Three: Getting It Right

You have to get life right before you start going on about its meaning.

Martin Amis, The Moronic Inferno.⁶¹

What is truth? said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer.

Francis Bacon, Of Truth.⁶²

Hitherto a comparatively sustained chronological narrative has been achieved, but the last twenty or thirty years are not always tractable to continuity of design. As one picks ones way between the trees of Dante’s dark wood of middle life its configuration becomes ever less discernible. All one can say of the trees is that most are gnarled, some hollow, not a few struck by lightning. Books are published; professional schemes take shape or fade away; journeys are made; new persons met. All the time a perspective that once gave at least the illusion of order to the past diminishes. The outlines of individuals and events, perhaps clear enough in themselves, grow ever more blurred in relation to each other....
Then uncertainties invade the mind as never before regarding what is true, what worth writing about. Fallibilities of reportage become only too apparent after reaching an age when biographies begin to appear dealing with personal friends, or even individuals known slightly. I reflect on the extraordinary views and remarks attributed to myself from time to time by newspaper interviewers. Pilate certainly had a point.

Anthony Powell, The Strangers All Are Gone.63

The Tottering Data Of The Contemporary

On a canvas that stretches from the 1920s to the 1970s, Anthony Powell’s novel-sequence The Music of Time delineates the complex patterns of fate and fortune that shape the lives of a large and variegated cast of characters. Set principally in London, the books focus upon the historical experience of Powell’s own generation, which came of age in the aftermath of the First World War and was young enough to serve in the Second. While most of the central characters belong to Powell’s own class (upper-middle), the novels’ sweep includes denizens of the arts, the academy, the army, politics, business, and “Society,” along with a less-easily-categorized miscellany of the eccentric, the bohemian, and the bizarre. In 1960, when only five volumes of this roman fleuve had appeared, it was frequently compared with Proust’s A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu. A decade-and-a-half later, however, when the re-titled A Dance To The Music Of Time

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came to an end with the twelfth novel in the suite, it seemed clear that Powell was concerned more with manners than with metaphysics, more with chronicle than with consciousness. Accordingly, to many readers a more fitting counterpart than Proust presented himself — John Aubrey, the seventeenth-century antiquary chiefly remembered by posterity for his gossipy biographical sketches posthumously published as *Brief Lives*.64

The comparison was hardly fortuitous: Powell had spent the years between the last of his pre-war novels (*What’s Become of Waring?* 1939) and the first installment of *The Music of Time* (*A Question of Upbringing*, 1951) writing a life of Aubrey and editing a selection of his writings. But whether or not critics specifically invoked Aubrey, several of them echoed Bernard Bergonzi’s perception that “The appeal of Powell’s work is of a suspiciously simple kind: it is, above all, to a love of gossip....” Jonathan Raban memorably damned *The Music of Time* with the faint praise “an epic of beautifully orchestrated gossip,” while even Powell’s friend Kingsley Amis conceded that the work’s “interest in families, forebears, descendants, relatives... can also slip here and there into something not far from mere gossip.”65

To convict Powell’s fiction of “gossip” is not definitively damning, of course: as another contemporary English novelist, A.N. Wilson, reminds us, “Conrad’s Marlow, in *Chance*, expounds the idea that fiction and gossip spring from the same wells of curiosity in the human mind,” wells from which can spring “compassion, charity, indignation, the sense of solidarity; and, in minds of any largeness, an invitation to that indulgence which is
In any case, my concern here is neither to bury Powell nor to praise him, but rather to register that quality of Powell’s novels that “gossip” points to: what Bergonzi calls “the unfailing fascination with the oddities of human behaviour” (Situation 120). A deeply conservative man, Powell is nevertheless liberal in the sense at issue here: he believes that whatever significant pattern of history emerges as the dance to the music of time, its basic components are the movements of each individual dancer, which must be studied and anatomized in all their apparent idiosyncrasy. This does not, of course, necessarily imply that the dance as a whole can be either apprehended or comprehended in a single step; but it does mean that any concept of the dance of history that elides or simplifies the quirks and oddities of the individual gyration will be false. So Powell more than most authors is determined to give contingency its due by practising what Kingsley Amis found to be an extreme and even “un-literary” realism:

... the sequence as a whole was more like life, in a way more realistic, than its components [the individual novels], with for instance characters such as the painter Barnby coming and going haphazardly. Thinking about this more recently has suggested the odd conclusion that, if a comparison can be ventured, I am a more literary novelist than Tony [Powell]. Two tiny incidents seem to me to bear this out. In one of my novels, *Girl, 20*, the narrator and others visit a horrible flashy eating-drinking-dancing club of the period (early Seventies); I had to get the decor and such off my son Martin. Tony complimented me mildly for making the food at this place, to my character’s surprise, ‘excellent’. I had done that for, well, a little artistic...
reason, feeling it would have been too dull and predictable to make the food as nasty as everything else there. But he, Tony, observed that he, or perhaps his son Tristram, had in fact found the food at such a joint to be okay; I had got it right in that sense. On a later occasion, interviewing him for a Sunday paper, I asked what all this card-reading stuff with Mrs. Erdleigh was doing there, meaning, ahem, its artistic function; Martin saw this point at once when I put it to him. Ah, said Tony, a lot of people had been in fact very keen on that sort of stuff at the time in question, so he had got it right. (Memoirs, 153).

“Getting it right” means fidelity to the convolutions, the contours, of the contingent as Powell apprehends it in the world outside the novels.

