Powell's own life, but as his

superb four-volume memoirs¹⁰ make clear – as also in many interviews – a reader would be foolish to take *Dance* as either thinly or thickly-veiled autobiography. Rather, *Dance* proceeds whereby “the moment the ‘I’ of the novel is embroiled with ‘invented’ characters, the ‘I’ ceases to be the author, who is henceforward having experiences not known before.”¹¹

Similarly, Powell notes the central need to of fiction whereby the ‘real person’ who sets going the idea of a ‘major’ character in a novelist’s mind always requires change, addition, modification, development, before he (or she) can acquire enough substance to exist as a convincing fictional figure. These alterations come not so much from thought on a novelist’s part as from the uncontrolled subconscious instinct that gives a ‘character’ life; while the smallest deliberate change made by a novelist to suit the story’s convenience means, in truth, that all genuine dependence on the original model ceases – in contrast with traits (possibly inconvenient from a fictional point of view) that must unavoidably be chronicled about a ‘real person’ in Memoirs or Autobiography.¹²

What Powell creates in *Dance* is a fictional universe of “a twelve-volume novel, four or five hundred characters, a million words” wherein “the narrator, Nicholas Jenkins, is merely a vehicle for expressing how people and happenings struck him over a period of some sixty years”, a narrative that is told in a manner as “over the dinner table, rather than as recorded history.” This means the narrative concerns “matters on which the opinion of his listeners may differ.”¹³

That this is indeed a fictional universe is explained by Hilary Spurling’s *Handbook to the Dance*, which includes a character index (both fictional and those real life figures who are mentioned or have a passing role to play); a book index “(including Writers, Plays and Playwrights, Pamphlets, Magazines and Articles, Publishing Houses and a Literary Prize, together with sections covering Biblical Texts, Hymns and Popular Songs)”¹⁴, a Painting Index “(including Painters, Sculptors, Works of Art, Collections, Galleries, Exhibitions etc)”¹⁵, and a place index whereby “fictional places are distinguished from actual ones”.¹⁶

To enter into *Dance* is therefore to enter into this fictional universe, to enter into fictional time, but a fictional universe and time that exists as a narrator’s experience: necessarily incomplete, revised, and repetitious of

people and places. The novel is therefore also 'novel' in the sense of being new, original and never read before because it is the expression of a narrator's impressions, insights, memories and revisions; a narrator who does not exist outside of the text, but who also exists because of the author and the act of writing and more so, thinking the novel.

Dance is a novel about time, but what time is it? Here I draw upon Graham Ward's statement in *Cities of God* that the question theology "does not handle" is the question concerning "what time is it?"¹⁷ For Powell himself, the answer seems to have been clear: this was a time after god. There is no ordering principle or power in the world that can be called or identified with God. Time – such as it provides that which the world dances to – is not Christian time. For this is a social history in which religion and god are notably absent – or if present exist on the margins as cultural reference as hymns or as the provider of civic services (such as the Service of Victory and Thanksgiving held at St Paul's Cathedral at the end of the Second World War, in *The Military Philosophers*) or places where the rituals of weddings, baptism and funerals may be held. But the characters live outside religion, outside of Christianity as a way to exist in time, as a way to think about time. This is the time of the Nietzschean death of God.

We get intimations of this in Powell's novels of the 1930s in which he practices his craft. In his first novel, *Afternoon Men*¹⁸ (1931), written in a sparse, deliberately modern style Powell narrates the lives of the young, disaffected, dissolute post-Great War generation that as Ed Park's insightful essay notes, could just as easily be labelled "A Portrait of the Artist as a Droll Slacker"¹⁹ – and that is central to its ongoing appeal some 80 years after its publication. In itself this raises an interesting question as to 'what is the novel?'; for, central to the novel is its claim of specificity *and* universality, of time *and* place and yet also cross-decades appeal and sensibility. The characters in *Afternoon Men* are not slackers in the late-modern sense²⁰ yet are recognizably companions to that life and sensibility when viewed – as it were- backwards. Alternatively, from the late 1920s/early 1930s they could be read and recognized as that modern invention – the disaffected, educated, dissolute young person who is critical of the work-place world and ethos of modernity but finds themselves circulating by default through it. They possess enough will

and intelligence to try to resist, but not enough of either to escape, and so exist in a type of personal and societal interregnum. Time – their time – the time of the age – lacks any overarching meaning or drive and so theirs is a type of circular dance that occurs, sometimes faster, sometimes deadeningly slow, a dance of ennui on long afternoons, often in the evenings a dance of sex and drama; a dance that seems often easier if one is distracted and perhaps drunk. Or as Fotheringham begins to expand (before losing his thread of thought), in one of many later afternoon bar conversations, friendship is what happiness relies upon,

most of all in this struggle, this mad, chaotic armageddon, this frenzied, febrile striving which we, you and I, know life to be; and when we come at last to those grey, eerie, and terrible waste lands of hopeless despair, unendurable depression and complete absence of humour that drink and debt and women and too much smoking and not taking enough exercise and all the thousand hopeless, useless, wearying and never to be sufficiently regretted pleasures of our almost worse than futile lives inevitably lead us to..."²¹

Yet this is why Powell's time is a time of comic regret and observance, a time when it is the meandering conversations, observations and asides of friendship that propel us through life, a propulsion that ebbs and flows, a propulsion that has no end in sight, that has no drive for those who are not driven by the will and a quest for fame and power. Or, as Fotheringham notes regarding friendship as the only thing that makes 'everything' worthwhile:

I'm not a religious chap. I don't know anything at all about that sort of thing. But there must be something beyond all this sex business."²²

These are young people who, rather than do the mundane work they are employed to do prefer to "think about existence and its difficulties"²³ – not that they ever attain any insights because the mundane keeps intruding; perhaps as in the case of Atwater it is the telephone ringing with an invitation from a young woman he has met at a party but is not really interested in: "There was the world making itself felt again. Once more material things had forced themselves forward."²⁴

Powell is an acute social observer and from his novels we gain a fascinating insight into what was forming and framing the thoughts and lives of all those living 'after god'. In *Afternoon Men*, Atwater notes and specifically mentions that among the books (unnamed) on the shelves of the painter Barlow is *Thus Spake Zarathustra*²⁵ and this ongoing influence of Nietzsche – and it will be posited, Nietzschean time – continues throughout his writings, either explicitly as shall be discussed in *From A View to a Death* or more generally, as time being that of the will and power as laid out in *Dance* and perhaps most centrally in the character of Widmerpool.

The question of what to do with one's life if one lacks ambition and will is continued in Powell's next novel *Venusberg* (1932). The Powellian theme of young men trying to make sense of romantic attractions and engagements – yet without a will to act decisively – continues in this, with Lushington spending time as a special correspondent in a Baltic nation and getting involved in various romantic, political and social entanglements that are both comic and a cause of ongoing despair. Lushington's ambition causes him to pursue opportunities, yet he lacks sufficient will to make a proper success of them; rather, Powellian time sets him on yet another dance in which he is danced as much as he may think he is dancer. If Nietzsche is specifically referenced in *Afternoon Men*, in *Venusberg* it is Freud's *Psychopathology of Life*; such references provide clues as to what Powell is observing as enabling a way to understand the times he and his characters find themselves in. In all Powell's novels various characters give expression to ways to understand the world, not necessarily philosophically but more we could say, hermeneutically. Here for instance is the Professor of Psychology, Professor Mavrin in *Venusberg*:

...it is impossible to disregard the intricacies, the compromises, which must accompany any reconciliation of the reachings of the doctrinaire who may content himself with hypothetical cases of comparative simplicity, with the more complicated and personal problems of the world in which we live.²⁶

In *From A View to a Death* (1933), the painter Zouch ingratiates himself into a English country house. Zouch is a determinedly modern and bohemian young man, yet here we see an early indication of the divide

that was to drive the *Dance* novels; for even if, as a painter, Zouch could be expected to be on the creative side of the Powellian divide, his embracing of Nietzsche locates him as on the side pursuing power – and this is to be his downfall:

Zouch was a superman. A fair English equivalent of the Teutonic ideal of the *ubermensch*. No one knew this yet except himself. This was because he had not been one long enough for people to find out. They would learn in good time; and to their cost. Meanwhile he went on his way, taking but not giving, treating life as a sort of quick-lunch counter where you helped yourself and all the snacks were free. He was ambitious, naturally, and painted bright, lifeless portraits that would have hung in the Academy if he had sent them there but which he preferred to show in smaller galleries having the reputation for being modern. His preponderance therefore lay in the spheres, stressed by English educationalists, of character rather than developed talent.²⁷

Yet to seek to live the life of the *ubermensch* is – as Vernon Passenger, the other, provincial *ubermensch* Zouch encounters – to be “gnawed inside with megalomania.”²⁸

The failure of the *ubermensch* is emphasized in Zouch's dislike for reading – and moreover, in what his limited reading involves:

Zouch himself did not care for reading, except a few favourite books like *The Way of All Flesh* and *Moby Dick* and the *Four Just Men*, all of which he would read over and over again, and reading was a habit he discouraged in the women with whom he was associated. He had noticed that it was inclined to make them over-critical.²⁹

The choice of books is telling; Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* is exactly the type of novel an undereducated, decidedly 'modern' and consciously *ubermensch* young man would latch onto; as one discussion noted, following its posthumous publication in 1903, “In all the English-speaking countries (the book has had no great reputation elsewhere), advanced young men and women devoured *The Way of All Flesh*.”³⁰ Yet, Zouch's admiration marks him as a man already out of time, stuck in adolescent tastes and attitudes, because as he is almost 29 years of age³¹ (that is, in 1933 the same age as Powell) he should have

moved on to “more complex novels, such as those by Joyce and Lawrence...that captured the estimation of advanced people.”³² Similarly, *Moby Dick* is precisely the type of novel that would appeal to a self-styled *ubermensch* and autodidact; while Powell deftly undercuts Zouch’s pretensions by also including the prolific pulp writer Edgar Wallace’s tale of four wealthy assassins who, in their own way, act as *ubermensch* in taking the law into their own hands to kill those who they believe deserve to die.

Zouch’s will to power causes his demise; he agrees to go hunting even though he cannot properly ride because “he remembered he was a superman and he saw no reason why he should not learn to do the things which were required of him with perfect ease. The will to power should teach him how to ride.”³³ In Zouch’s battle of wills with Mr Passenger, it is the younger man who is killed, forced into a situation whereby to demonstrate his strength of will he rides the unsuitable horse Creditor, falls off and dies. In Zouch we can note the way time has already begun its dance in Powell’s mind; Zouch in his Nietzschean pretensions and interests harks back to the painter Barlow in *Afternoon Men*, but also, in his death in pursuit of an act of will and in his self-conception, anticipates those characters, especially Widmerpool in *Dance*, who live – and die by the will- even as (or more so, because) they fancy themselves *ubermensch* because of their pursuit of the will and power.