Yet Powell, as if heedful of Sir Joshua Reynolds’ dictum that to paint particulars is not to paint Nature, merely to paint circumstances, clearly had an ambition that went beyond writing what one critic has called “the most substantial English account of social life and manners in the twentieth century.” That aim, I suggest, was nothing less than the great Modernist project of reconciling the realm of absolute contingency with the realm of absolute necessity. Fellow-novelist Alan Massie thought that Powell had pulled it off:

Powell’s achievement, unmatched by any contemporary, and indeed unique in the English novel since Henry James, was to render social reality convincing, in a rich expressive prose, while at the same time revealing the inadequacy of any attempt to understand human nature, and the human condition, only in such terms. Adroit in his
deployment of factual detail, the accumulation of which makes every page ring true
to life, scenes of social, army and business life all being presented with fidelity to
common experience, Powell nevertheless, by the vividness of his imaginative
perception, bathes the world he has called into being in the golden light of timeless
myth. 68

This is hardly a unanimous verdict, for other critics have felt that Powell’s “deployment
of factual detail” overwhelmed any overarching significant form. 69 Massie, in hailing
Powell’s unmatched “intertwining of art and reality” (9), simply misses the drama of a

This, surely, is what Bergonzi meant when he described Powell’s method as
"anecdotal" and The Music of Time as "in essence, a vast intricate collection of
anecdotes, some of them . . . brief and cryptic . . . others of them very prolonged and
circumstantial . . . ." Situation 120. Neil Brennan, writing before Powell's sequence was
completed, leaves open the possibility that it might yet achieve significant form, but
thinks it doubtful: "... the length of The Music of Time may be determined by Powell's
own longevity; its shape, by vicissitudes of health and accident. Critical judgment on
such a projection would tend automatically to be negative. The esthetic creed seems
betrayed. Form is the essence of a work of art, and The Music of Time would seem
destined to have a form shaped not by the artist but by chance." Anthony Powell (New
York: Twayne, 1974), 208.

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struggle being waged at a deeper level in Powell’s text, and I shall argue in this chapter
that the attempt to render the world legible and intelligible in Powell’s liberal-realist
terms involves some characteristic self-deluding ruses. It is clear, however, that Massie
is correct about Powell’s aims, and that a successful depiction of the \textit{dance} to the music
of Time would paradoxically reveal the timeless pattern that informs and redeems the
historical and circumstantial fact, would depict the apparently random and contingent
accident as the exfoliation of some eternal essence, and would thereby show the futility
of attempting to distinguish the dancer from the dance.

Whatever the justice of designating John Aubrey’s anecdotes as the measure of Powell’s
achievement, an appropriate yardstick of his ambition might be the Modernist monument
of his great precursor, James Joyce. \textit{Ulysses} explores in unprecedented detail the
contingent, quasi-historical “facts” that make up a day in the life of Dubliner Leopold
Bloom, and yet it assimilates all these particulars to the archetypal patterns — father-and-
son, journey-and-homecoming, betrayal-and-reconciliation, usurpation-and-conquest —
that Joyce identified in Homer’s \textit{Odyssey}. Like Powell, Joyce was fanatically anxious to
“get it right” in the matter of contingent detail — so much so that, like Powell, Joyce
wrote a novel that in parts approaches a \textit{roman à clef} — but Joyce’s scrupulosity with
regard to realism went even further. For example, Joyce wrote to his aunt to ask her to
measure the height of the railings around the area of the actually existing house in Eccles
Street that Bloom was supposed to have lived in, so that he could assure himself that it
was feasible for Bloom to have climbed over them. And when he wrote the “Wandering
Rocks' episode of the novel, he armed himself with a map of Dublin, a pair of compasses, and a stop-watch, in order to ensure that the peregrinations of the various characters who meander through the chapter were "realistic" in the sense of "plausible." But contingency was redeemed, transcended, rendered Significant, in what one may call Joyce's ultimate Homeric simile: when *Ulysses* appeared, T.S. Eliot proclaimed Joyce the originator of "the mythical method," which Seamus Heaney has wickedly and perceptively glossed as "the art of holding a classical safety net under the tottering data of the contemporary, of parallelling, shadowing, archetypifying — the art practised in *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* and the early sections of Pound's *Cantos.*" Powell embarked on *The Music of Time* without such a safety net; but as the sequence progressed and the time-being-written-about more closely approached the time-of-writing, the "data of the contemporary" indeed began to totter. The orderly pattern of a dance refused to emerge from the carefully-chronicled twitchings of contemporary history, and Powell looked increasingly to myths for models and to other stratagems for support.

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* "When Powell began work on the sequence in the late forties he did not know how it was going to end, though he knew it would take twelve volumes to complete. This openness to contingency was courageous and admirable; but the future, when it arrived, proved intractable." Bergonzi, *Situation* (2nd. edition, 1970), 241.

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In the fourth and final “movement” of the sequence — *Books Do Furnish a Room* (1971), *Temporary Kings* (1973), and *Hearing Secret Harmonies* (1975) — the signs of strain are clearly showing. The flow of time itself is more fitful and the novels more episodic: they focus on incidents occurring years apart, and the three of them together cover a period approximately equal to the quarter-century dealt with in the first nine. It is as if after World War II the comedy of manners that is social history no longer makes coherent sense, and the increasingly overt resort to myth in these novels is a kind of last-ditch stand against the onslaught of history-as-change, an onslaught which renders realism impossible because it destroys the terms in which Powell’s world has been intelligible to him. In *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, Powell’s narrator, Nick Jenkins, clings to the old, known verities, explicitly embracing myth as truth confirmed by experience when he declares that one of the compensations for growing old is “a keener perception for the authenticities of mythology, not only of the traditional sort, but — when such are any good — the latterday mythologies of poetry and the novel” (30).71 And there is no ironic gap between Jenkins and Powell here. Indeed, it is almost fair to say that in this final movement Powell, who began his sequence determined to be open to contingency, is now determined to conquer it, to assimilate its illimitable variety to a few set patterns. History becomes the novelist’s enemy because it engenders difference and change, and it

* Or, as far as I am able to tell, anywhere else in the novel.
is appropriate that *Harmonies* (and therefore the sequence as a whole) closes with a quotation that represents history as "a vast confusion":

'I hear new news every day, and those ordinary rumours of war, plagues, fires, inundations, thefts, murders, massacres, meteors, comets, spectrums, prodigies, apparitions, of towns taken, cities besieged, in *France, Germany, Turkey, Persia, Poland, Etc.*, daily musters and preparations, and suchlike, which these tempestuous times afford, battles fought, so many men slain, monomachies, shipwrecks, piracies, and sea-fights, peace, leagues, stratagems, and fresh alarms. A vast confusion of vows, wishes, actions, edicts, petitions, lawsuits, pleas, laws, proclamations, complaints, grievances, are daily brought to our ears. New books every day, pamphlets, currantoes, stories, whole catalogues of volumes of all sorts, new paradoxes, opinions, schisms, heresies, controversies in philosophy, religion, &c. Now come tidings of weddings, maskings, mummeries, entertainments, jubilees, embassies, tilts, and tournaments, trophies, triumphs, revels, sports, plays: then again, as in a new shifted scene, treasons, cheating tricks, robberies, enormous villainies in all kinds, funerals, burials, deaths of Princes, new discoveries, expeditions; now comical then tragical matters. Today we hear of new Lords and officers created, to-morrow of some great men deposed, and then again of fresh honours conferred; one is let loose, another imprisoned, one purchaseth, another breaketh; he thrives, his neighbor turns bankrupt; now plenty, then again dearth and famine; one runs, another rides, wrangles, laughs, weeps, &c. (271-2).