Powell’s next novel, *Agents and Patients* (1936) demonstrates his “weakness for dividing the population into those who act and those who are acted upon”³⁴ that is, drawing inspiration from a phrase from one of John Wesley’s sermons (as cultural not religious artefact): “*So in every possible case; He that is not free is not an Agent, but a Patient.*”³⁵ These are the afternoon men now fallen into shabby bohemia of “post-war types”³⁶, a world whereby one could combine being “an art-critic and amateur of psycho-analysis”³⁷ (Chipchase) or have “connexions with the film industry”³⁸ (Maltravers), yet whereby perhaps their most defining characteristic is that they “gave no hint of intellectual aptitudes”.³⁹ Both had a background in journalism and “Chipchase had published a short book on psycho-analysis and automatic writing, but its sales had not been large”⁴⁰. However they decide to combine their attention to not only

get Chipchase “a suitable patient to experiment on for a new system of psychological and psycho-analytical treatment I am developing” but also enable Maltravers to make his film which is “to be a document of behaviour founded to a certain extent on the findings of psycho-analysis⁴¹. I take a small group of people. I show certain salient features of themselves. Dreams. Desires. I illustrate their behaviour.”⁴² To do both, they need the patient, a patient of economic means and they find one in “an unexceptional young man”⁴³ Blore-Smith, recently down from Oxford and reading for the bar. An orphan of independent means, he is constrained by the expectations and attitudes of his deceased parents – “midland business people”⁴⁴ – and now, in London, is wanting to do something with his life, but not in any way that would alarm him. Blore-Smith falls under the influence of Chipchase and Maltravers, who convince him he needs to be psycho-analysed as a patient of Chipchase, while at the same time funding Maltravers’ venture in filmmaking. So this trio begin their own dance through London bohemia, dissolute Paris and the film-studios of Weimarian Berlin.

In *Agents and Patients* there is constant reference to psycho-analysis, as almost a type of explanatory obsession amongst those who inhabit that mixing-ground of bohemia: (minor and major)public schoolboys drifting through journalism and films, Oxford graduates making their way without aim in the world, artists and their hangers on, intellectuals, raffish clubmen, beauties, society ladies, those on the rise and the slide socially and economically. Not so much Waugh’s ‘bright young things’, but rather those of a lesser glow: a dull gleam of tarnished hopes and dreams, success and failure - but still not working in any bourgeois, middle-class way.

Not only is psycho-analysis a constant reference, so too – in a way that will also become a constant theme in *Dance* – is the interest in the Occult. God might – or might as well be, dead; there is no driver of time or meaning, yet what is constantly turned to, in both practice and interest is the Occult. Chipchase reads the *Occult Review* which he has purchased at the airport bookstall⁴⁵ as they await the plane to Paris. The reference is not expanded upon, rather it is included as yet another of Powell’s observations of the times he finds himself in. For the occult was part of a wider theosophist and romanticist element of late-Nineteenth

and early-mid-Twentieth century modernity; strong in literary circles as a way to seek meaning and wisdom without – and against – religious faith. Occultists saw themselves as modern and a number of occultist journals circulated. The *Occult Review* (1905-1933) was “a six penny monthly aimed at a wide audience”, publishing about 50 pages of articles, as well as reviews and a correspondence section.⁴⁶ Powell's throw-away observation is telling; the interest in the occult was everywhere – and easily accessible – and read, in many ways, as a distraction from modern life. The turn to the occult is an anti-religious turn; a desire for there to be some meaning, some accessible meaning, some possibility for self and existence, after death, after religion, after god. That the amateur psychoanalyst is the one reading the *Occult Review* is telling; after god, Powell seems to imply, we search everywhere, indiscriminately for meaning, yet as *Dance* will show, there really is no meaning- except what we (and not Powell) would term hermeneutics. With the death of God there is no meaning, but because the vast majority of us do not want to live without meaning, we implicitly and explicitly, both knowingly and more widely, unknowingly, take up the task ourselves – or more often, live amongst and by the meaning-making of others. Therefore, what one decides to interpret self and life via, what one draws upon, in short creates the world and meanings one inhabits; that is how we interpret the dance of time we find ourselves in.

This becomes clear in the latter stages of the novel when Blore-Smith confronts Chipchase and Maltravers, claiming that they have swindled him; yet as Maltravers responds:

‘But what really is the matter?’ he said. ‘When we met you your life was of a dullness so intolerable that you thought of suicide. You told me so. I repeat your very words. We take you in hand and in the space of a few months you are in the thick of everything. Love affairs. Business dealings of the most varied kind. Travel. Strange company. Adventure. What else do you want? What else do you imagine life has to offer? I admit it has cost you some money, but, after all, the money is no good unless you use it for something.’⁴⁷

Blore-Smith counters that he wants his own life:

‘The real thing,’ said Blore-Smith, rather desperately.