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The source of the quotation is not John Aubrey but Robert Burton, another seventeenth-century miscellanist and the one upon whom Jenkins has written a book. The spirit in which the passage is quoted is the spirit of *Ecclesiastes*, world-weary, elegiac, with Jenkins using a screw of newspaper ("new news every day"!) to light a winter bonfire of "an untidy pile of miscellaneous debris" (243). This is history-as-one-damned-thing-after-another finally disposed of.

**The Eternal Parade**

In order to see how Powell arrived at this point, the reader might think it necessary to retrace his steps from at least the beginning of the novel's last movement. To do so, however, is to discover that this view of history, this consignment of contingency to the bonfire, has long been implicit in the novel celebrated for its fidelity to the contingent circumstance. The repudiation of contingency in favor of iron laws of human behaviour is what underwrites the absolute assurance of interpretation that is one of the most striking features of these first-person novels. Nick, ostensibly a character in the novel, seems to have a kind of authorial omniscience: everything he encounters is confidently placed and interpreted, because everything is always already known, and the locutions are the familiar locutions of that realism in which claims to see the real significance of a particular detail are based upon a (usually-hidden) major premise encapsulating some *idée reçue*. For example, when Jenkins goes to visit Sillery, his old Oxford tutor, he
meets Ada Leintwardine, Sillery's editorial assistant, and is a witness to the scene in which she informs Sillery that she will be leaving his employ in order to work for a London publisher: "The girl's nervousness, now confession had been made, well illustrated that odd contradictory feminine lack of assurance so typical of the moment when victory has been won — for there could be little doubt that progression onto the staff of Quiggin & Craggs represented a kind of victory over Sillery on her part, escape from his domination" (25). Jenkins has met Ada only a moment before, and knows nothing of the nature of her relationship with Sillery; yet he confidently asserts ("there could be little doubt . . .") that her new job represents a "victory" for her over Sillery. Possible evidence to the contrary ("the girl's nervousness" appears at first to be a "contradictory" signifier) is just as confidently explained away; what appears to be a problem for Jenkins' inference becomes a confirming detail once it is referred to the strange and contradictory nature of Woman ("that odd contradictory feminine lack of assurance so typical of the moment when victory has been won"). Jenkins, of course, has long been familiar with the paradoxical essence of the Eternal Feminine, so he can also confidently describe this behavior as "typical".

This is no isolated example. Every nuance of Sillery's behavior in this scene is confidently interpreted from the privileged position of a narrator who knows both past (e.g. "This irresolution, in any case observable only to those accustomed to the absolute certainty of decision belonging to Sillery's past...." [18]) and future-as-past (e.g. "She was giving nothing away that evening. This attitude was probably due also to other Michael Harper
matters...which only came to light some minutes later” [22]). The narrator of this dance to the music of Time knows all because he is, like God, himself outside Time. This is possible because, as another character puts it, “human life always remains the same” (119). Indeed, Books is inaugurated by a kind of repudiation of history and time as Jenkins returns to Oxford to carry out research for his book on Burton:

Reverting to the University at forty, one immediately recaptured all the crushing melancholy of the undergraduate condition. As the train drew up to the platform . . . a more imminent gloom was re-established, its sinewy grip in a flash making one young again . . . . The odd thing was how distant the recent past had also become, the army now as stylized in the mind — to compare another triumphal frieze — as the legionaries of Trajan’s Column, exercising, sacrificing, sweating at their antique fatigues, silent files on eternal parade to soundless military music (1).

On the one hand, time is abolished “in a flash” as Jenkins feels once more his undergraduate melancholy. On the other hand, time appears to receive its due in the distance that now separates Jenkins from the recent past of his war service, but this apparent acknowledgment proves to be a feint; even in this instance time is abolished by
being converted into space — "stylized" into the spatial art form of a frieze in which figures are "frozen" in the postures of eternal parade.*

Time is abolished in other ways, with gritty English rock-buns wittily performing (but at one remove in the chain of reminiscence!) the function of Proust's madeleine:

To enter Sillery's sitting-room after twenty years was to drive a relatively deep fissure through variegated seams of Time. The faintly laundry-cupboard odour, as one came through the door, generated in turn the taste of the rock-buns dispensed at those tea-parties, their gritty indeterminate flavour once more dehydrating the palate. The props round about designed for Sillery's nightly performance remained almost entirely unaltered. Eroded loose-covers of immemorially springless armchairs still precariously endured... (5).

But it is not just Sillery who has outwitted Time, for the novel is liberally sprinkled with similar indications. "In some sense history was repeating itself...", Nick reflects at one juncture (214), and this is made plausible by the claim that people are stable entities: "people stay themselves" (195). Just as Jenkins' undergraduate melancholy returns "in a

* Cf. Georg Lukacs' remarks in "The Ideology of Modernism" on how the Bergsonian identification of "experienced" or "subjective" time with "real" time leads to a condition in which "the inner world of the subject is transformed into a sinister, inexplicable flux and acquires — paradoxically, as it may seem, a static character."

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flash” when he enters Oxford in the first chapter, so his “boyhood returned in a flash” when he runs into his old housemaster in the last (231).

Sameness, continuity, stability: they are what underwrite Jenkins’ ability to read the world, what render its inhabitants transparent. Experience is a welter of citations from the already-written Book of Human Nature, which remains One and The Same. For Jenkins even culture is unproblematically monolithic, internally undifferentiated: terms like “American” and “European,” which one might take to denote loose and frequently conflictual agglomerations, instead connote essences manifest to the observant eye in every tiny detail of physique and demeanour: “That he was American scarcely appeared on the surface at first, then something about the thin bone formations of arms and legs, the sallowness and texture of the skin, suggested the nationality. The movements of the body, supple, not without athletic promise, also implied an American, rather than European, nervous tension; an extreme one” (Kings, 20).

In the interest of verisimilitude Powell occasionally gestures towards the opacity of the other, but the gesture is usually a feint. Jenkins, for example, is occasionally ready to confess uncertainty about minor characters and unimportant matters (e.g. “At least Blanche always appeared uncomprehending. Possibly she really grasped a great deal more than her own relations supposed” [41]). But if Jenkins is uncertain about anything of importance, his ignorance is usually a temporary deficiency, a mere deferral of the revelation that is speedily supplied. For example, we find on page 18 that Sillery “for once, a rare thing . . . appeared uncertain,” but three pages later “These last sentences put
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an end to doubt, explaining Sillery’s momentary uncertainty. . . .” The novel is peppered with similar locutions: “That was the immediate response. Almost at once this turned out an incorrect as well as priggish judgment” (107), or “For a moment I wondered whether that had been the real reason for making such a point of introducing himself. . . . Any such guess turned out wide of the mark” (136). To the narrator, nothing is truly hidden: although he is a practised dissembler, Sillery “could not conceal relief at this withdrawal” (25) and “His manner of enunciating the remark. . . made one suspect Sillery meant the opposite to what he said.” (26). Jenkins is an excellent reader with a keen eye for the significant, the revelatory, detail: “The fact that his demeanour stopped just short of being aggressive was no doubt in the main a form of self-protection, because a look of uncertainty, almost of fear, intermittently showed in his eyes, which were dark brown to black. They gave the clue to Trapnel having been through a hard time at some stage in his life...” (107).

Jenkins’ perspicacity, his ability to decode the most elusive and ambiguous signifiers, is arguably a large part of the appeal of Powell’s work, for Jenkins’ point-of-view is perforce the reader’s. At a time of rapid and dizzying social transformation which seems to have scrambled all the established codes by which an Englishman of Powell’s generation and class has made sense of the world, Jenkins’ narration provides a profound reassurance that there is after all no final, unbridgeable gap between signifier and signified, between appearance and reality; what at first seems opaque is shown finally to be transparent when subjected to Jenkins’ informed scrutiny. A large part of Powell’s

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skill consists in the ways in which he renders this ultimate transparency plausible, including not only the various feints and deferrals of the kind already cited but wider detours in which many dimensions of the climactic event of one novel are not fully known and delineated until at some point in the next. The death of Pamela Widmerpool from a drug overdose, for example, is certainly the climax of Temporary Kings, but since Jenkins did not himself witness it or the events leading up to it, exactly what happened and why must be painstakingly pieced together from a variety of imperfectly-congruent accounts, with further detailed confirmation being deferred until Hearing Secret Harmonies. Powell insists again and again upon the difficulty of knowing:

One hears about life, all the time, from different people, with very different narrative gifts. Accordingly, not only are many episodes, in which you may even have played a part yourself, hard enough to assess; a lot more must be judged by haphazard accounts given by others. Even if reported in good faith, some choose one aspect on which to concentrate, some another. This truth, obvious enough, was particularly applicable to the events following the Seraglio party. (Kings 252).

Nevertheless, the task of knowing is not as hopeless as it sounds. "Even so, essential facts were scarcely in question," Jenkins declares, affirming that "there was no irreplaceable divergence between" the accounts of Moreland and Stevens, his principal informants, even though "when it came to telling a story in which veracity had to be measured against picturesque detail, neither could be called pedantically veracious" (252).
Some minute details may never be known with certainty, but they are irrelevant, the
concern of the pedant rather than the novelist. For although *A Dance To The Music Of
Time* seems determined to give the contingent and the aleatory qualities of experience
their due, in the last three books of the sequence Powell is at pains to insist that the
novelist's real business is with the essential patterns — the patterns already inscribed in
Myth and Art — that redeem contingency and give it meaning. Because we know these
patterns, we know what *must have happened* even when eyewitness testimony is lacking.
So Gwinnett “did not, of course, disclose whether he had ‘known’ Pamela’s condition
before she came to the hotel. How could he disclose that?” But his reticence on this
point is neither here nor there: “The fact is, Gwinnett must have known. Otherwise there
would have been no point in Pamela making the sacrifice of herself. Her act could only
be looked upon as a sacrifice — of herself, to herself” (269). It can only be regarded in
this light because otherwise her death would be meaningless, an accidental
miscalculation or an insufficiently motivated impulse. Since this possibility —
meaninglessness — is ruled out *a priori*, we know that she deliberately took the overdose
in order to make the supreme offering of her still-warm corpse to the necrophilic
Professor Gwinnett, and that he in turn must have known of her condition. To
Moreland’s question, “You really think she took the overdose, told him, then ... ,”
Jenkins replies with another question, “What else could have happened?” And Moreland
agrees that this version of events is necessarily true, not least because it abolishes the gap
between signifier and signified by literalizing a metaphor: "Literally dying for love" (270).

Jenkins, to be sure, does not know for certain whether Gwinnett actually coupled with the dead Pamela: "The sole matter for doubt, in the light of inhibitions existing, not on one side only, was whether, at such a cost, all had been achieved. One hoped so" (269).

Jenkins hopes so, but Powell goes further and assumes so, for it is only on the basis of this assumption that the important "Gwinnett-thread" of the tangled narratives in the final two novels of the sequence can achieve the kind of meaning that Powell is striving for: Gwinnett, drawn to death in life as in the literature he studies, performs something of a descent into the underworld to gain wisdom by his "release of sexual energy in literally necromantic circumstances... in short, direct contact with the dead" (Harmonies 180) and is prepared for his eventual reclamation by the forces of Life in the person of Fiona, whom he happily marries.

**Femininity And Unintelligibility: Woman As Scapegoat**

There is an even stronger reason, however, for Powell and his reader to believe that Gwinnett does indeed have sexual intercourse with the dead Pamela, for this act resolves a tension and an enigma that has been the driving force of the novel-sequence as a whole and which bears directly on the question of the legibility/intelligibility of the phenomenal world. As I have shown in some detail, one of the major satisfactions of Powell’s fiction is that it shows that the apparently inscrutable face of experience yields its hidden
meaning to a skillful reading of the kind that Jenkins is able to provide, allowing the
reader confidently to negotiate what would otherwise remain confusing and — literally
— insignificant. But as I have emphasized in an earlier chapter, the plausibility of such
readings in life or novels rests upon the prior existence (or widely-held belief in the
existence) of a well-established social code, whereby minute details of dress and manner
are apprehended as transparent signifiers of moral and psychological qualities. As D. J.
Taylor points out, “In seeking to establish the salient features of their characters, English
novelists generally rely on externals — accent, dress, real or imagined status,” and Taylor
quotes a passage from an earlier installment of *A Dance To The Music Of Time*
(“Intricacies of social life make English habits unyielding to simplification, while
understatement and irony ... upset the normal emphasis of reported speech”) as going
“...some way towards explaining the very strong feeling one obtains from a novel of the
Angus Wilson/Laura Talbot type that the whole thing is being written in an immensely
subtle and sophisticated code, whose solution presupposes a highly developed social, as
opposed to literary, sensibility on the part of the reader.”