'If,' said Chipchase, 'you imagine that the Real Thing is ever going to widely differ from what you have already experienced, I fear that you may be disappointed.'⁴⁸

The question of the Real Thing – and who and what in fact is, and are real – sits at the centre of Powell's final pre-*Dance* novel, *What's Become Of Waring* (1939). Ostensibly the story of the search for the celebrated travel writer T.T. Waring who is exposed to be a plagiarist of untranslated books who therefore has no need to venture from the French Riviera, the novel also includes many references to the presence of the occult in everyday life, such as the publisher Hugh Judkins who makes a hobby of seeking to expose seances – or as they are described – “one of his jaunts into the occult”⁴⁹. Powell's unnamed narrator (who observes in very much the same way of Nicholas Jenkins in *Dance*) notes “the previous night I had dined with Hugh and an assorted collection of authors and agents. The conversation has turned to spiritualism...”⁵⁰. The narrator is invited by Hugh to attend 'a sitting', which having never attended anything of the sort, he accepts. There follows a detailed section on the séance in which sounds attributed by the medium to the spirit of George Eliot (who wishes to be called Mimi⁵¹) are interpreted as being “T.T” and then further interpreted to refer to T.T. Waring. As for the narrator's experience, on being asked, he answers in an allusion to the famous *Punch* cartoon “True Humility” (better known colloquially as ‘The Curate's egg’⁵²): “Parts of it were excellent, I thought.” While the main focus of the novel is finding and identifying the real identity of T.T. Waring, there is the constant background of the other search for what is taken to be true – or false: seances and the occult. Hugh moves on from seeking to expose séances, to becoming interested in “an amusing little sect”⁵³ called the Sons and Daughters of the Tabernacle. In due course Hugh develops a type of religious mania, described by the narrator as always “preoccupied with theological questions”⁵⁴, that both distracts him from his work and raises in him a puritanical focus and attitude towards the work of the firms authors. Hugh now proclaims he is on a religious quest, seeking “decency”⁵⁵, the result of his having had “a spiritual overhaul”⁵⁶ which actually results in a nervous breakdown.

The novel concludes with the narrator attending another séance, again more out of detached curiosity and bemusement than believing

participation, when to his surprise Hugh turns up “not looking himself yet”⁵⁷. Following a clairvoyant communication, Hugh protests and then prevaricates; he had turned up to challenge the séance but is deeply disturbed by what he believes is reference to T.T. Waring. In the end, nothing is resolved one way or the other, the séance occurred and can be interpreted however any of the participants want. Meaning is individual and hermeneutical. And yet the closing passages of the novel point to that which will, post-war, provide the basis for *Dance*: the narrator broods on Stendhal, the subject of a book he is writing, and in particular the sections of Stendhal’s journal under *The Life and Sentiments of Silencious Harry*. This causes him to conclude that many of his acquaintances wanted power: “everybody wanted power, waiting for an answer.”⁵⁸

These earlier novels are not as well known – or as widely read as *Dance*, yet as the critic Neil McEwen noted:

[M]agic and coincidence, idiosyncrasy and social role, egotism and the will-to-power, and sexuality – orthodox or not – are some of Powell’s themes in the 1930s which were to dominate his later novels. The power and oddness of Time are not yet fully apparent.⁵⁹

What is often not noted – or perhaps, just taken for granted – is the absence of any view of religion or religiosity as normal; almost every character – except for the unsophisticated and provincial Passengers in *From A View to a Death* – do not participate in religion or think about it; this is, to all intent and purposes a society and lives lived after institutional religion, preferring if necessary, the occult or psycho-analysis or, for those seeking power, an unsophisticated embrace of the Nietzschean *ubermensch*. There is, it would seem, no ordering principle for life – or to live life by.

Powell began his series after the war (having end up in the Intelligence Corps as liaison with minor power allies such as the Belgians and the Czechs, reaching the rank of Major), having decided that a long sequence would enable him to make greater use of the “actors and extras hanging about for employment at the stage door of one’s creative fantasy.”⁶⁰ What “very few critics of the opening volumes showed themselves capable of appreciating” was “that undeveloped characters, potential situations, must be introduced, whose purpose

might be unresolved throughout several volumes of the sequence.”⁶¹ This is, of course how life itself is encountered by all of us, none of us possess the omniscience often claimed by a novelist and in deliberately undertaking such an approach Powell is taking on the role of the supreme social realist. It is not, as many seem to suggest, the constant interplay, lack of resolution, constant interweaving, appearance and disappearance, coincidences and the like of *Dance* are too unrealistic to be true; rather the inverse is the truth: life mirrors the lack of clarity, lack of omniscience and purpose of dance. It is this that makes Powell in *Dance* the supreme social realist – it is just a reality that too many do not wish to acknowledge.