Now Powell, as we have seen, appears to presuppose such a highly developed social
sensibility but actually does nothing of the sort. His very subject in *A Dance To The
Music Of Time* is the constantly-accelerating and dizzying changes that he believes to
have taken place in England since the First World War, and these changes have
progressively weakened and scrambled any code that might once have existed. No longer
able to count on a reader’s ability reliably to decode social appearances, Powell must

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therefore embody this power in his narrator and render the processes of inference explicit in the narration. This is Jenkins’ only function in the books, for he is always marginal and peripheral to the main action, rarely present at decisive events, and (as many frustrated readers have discovered) he is not, like the other personages of the novel, a “character” whose actions and motives supply any significant part of the novels’ interest. So although Jenkins functions in the novels as a means of rendering the world legible, the very necessity for him or someone like him to perform this function is Powell’s implicit admission that the world is not by any means as transparent, as easily-intelligible, as Jenkins’ narration makes it seem. The demon of illegibility, of unintelligibility, of senselessness, in other words, haunts the margins and the interstices of Powell’s world; as one might expect, its ghostly presence becomes harder to ignore as the time of the novels’ action approaches the 1970s. The locutions and strategies of Jenkins’ narration already examined are Powell’s means of warding off the appalling possibility that the world refuses, in the end, to make coherent sense, but these prove insufficient: to exorcise the demon of unintelligibility Powell must finally incarnate it in a character who can be scapegoated and driven out of the novel. The role of scapegoat, as I shall show, is occupied first by the enigmatic Widmerpool and then taken over by his even-more-enigmatic wife, Pamela. When Pamela sacrifices herself, when she bridges the gap between signifier and signified in her literalizing of the metaphor “dying for love,” then “all is achieved” in Powell’s project.
Right from the beginning of *A Dance To The Music Of Time*, Jenkins' usual perspicacity is frustrated and defeated by the character of Kenneth Widmerpool. In Powell's upper-middle-class England, Widmerpool is the intruder, the outsider, a man without irony or humour and with no apparent centre of gravity except what is supplied by his own ambition. His climb up the greasy pole of power and influence functions in the novels as an index of the decline of English institutions; he is Powell's version of the "new man" who features in much contemporary English fiction as both the embodiment of and the reason for moral and social decay. Widmerpool achieves positions of importance by allying himself with every fashionable trend that sweeps the nation. The Labour landslide of 1945 puts him into Parliament, where he quickly becomes Parliamentary Private Secretary to a Cabinet Minister and then a Junior Minister himself. After losing his seat in the 1955 election, he is made one of the first Labour life peers, and continues to be something of a public figure. A suspected fellow-traveller, he dabbles in espionage but escapes the disgrace of a trial and a long jail sentence because "it's been found 'not in the public interest' to proceed with the case" (*Kings* 231). Finding it convenient to leave the country for a while, he takes up an appointment at the Institute of Advanced Study at an unnamed Ivy League university and then at a "noted Californian centre for political research." Returning to England, he becomes a minor television "talking head," Chancellor of a provincial university, self-appointed champion of the 'Sixties youth movement, and devotee of a suspiciously satanic "New Age" cult led by a sinister 'Sixties youth.

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Widmerpool incorporates, in other words, social and political developments that Powell strongly deplores, but his outrageousness goes beyond the scurrility of any particular view or act that is attributed to him. In the scheme of *A Dance To The Music Of Time* Widmerpool is monstrous because he has no centre, no stable identity by which his present actions can be understood and his future actions predicted; he is an exorbitance, an outrage — literally a *scandal* or stumbling-block to Powell’s (and the reader’s) adherence to the faith that the world is legible and intelligible. He operates in the novel as a constant irruption, a perennial surprise.* His motives are incomprehensible: he pursues power and celebrity for no easily-grasped reason — certainly not because they bring a plenitude of worldly goods, since he is not driven by fleshly appetite. Ponderous, pompous, and devoid of irony, he is also incapable of cynicism, and would have to be called sincere in his espousal of each passing fashion of thought and belief if it did not seem absurd to attribute sincerity to such unreflecting, un-self-critical fickleness. He is propelled by ambition, by sheer will-power, but his will is never clearly anchored to any deeply-held desire or project of a positive kind. He is unknowable: even Bagshaw, “adept

* At Erridge's funeral "a noise, quite a commotion," accompanied by voices "raised in apparent argument, if not altercation," precedes the entrance of Widmerpool, whose "appearance at this moment was wholly unexpected" (*Books 44-5*). It always is: "Suddenly...Widmerpool appeared" (*Books 170*), and "The figure waiting on the doorstep was not the newspaper-man, but Widmerpool" (198), are typical Widmerpool entrances.
at setting forth the niceties of political views, if these happened to attach to the
doctrinaire Left,” finds it impossible to pigeonhole Widmerpool: “‘From time to time I
detect signs of fellow-travelling. Then I think I’m on the wrong tack entirely, he’s
positively Right Wing Labour. Again, you find him stringing along with the far, but anti-
Communist, Left. You can’t help admire the way he conceals his hand. My guess is he’s
playing ball with the Comrades on the quiet for whatever he can get out of it, but trying
to avoid the appearance of doing so. He doesn’t want to prejudice his chances of a good
job in the Government when the moment comes’” (Books 93-4).

Finally and appropriately, in Hearing Secret Harmonies Widmerpool explicitly assumes
the role he has been playing all along, in one guise or another, in Powell’s novel —
saboteur of all the regularities and consistencies that make knowing, reading and writing
possible. At a dinner convened to bestow a prestigious literary prize, he springs to his
feet with an impromptu speech: “I take pride in ridiculing what is — or rather was —
absurdly called honour, respectability, law, order, obedience, custom, rule, hierarchy,
precept, regulation...” (111). His end — he collapses and dies while running naked
through the woods in one of the rites of the cult he has joined — is ignominious and, in
terms of his own life, as meaningless as anything else in it; but it completes the cycle of
A Dance To The Music Of Time, for Widmerpool departs the scene in the same way he
arrived on it in the first novel of the sequence — running grimly through the countryside
in a sheer act of unremitting will that finally proves self-destructive.

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Structurally, Widmerpool is clearly designed to function as the Enemy of both Meaning and the Possibility-Of-Meaning; his departure from the novel-sequence should mend the breach in the walls of the citadel of realism and allow Powell’s project to reach its triumphant conclusion. But there is a problem here: Widmerpool as the Great Anarch fails to convince. His character, exorbitant though it is, cannot sustain the burden of representation it is called upon to assume, and the novel seems both aware of and troubled by this failure. For example, Widmerpool’s unexpected speech at the prize dinner is obviously intended to be taken seriously as a meaningful repudiation of all conventional values “in the name of contemporary counterculture” (110), but it is more likely to strike the reader as self-parody rather than as serious threat. Powell himself presumably felt that there was something lacking, since he chose to supply dramatic enhancement; Widmerpool’s ramblings are interrupted by “a loud crackling explosion, like fireworks going off in an enclosed space, followed by a terrific bang. Widmerpool’s table was enveloped in a dark cloud that recalled ‘laying down smoke’ in army exercises. Within half a second all that end of the room was hidden in thick fumes... At the same time a perfectly awful smell descended” (112). Pandemonium duly ensues, but again the effect is that of self-parody, since the explosions are not real bombs but smokebombs and stinkbombs detonated by the two students who have come as Widmerpool’s guests. Earlier in the novel Jenkins reflects that British students in the ‘Sixties are becoming like their traditional continental counterparts, “young men for ever rioting, undertaking political assassination, overturning governments” (45), and the explosions that bring the
dinner to a sudden conclusion seem designed to conjure up in the reader's mind the figure of the stereotypical bomb-tossing anarchist. But if Powell meant this implied similarity to magnify the threat posed by Widmerpool’s philosophy and its youthful adherents, he seriously miscalculated. Stinkbombs and real bombs belong to such different orders of experience that any comparison between them emphasizes the differences much more than the similarities. The result here is that Widmerpool’s pretensions to sacrilege and desecration are assimilated to student prank rather than to terrorism.

The structural reason why Widmerpool can never be completely, satisfactorily “other” is that he is male; hence he can differ only in degree, not in kind, from the norms of Powell’s imagined world, for these are distinctly gendered norms. Their “masculinity” is usually implicit in their embodiment in a male narrator and a male point of view, but it occasionally becomes explicit, as when Jenkins reflects that his old housemaster “belonged to a generation which continued throughout a lifetime to use that excellently masculine invocation of surname, before an irresponsible bandying of first names smothered all subtleties of relationship” (Books 232). The implications of this statement are profound. Not only the realistic novel but the very possibility of meaningfulness/intelligibility/legibility depend upon relatively stable systems of distinctions and differences (the “subtleties”) which, in Powell’s novel, are maintained and defended by excellently masculine forces. Hence everything that threatens to blur these important distinctions — “smothering” them by means of an “irresponsible
bandying" of signifiers — ought to be conceptualized and represented as intrinsically anti-masculine (i.e. castrating) or at least non-masculine (i.e. feminine, homosexual, or neutered).

Since the fundamental values of the novel are so strikingly gendered, the character of Widmerpool — enemy of all distinctions, all “order, obedience, custom, rule, hierarchy, precept, regulation” — demands a non-masculine inflection. But Widmerpool cannot plausibly be represented as overtly effeminate and at the same time a man who climbs to power and prominence within traditional male institutions (public school, the City, the Army, Westminster and Whitehall) — indeed, a Whitehall insider dismisses the rumour that Widmerpool was mixed up with the Soviet spies Burgess and Maclean because “I don’t believe the man’s a bugger for a moment” (Kings 39). And Widmerpool as castrator is even less plausible, although Powell makes one tentative gesture in this direction: a witness to Widmerpool’s sulphurous after-dinner tirade jokingly compares his sacrilegious assault on civilized values to “the Mutilation of the Hermae” (113), the famous incident in fifth-century Athens in which Alcibiades was accused of desecrating the sacred statues of Hermes by breaking off their prominent genitalia. But this off-hand comparison clearly will not stand close examination (Widmerpool is no Alcibiades, after all), and Powell does not elaborate upon it. Instead he reserves for Widmerpool’s private sexual life the inflection of a passivity that makes him less than a man, portraying him as a voyeur who spies on his wife’s extra-marital couplings (see especially Kings 261 ff.)
The choice of perversion seems, at first glance, a suitable one: for Powell, it is “the love of power that makes the true voyeur” (Kings 270), and Widmerpool is driven by that kind of “love” as opposed to more “normal” fleshly appetites; and at the same time the comparative passivity of the voyeur’s role (particularly when it is his own wife’s penetration he is watching) places it at the feminine rather than the masculine pole of the conventional-cum-Freudian conception of human sexuality. But the opposition between Widmerpool as radical deviance and Jenkins as healthy norm deconstructs itself quite strikingly when expressed in these terms. The problem with making voyeurism the sign of radical deviance from male norms is that the role of the realistic novelist — and certainly that of first-person-narrator Nick Jenkins, whose function in the novels is both to narrate and perform those norms — is a kind of voyeurism. As Wayne Brown has written of V. S. Naipaul: “A novelist, whose potential material is everyone and everything, learns early to watch: to watch himself; to watch everyone and everything around him; to watch himself watching them. And the better the writer, and the longer he persists in his writing, the more ascendant grows The Watcher in him: and the more insubstantial by comparison he himself, the mortal man, perceives himself to be. It is as though that daemonic or spectral Watcher were blooming invisibly in him, in the process increasingly draining him, for its own sustenance, of the sense of personal authenticity, autonomy and potency, which the mortal man needs and which constitute the basis of his well-being.” Draining the novelist of personal authenticity and potency, novel-writing is structurally so close to sexual voyeurism that the latter stands inescapably as an apt