Here is not the place to discuss in detail the volumes that make up *Dance* (I urge those who have not done so, to read the series), rather I want to turn to the central question of what time is it, in *Dance*? As I read my way again through *Dance*, and more widely through the various articles and books that discuss *Dance*, I found again and again I was heading notes with such phrases as ‘secular theology’ or ‘a materialist agnostic ethics’. To give two examples, Bergonzi observes :

We are all sinners, he seems to imply, and should not judge one another, and although Powell displays a quintessentially secular caste of mind, he regards his creations with an exemplary religious compassion.⁶²

While Gora declares that *Dance*:

...provides, in the end, a series of lessons on how to live in the absence of religious certainty, of how to maintain the ‘life of values’ even though all one knows is the ‘life in time’.⁶³

Nicholas Jenkins, Powell’s narrator, displays an omnivorous interest in the society he encounters, always observing, recounting, remembering and rethinking what is - and what has occurred. He is aware that not only is his own knowledge limited, but that it will always be so. The degree to which we can truly know anyone is a constant theme; everyone dances to life in their own ways and sometimes the dance and dancers reveal more of oneself and others than at other times. But there is no guiding plan or hand, you make of life what you will and what you can. One thing is clear, those who seek to live by will, those who seek to attain and impose power will, in the end, become undone – whether by the furies or

by hubris. For this “is a godless universe”⁶⁴ in which “the missing dimension in this world is faith, faith as a passion”, yet what does exist is both “tragic negation’ and “a residual moral code”.⁶⁵ This means that while there are those such as the mage and cult leader Trelawny, or in the last volume Scorpio Mortlock, who seek to invoke the occult as a way to exert power over others – and while to a degree and for a time they are successful – they are also in the end, undone. Similarly, Powell’s great, monstrous creation Kenneth Widmerpool, who seeks power via a combination of obsequiousness and will likewise suffers due to the power of another – just as he caused the death of Stringham and Templer who were far more successful socially than him at school and during young adulthood.

Gorra’s focus on the ‘life of values’ is important, because it could be said that the central divide of the novel comes down to what values you choose to live by: the values of power and will; or the values of culture and creativity. That is, what do you choose to draw upon to live your life and make sense of existence? In other words, what do you dance to? The answer seems to be a private mythology that is of self and others – just as each of us finds ourselves, often unwittingly, as part of the private mythologies of others. This is why both self and others are incomplete, for we narrate our lives and those of others as they come to present meaning to us. This is a necessarily contingent mythology, whereby meaning is only ever provisional and occurs more and more in memory and remembering; as critic Vernon Bogdanor observes, we dance “driven by our furies” to “the rule of the dance” that “we cannot alter” – yet “life is governed not by rules but by contingencies”.⁶⁶ How we respond to this tension – the tension between rules and contingencies or as Bogdanor expands, “those who live by the will and those who live by the imagination”; this means it “is the creative artists who are more likely to live satisfactory lives.”⁶⁷ Yet it also needs to be remembered that life in *Dance* is a dance that is comedy in that every attempt to exert strong meaning will come undone; *Dance* exposes that “constant sense of the gap between aspiration and achievement, between appearance and reality... a fictional universe [that is] not at all solid or stable”⁶⁸. This means we can either attempt – and ultimately fail – to exert our will on the world and others, or – via the world of culture and imagination – acknowledge

that “our perception of the world requires a perpetual mild, ironic adjustment.”⁶⁹

This raises what I term the hermeneutical problem of *Dance*; or rather, *Dance* is the expression and realization of what can be termed the hermeneutical problem. This was identified by novelist and playwright Michael Frayn’s insight:

Like the world we ourselves inhabit, and unlike most of the worlds fabricated in novels, the world in which Nicholas Jenkins lived is not fully interpreted. We have to make our own sense of its ambiguity, place our own construction upon its events, just as we do with the world around us.⁷⁰

This arises because while there is a dance to time, a dance within time, this is time without any ordering principle – even in its narration within the sequence. While each novel of the sequence is a stand-alone novel in its own right, to enter a novel is to enter a world not properly explained, understood or narrated. The one constant presence is understandably that of the narrator, Nicholas Jenkins, yet he tells us far more about others than himself, but even then what he tells us is primarily observation and his own interpretation of characters, events and causes – many of which will be later modified by Jenkins as he either learns more from others, or his own experiences and encounters cause him to revise his earlier narrative, claims and interpretations. Jenkins as narrator reinforces that life is a creative, hermeneutical event, increasingly counterposed (in as much of a surprise to the reader as to the narrator) by Widmerpool’s life of will and pursuit of power.

One way to think *Dance* is that it embodies what could be called Deleuzian repetition; life occurs, characters occur, in a type of repetition that embodies difference – not only in events themselves but more so in the repetitive interpretation that arises. This is of course my imposed interpretation. Yet in the novel there are three references to Nietzschean repetition, twice in *The Soldier’s Art* and once in *Hearing Secret Harmonies*⁷¹, yet these are presented more as elliptical asides and are in a sense offered as hermeneutical gifts for the reader who wishes to take them up. Such diffidence on the part of Powell is central to the experience of life lacking any ordering principle. We can – if we wish – draw upon Nietzschean repetition to make sense of what we read and,

by extension, what we experience in our own lives; but this is not to say that Nietzschean (or we can add or intrude, Deleuzean) repetition exists in any way separate from the one who may claim it is so – or draw upon it to make some narrative sense of one's life and the roles others play in it. That is, the dance is a series of dances that intertwine depending on the time and place of narrator and who else is dancing at that moment.

While time unrolls in the sequence, just which time we are engaged with moves back and forth, including a number of oblique, digressive asides that make us aware that the 'present' is never fixed nor stable, that 'the present' undergoes a constant drama of interpretations by all involved in it; hermeneutics that begins, in effect, the moment the present has passed. So the sequence itself, 12 novels over 24 years (1951-1975) that cover c.1914 to the early 1970s, embodies

an open-ended time scheme, complicated and enriched by subtle interrelations of the instances of telling and the story-line times...