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metaphor for the former. This certainly fits Jenkins, whose narrative is rooted in his
often-prurient interest in and speculation concerning the manners, dispositions and
motives of a broad range of figures purportedly representative of modern England.
Reticent about his own affairs while ceaselessly interrogating the doings of others,
Jenkins is a passive witness to the happenings he recounts, not an active participant. So
Powell’s stigmatization of Widmerpool as a voyeur is a dangerous tactic, because it
threatens to rebound and contaminate the representative of the very norms with which
Widmerpool’s behaviour must be starkly contrasted. The distinction between the norm
and the abnormal is thus inadvertently deconstructed by the novel, which structurally
performs as narration the very outrage it seeks to condemn as content of the narration. In
what one may usefully term the novel’s “unconscious,” it appears to have some inkling of
this; and in order to avoid the abyss that its inadvertent deconstruction reveals, it attempts
to recuperate voyeurism as “normal.” “Most men have a bit of Candaules [the
mythical/artistic pattern of the voyeur] in them. Your friend Widmerpool seems to have
quite a lot, if he really liked exhibiting his wife” says Moreland (269). Widmerpool, in
other words, is exorbitant in degree but not in kind, not so radically “other” after all.
Accordingly, the diffuse threat of the irrational, the illegible, the unintelligible — the
threat posed by all the elements of post-war England that disrupt and destabilize the old,
fixed codes that supposedly made knowledge possible and underwrote the realistic novel
— is concentrated in the figure of Pamela Widmerpool née Flitton, and specifically in
her mysterious and destructive sexuality. Pamela is strikingly beautiful, but Jenkins
declares that what makes men catch their breath at the sight of her is not “her slim figure and pent-up sullen beauty” but a “closeness to Death... carried within herself” (Books, 46-7). This Death that she embodies is the death of meaning; since meaning demands difference, its death is manifest first of all as indifference, both in Pamela’s attitude to others and in the resolute blankness and indecipherability of her own behaviour. “Apart from the instant warning of general hostility to all comers that her personality automatically projected, an unspoken declaration that no man or woman could remain unthreatened by her presence, she did not appear displeased at this encounter, merely indifferent,” says Jenkins when he meets her in Venice (Kings 78), and at Florian’s “Pamela appeared indifferent to whether they stayed or went” (169). Her response to meeting another old friend is “a neutralization of Ada’s affectionate embrace” (98), but this neutralization or neutering is itself neutral, indifferent, indecipherable: “Pamela’s reception of this greeting was less obviously approving of reunion, though her accustomed coldness of manner was not to be constructed as pointer in one direction more than another... It was impossible to judge from outward signs” (93). Powell’s representations of Pamela insist on this indifference: “Pamela gave him one of her blank stares” (100) and “as usual registered no immediate reaction to his first statement” (101); she “showed not the least recognition of the fact that her husband had just arrived” (105), and when Widmerpool appears at the door of the flat she shares with her lover Trapnel “so far from showing any wonder, she made no sign whatever of even being aware that another person had entered the room” (Books 199).
Pamela's indifference, her blank stare, is the Gorgon-face of her destructiveness. Jenkins speculates that she leaves Widmerpool for novelist X. J. Trapnel because the "violent antithesis" of the two men "promised anarchic extremities of feeling of the kind at which she aimed; in which she was principally at home. She liked... 'to try conclusions with the maelstrom'" (192) The rumours that surround her relate "that one of the generals at a NATO headquarters had fallen out with another senior officer, when she was staying with him; that her visit to an embassy in Asia had resulted in a reshuffle of diplomatic personnel; that the TUC had been put in a flutter one year at their conference by her presence with a delegate at a local hotel" (Kings 37). She is especially inimical to Art: when she becomes ill at the reception after Erridge's funeral, she shocks the other guests by vomiting into an enormous Chinese vase but herself displays no embarrassment: "The way she brought it off was remarkable, almost sublime. She stepped down from the plinth with an air of utter unconcern" (82). And in "an extraordinary incident at the French Embassy in London... Lady Widmerpool, quite deliberately, broke the back of a small gilt chair during supper" (Kings 47).

Powell insists that the source of Pamela's indifference is sexual — "outward expression, no doubt, of an inner sexual condition" (78). This Medusa is an all-devouring nihilism operating under the sign of castration. "'I'd like to ask you about this girl — the castrating one," says Gwinnett to Jenkins after meeting Pamela (Kings, 27), and he repeats the characterization a few pages later ("the castrating girl" 36). This is no throwaway description; telling Jenkins about his meeting with Pamela in the Basilica of
San Marco in Venice, Gwinnett “gave an embarrassed laugh. ‘She grabbed hold of me,’

he said. ‘You mean—‘ ‘Just that.’ ‘By the balls?’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘Literally?’ ‘Quite

literally’” (158). Powell makes it abundantly clear that Pamela’s impulse to castration is

intimately connected with her hostility to all systems of differences, particularly those

that undergird the novel. In *Books Do Furnish A Room* Pamela symbolically castrates

her lover, novelist X. J. Trapnel, by destroying the only manuscript of his new work.

“‘We never seem to agree about writing, especially my writing.’” Trapnel tells Jenkins.

“‘It’s almost as if she hates it, doesn’t want me to do it, and yet she thinks about my work

all the time, knows just where the weak places are’” (*Books* 219). Within minutes he

finds his precious pages dumped irretrievably into the local canal:

‘She brought the MS along, and chucked it into the Canal... She must have climbed

over the railings to get to the water. I’d liked to have watched her doing that. I’d

thought of a lot of things she might be up to — doctoring my pills, arranging for me

to find her being had by the milkman, giving the bailiffs our address. I never thought

of this. I never thought she’d destroy my book... In a way I’m not surprised. Even

though this particular dish never struck me as likely to appear on the menu, it all fits

in with the cuisine.” (*Books*, 223-4).

That Pamela’s act is to be apprehended as a castration is underlined when Trapnel, on
discovering his manuscript pages floating on the water, throws away his most valued

possession, the phallic death’s-head swordstick that has been his constant companion:

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"Then an extraordinary thing happened... He lifted the swordstick behind his head and, putting all his force into the throw, cast it as far as this would carry, high into the air. The stick turned and descended, death’s-head first. A mystic arm should certainly have risen from the dark waters of the mere to receive it. That did not happen. Trapnel’s Excalibur struck the flood a long way from the bank, disappeared for a moment, surfaced, and began to float downstream. ‘Now he really has become unmoored,’ said Bagshaw. (223)

After this unmooring/unmanning, Trapnel disappears from sight. Occasionally an article or story appears, but “nothing comparable with the old Trapnel standard” (Kings 26). He dies bemoaning his losses: “‘I haven’t got a stick any longer, have I? I sacrificed it. Nor a bloody novel. I haven’t got that either.’ Then he heeled over into the gutter” (34).