[which means] the story keeps unrolling into the narrator's future.⁷²

In short, there is no singular 'present' in *Dance*, time itself is an ongoing hermeneutical event – or rather experience and claim – that is at once social and intensely personal, contextual and societal, constantly intruded upon by others and that perpetual flow of memories, references, associations and claims that depend upon one's social, cultural and educational capital. Time is therefore a human construction, a human experience, a human hermeneutic that may for some exist in reference to an ordering principle of their own choosing- and making. Life is, Jenkins makes us see, actually intensely personal and materialist; perhaps it entails what can be termed a personal materialist mythology that we really never let anyone else truly see or understand. So for Jenkins, time and life – his and others – is mythological and interpreted via books, arts and classical mythology; a mythology not believed in but drawn upon to make sense of the present. Here we can understand the constant interruption of the occult into the narrative, for this is a type of contra-mythology that others draw upon – or via the clairvoyant Myra Erdleigh, have presented to them whether they wish to or not, whether they believe in her powers or not. Some draw on ideology, notably Erridge, Gypsy Jones, Quiggan and St John Clarke who align themselves with Marxism; the soldier-philosopher David Pennistone draws upon

Descartes: the composer Moreland draws upon Music (and like Jenkins lives a life via culture and creativity); the novelist X. Trapnel creates his own personal mythology to both draw upon for his work – and to live by, his whole life being a type of embodied mythology; then there are those like Widmerpool or Pamela Flitton who draw upon personal mythologies of power and will, and in Pamela's case sex, to achieve their ends and exert their myth. But a myth that does not embody a life of creativity is, in the end, doomed to disappointment and failure, just as those who fail to develop and sustain their myth become too easily used by those of power and will. In the end, the dance of *Dance* seems to be saying that only a life of creativity and culture can stand some chance against the destructive powers of the will.

What is therefore important is, as Jenkins tells us early on in *The Acceptance World* (yet here of course this is the later Jenkins telling us – or rather, interpreting for himself and us, the younger Jenkins):

In a sense, nothing in life is planned – or everything is – because in the dance every step is ultimately the corollary of the step before; the consequence of being the kind of person one chances to be.⁷³

What *Dance* therefore exposes and expresses is that life is unplanned, without any ordering principle except, that is, the self: the self that you are and the self of others and how each of us chooses to live our life; or rather, as Jenkins presents it to us, we are the narrators, the tellers of our lives, but never its author⁷⁴ – because there is no author, not even ourselves. As Isabelle Joyau notes, this means that “the irreducible distance separating us from the crowning glory of an all-encompassing explanation”⁷⁵ is central to the very success of *Dance*, providing a unity because:

[t]he impeded, shackled quest for meaning, the struggle for authenticity, with its constant twists and turns, engrosses the reader possibly better than the details of plot.⁷⁶

Or, to put it another way, in this very ‘plotlessness’, the novel enables a hermeneutic of life to occur for the reader, because life itself is plot-less; and this is clear to us after the death of God. The hermeneutic is that the novel itself, in ways unintended but similar to that expressed by Barthes in the death of the author, becomes a new text with every reader and

every reading – just as life itself becomes a new text with every memory, every new bout of information, gossip and encounter, every remembering and retelling. Via *Dance*, we become aware that the plot of life only reveals itself in memory and retelling, a personal mythology constantly told backwards not forwards – or at least, we could say, that is the response of creativity; for those seeking power, those seeking to act by will, the plot is one they write forwards, or rather not write or tell, but seek to inscribe upon themselves and others, upon time itself.

Joyau provides a telling distinction:

In the dance of barbarians and monsters, he [Jenkins] represents the saving grace of civilization; in an age of excesses and vociferousness, he maintains a degree of decorum and embodies clam and control.⁷⁷

So it is not that one is in a dance, not that we find ourselves in a dance, but rather how we dance and who we partner with – fully knowing that each turn of the dance brings new steps, new moments, new partners. What we dance in the name of is perhaps the central question the sequence seeks to answer; to which are given those two possibilities: we dance to will and power or we dance to culture and creativity; we seek a life of action and involvement, or we stand aside and watch the follies of the world. So we find two central characters that *Dance* circulates around: Widmerpool, driven by ambition, will and the quest for power who dies running to the will of the occult leader Scorpio Mortlock; Jenkins who constantly finds himself dancing with and amongst Widmerpool and his life, much to his surprise given how unprepossessing Widmerpool was as a schoolboy. Power compared to culture, will compared to creativity, action compared to observation; both are in time, but the one who seeks to bend time to his will is undone – whether seeking power in the worlds of business, the army and politics, or belatedly, power through the occult.

Therefore in answer to that question ‘what time is it?’ we could answer that this is not only a question that theology ‘does not handle’ but also one that the novel does not handle – nor should it. That is, novels that seek to be the expression of time, that seek to handle the question of time, claim a teleology and an omniscience that means the novelist stands in for the absence of God. For in such novels the author seeks to

replace the original author of God and too often creates a type of fixed, determinative, interventionist universe. *Dance* asks how do we, or perhaps more reticently, how might we, or perhaps even more hermeneutically, can we even seek truth when that which was taken to locate it is not there – or is no more? Not that God's death is noted or discussed, rather it is self-evident in the elliptical engagement of life lived without ontological or metaphysical meaning. Truth, life, reality (not that these are necessarily similar) are all, we come to understand, only ever improperly assembled as ongoing hermeneutics; a type of quest where these are mysteries Jenkins will never fully gain access to – not even those of himself. The novel is therefore not that of what we know but rather that which reminds us just how little we know; not so much a time of nihilism or despair, but rather a time of agnosticism in all things – including ourselves. *Dance* is therefore the novel as critique of the age – to identify what is claimed of value and observe what occurs in its pursuit. As Jenkins observes midway through the sequence:

I could now recognize that individuals live in different ways. They must be taken as they come⁷⁸

Dance is the novel that is not 'a novel', a narrator who is not an author, an open, ongoing hermeneutical dance in which time is exposed as that which the novel cannot contain – nor explain, except, perhaps, as the ongoing hermeneutical personal mythologies we all live by – and within. For just as Powell noted his own interpretation as to the identities of the dancers in Poussin's painting, so can – and should – we. Time's music calls forth different dancers for all of us – and different music too.

¹ <https://www.wallacecollection.org/>

² [https://wallacelive.wallacecollection.org/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=direct/1/ResultDetailView/result.inline.list.t1.collection_list.\\$TspTitleImageLink.link&sp=13&sp=Sartist&sp=SfilterDefinition&sp=0&sp=1&sp=1&sp=SdetailView&sp=49&sp=Sdetail&sp=1&sp=T&sp=0&sp=SdetailList&sp=0&sp=F&sp=Scollection&sp=l65042](https://wallacelive.wallacecollection.org/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=direct/1/ResultDetailView/result.inline.list.t1.collection_list.$TspTitleImageLink.link&sp=13&sp=Sartist&sp=SfilterDefinition&sp=0&sp=1&sp=1&sp=SdetailView&sp=49&sp=Sdetail&sp=1&sp=T&sp=0&sp=SdetailList&sp=0&sp=F&sp=Scollection&sp=l65042)

³ Anthony Powell, *Faces in My Time* (London: Heinemann, 1980) p.214.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.215.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Christopher Hitchens "Powell's Way", *The New York Review of Books*, May 28, 1998:

<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/05/28/powells-way/>

⁷ Tariq Ali "Come Dancing" *The Guardian*, 26 January, 2008:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jan/26/fiction4>

⁸ Powell, infamously acerbically divided his readers into 'fans' and 'shits'. See variously:

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/11/12/how-anthony-powell-wrote-his-twelve-volume-masterpiece>

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/anthony-powell-dancing-music-time-hilary-spurling-review/>

⁹ I thank Cindy Zeiher for raising this point on reading an earlier version of this essay.

¹⁰ Powell's memoirs, that were published (1976-192 by Heinemann) under the collective title *To Keep the Ball Rolling* are: Vol. 1: *Infants of Spring*; Vol. 2: *Messengers of Day*, Vol. 3: *Faces in My Time*; Vol.4: *The Strangers Are All Gone*. There is also a one-volume abridged version entitled *To Keep the Ball Rolling* (1983).

¹¹ Powell, *Faces in My Time*, p.214.

¹² Anthony Powell, *Infants of the Spring*, (London: Heinemann, 1976) p.52.

¹³ Anthony Powell, "Introduction" in Hilary Spurling, *Invitation To The Dance. A Guide to Anthony Powell's Dance to the Music of Time* (Boston/ Toronto: Little, Brown & Company, 1977) p.vii.

¹⁴ Spurling, *Invitation to the Dance*, p.209 & ff.

¹⁵ Spurling, *Invitation to the Dance*, p. 259 & ff.

¹⁶ Spurling, *Invitation to the Dance*, p.285.

¹⁷ Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), p.2.

¹⁸ The title is taken from Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621): "...they are a company of giddy-heads, afternoon men". Powell discovered Burton among the file-copies of his pre-war employer the publisher Duckworths. As he comments: "there are worse places to read about Melancholy than a publisher's office". He drew upon Burton for "the odds and ends" he jotted down "for use in potential books." He then drew upon Burton for *Dance*:

On the principle that the Narrator of *A Dance to the Music of Time* should be a man who had shared some (though not necessarily all) of my own experiences, he is represented as writing a book about Robert Burton (1577-1640), thereby undertaking researches that would have something in common with my own work, when engaged on a biography of John Aubrey (1626-1697); historical research having a particular bearing on a writer's life, with which no other literary activities are exactly comparable.

Anthony Powell, *Messengers of Day* (London: Heinemann, 1978) p.114-115.

¹⁹ Ed Park, "A Portrait Of The Artist As A Droll Slacker", *The New Yorker* (October 15, 2014): <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/portrait-artist-droll-slacker>

²⁰ The Slacker entered wider popular culture through two films: Richard Linklater's independent *Slacker* (1991) and Ben Stiller's Hollywood *Reality Bites* 1994. Yet the

slacker arises out of the disaffected youth of Generation X, as first expressed in Douglas Couplands' book, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1991). Generation X is usually taken to encompass those born between 1963 and 1978.

²¹ Anthony Powell, *Afternoon Men* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1960) pp.61-62.

²² Powell, *Afternoon Men*, p.63.

²³ Powell, *Afternoon Men*, p.43.

²⁴ Powell, *Afternoon Men*, p.43.

²⁵ Powell, *Afternoon Men*, p.49

²⁶ Anthony Powell, *Venusberg* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd, 1961) p.120.

²⁷ Anthony Powell, *From a View to a Death* (London: John Lehmann, 1948) pp.11-12.

²⁸ Powell, *From a View to a Death*, p.31.

²⁹ Powell, *From a View to a Death*, pp.73-74.

³⁰ F.W. Dupee, "Butler's Way" New York Review of Books, August 24 1967 <https://www-nybooks.com.ezproxy.canterbury.ac.nz/articles/1967/08/24/butlers-way/>

³¹ Powell, *From a View to a Death*, p.7.

³² Dupee, "Butler's Way".

³³ Powell, *From a View to a Death*, p.142.

³⁴ Neil Brennan, *Anthony Powell*, revised edition (New York : Twany Publishers, 1995) p.58.

³⁵ In Anthony Powell, *Agents and Patients* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd, 1962) p.7, as a stand-alone epigraph. Italics as in original. The source is given as "Wesley: Sermon lxvii".

³⁶ Powell, *Agents and Patients*, p.8.

³⁷ Powell, *Agents and Patients*, p.8.

³⁸ Powell, *Agents and Patients*, p.8.

³⁹ Powell, *Agents and Patients*, p.8.

⁴⁰ Powell, *Agents and Patients*, p.9.

⁴¹ As Cindy Zeiher noted, Powell's hyphenating of 'psycho-analysis' should alert latter-day readers that this is Freudian psycho-analysis, not unhyphenated Lacanian psychoanalysis.

⁴² Powell, *Agents and Patients*, p.10.

⁴³ Powell, *Agents and Patients*, p.15.

⁴⁴ Powell, *Agents and Patients*, p.15

⁴⁵ Powell, *Agents and Patients*, p.75

⁴⁶ Mark S. Morrisson, "The Periodic Culture of the Occult Revival: Esoteric Wisdom, Modernity and Counter-Public Spheres", *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol.31, number 2, Winter 2008, pp.1-22; p.15. This fascinating article positions the occult revival within a frame of modernist subjectivity.

⁴⁷ Powell, *Agents and Patients*, p.200.

⁴⁸ Powell, *Agents and Patients*, p.201.

⁴⁹ Anthony Powell, *What's Become of Waring* (London, Heinemann, 1968) p.13.

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- ⁵⁰ Powell, *What's Become of Waring*, p10.
- ⁵¹ Powell, *What's Become of Waring*, p17.
- ⁵² George du Maurier, "True Humility" *Punch* November 9, 1895. See: <https://punch.photoshelter.com/image/I0000vVolHOJX5FQ>
- ⁵³ Powell, *What's Become of Waring*, p.185.
- ⁵⁴ Powell, *What's Become of Waring*, p.206.
- ⁵⁵ Powell, *What's Become of Waring*, p.211.
- ⁵⁶ Powell, *What's Become of Waring*, p.211.
- ⁵⁷ Powell, *What's Become of Waring*, p.225.
- ⁵⁸ Powell, *What's Become of Waring*, p.236.
- ⁵⁹ Neil McEwen, *Anthony Powell* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) p.39.
- ⁶⁰ Powell, *Faces in My Time*, p.212.
- ⁶¹ Powell, *Faces in My Time*, p.213.
- ⁶² Bernard Bergonzi, *Anthony Powell* (Published for the British Council by Longman Group, 1971) p.24.
- ⁶³ Michael Gorra, *The English Novel at Mid-Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990) p.102.
- ⁶⁴ Keith Ovendon, *A Fighting Withdrawal. The Life of Dan Davin. Writer, Soldier, Publisher* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) p.353. Ovendon is referring to Davin's admiration for Powell, an admiration expressed in Davin's 1976 W.D. Thomas Memorial Lecture "Snow Upon Fire".
- ⁶⁵ Dan Davin, *Snow Upon Fire: A Dance To The Music Of Time: Anthony Powell*. The W.D. Thomas Memorial Lecture. 16 November, 1976 (University College of Swansea), p.10
- ⁶⁶ Vernon Bogdanor, "Off Piste – Fascinating rhythm" *Times higher education* (9 June 2011) <https://global-factiva-com.ezproxy.canterbury.ac.nz/ga/default.aspx>
- ⁶⁷ Bogdanor, "Off Piste – Fascinating rhythm".
- ⁶⁸ Bergonzi, *Anthony Powell*, p.20.
- ⁶⁹ Bergonzi, *Anthony Powell* p.20.
- ⁷⁰ Micahel Frayn, "The End of the Dance. Forty Years in a parallel England", In Michael Frayn, *Travels with a ty. A Reporter at large* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009) p.237.
- ⁷¹ See: Robert L. Selig, *Time and Anthony Powell. A Critical Study*. (London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1991) p.51.
- ⁷² Robert L. Selig, *Time and Anthony Powell. A Critical Study*, p.31.
- ⁷³ Anthony Powell, *The Acceptance World*, p.63 in Powell, *A Dance to the Music of Time. First Movement* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).
- ⁷⁴ Selig, *Time and Anthony Powell. A Critical Study*, p.55.
- ⁷⁵ Isabelle Joyau, *Investigating Powell's A Dance To The Music Of Time* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994) p.103.
- ⁷⁶ Joyau, *Investigating Powell's A Dance To The Music Of Time*, p.103.
- ⁷⁷ Joyau, *Investigating Powell's A Dance To The Music Of Time*, p. xiv.
- ⁷⁸ Anthony Powell, *The Kindly Ones* (London, Heinemann, 1962) p.109.