What makes Pamela’s sexuality castrating, what constitutes it as annihilating the ordered systems of differences that enable meaning, is its peculiarly paradoxical character: “One of the paradoxes about Pamela was a sexuality, in one sense almost laughably ostentatious, the first thing you noticed about her; in another, something equally connected with sex that seemed reluctant, extorted, a possession she herself utterly refused to share with anyone,” declares Jenkins (81). Pamela’s “ostentatious” sexuality is contradicted by her essential frigidity, her deathlike inability to truly articulate or connect with a lover in the sexual act: “She wants it all the time, yet doesn’t want it. She goes rigid like a corpse. Every grind’s a nightmare” says Trapnel (Books 225), and on the basis of Trapnel’s confession Jenkins describes her matter-of-factly as “frigid but

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wanted a lot of it all the same” (Kings 84). Pamela’s sexuality, her corpse-like frigidity belied by her obvious sexual allure, is a threat to the legibility of the world in general and to the enabling preconditions of the realistic novel in particular because it sunders the conventional connection between signifier and signified. To emphasize the enormity of the negation of meaning that Pamela represents, Powell infuses into his novel the “cabalistic dialectic” of the clairvoyante Mrs. Erdleigh, who warns Pamela that she is “near the abyss” and urges her “to evade the ghostly cataract.” “Court at your peril those spirits that dabble lasciviously with primeval matter, horrid substances, sperm of the world, producing monsters and fantastic things, as it is written, so that the toad, this leprous earth, eats up the eagle.” Putting these words into the mouth of Mrs. Erdleigh, of course, allows Powell to avail himself of their apocalyptically extravagant imagery without having to take responsibility for it, but the recipient of the warnings takes them seriously: “The extraordinary thing was Pam more or less understood the stuff,” says Odo Stevens, who witnesses the scene, and “Pamela began to scream with laughter again, shriller even than before. ‘You know, you know, you know. You’re a wonderful old girl’” (260-1).

Since Pamela is Powell’s scapegoat, she has to be sacrificed — more precisely, she has to sacrifice herself in a ritual death that will symbolically make whole what she has rent asunder. The abyss that yawns between signifier and signified, between appearance and reality, must be safely bridged so that the world can once again be legible, the noumenal reliably inferred from the phenomenal, and the traditional realist novel placed on a solid

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epistemological foundation. The woman who wanted it all the time, who was metaphorically “dying for it,” must literally die for it, offering her poisoned and still-

* The scapegoating of a character who embodies the “scandal” of the work in which he appears is by no means unknown in literature, but the most obvious examples I have noted come from the drama, in which the appearance/reality opposition is structurally-inscribed in the form. Dramatists sometimes feel (consciously or unconsciously) the need to exorcise it by displacing theatrical qualities onto characters who are held up to the audience’s censure or ridicule. Thus Volpone, the eponymous protagonist of Ben Jonson’s play, is finally punished not for what the audience is likely to perceive as his true crimes, but for his *theatricality*, and his punishment is expressly designed to heal the appearance/reality breach: since his wealth “was gotten by imposture, / By feigning lame, gout, palsy, and such diseases, / Thou art to lie in prison, cramped with irons, / Till thou be’st sick and lame indeed. Remove him” (V, 12, 121-4). Similarly his servant and co-conspirator, Mosca, is punished for the theatrical wearing of a costume or habit to which he is not socially entitled: “You / ...Have with your impudence abused the court, / and habit of a gentleman of Venice, / Being a fellow of no birth or blood” (V, 12, 107-12). Jonson thus exorcises the animating spirit of his own work. In a comparable fashion Terence Rattigan’s *The Winslow Boy*, feeling the need to establish the seriousness and weightiness of its theme, disavows its own theatricality by displacing its necessary interest in theatrical properties (literally, *stage properties*) onto a female newspaper
warm body to her necrophilic lover in a sacrificial death that will resolve the paradox of her sexual being: the woman who "goes rigid like a corpse" in her lovers' arms must become a literal corpse in a final amorous embrace. "The sole matter for doubt... was whether, at such a cost, all had been achieved. One hoped so."

From one point of view, all that Powell could achieve was achieved with Pamela's death, which comes at the end of the penultimate novel in the series. The final installment, Hearing Secret Harmonies, is rather poor stuff in comparison with what has gone before, a kind of mopping-up operation which has none of the energy and conviction that informs the novel's battle with Pamela and all that she represents. Widmerpool remains to be killed off, of course, but as the smokebombs that accompany his silly speech suggest, he is by now more of a pantomime demon than the real thing. Much the same thing can be said of Scorpio Murtlock, the mesmeric satanist who leads Britain's youth astray and who functions unconvincingly as the centrepiece of Powell's myopic depiction reporter: Miss Barnes interrupts Arthur Winslow's declamation of his intention to seek justice ("I shall continue to fight this monstrous injustice with every weapon and every means at my disposal") with a "typically-feminine" (and hence characteristically-trivial) question — "Oh, what charming curtains! (She rises.) What are they made of? (She crosses to window, examines heavy curtains. Arthur sits for a moment in paralyzed silence.)" [Terence Rattigan, The Winslow Boy, New York: Dramatists Play Service, n.d., I, 2, p. 38. The play was first performed in 1946.].

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of the 'Sixties. As an incisive and persuasive comedy of manners, this last volume falls far short of its predecessors, arguably because Powell's uncomprehending disapproval of a younger generation forecloses the kind of imaginative sympathy with which he chronicles his own.

From another point of view, however, the death of Pamela achieves nothing whatsoever. She, after all, is not the problem, and her death is not a solution: she is merely a projection of her creator's deepest epistemological and ontological anxieties, a displacement of his anxieties about a world that increasingly refuses to make sense on the terms which Powell proposed to himself as the basis of his magnum opus. Pamela herself "makes sense" only as a scapegoat, a function rather than a character. Any attempt to understand her in "realistic" terms is likely to end in the exasperation that Patrick Swinden typically articulates: "To discover that the reason a woman has been behaving as she has is because she is sexually frigid tells one very little. Why is she frigid? What link is there... between Pamela's offensive self-advertisement... and her present (supposed) frigidity? Powell's representation of her character does not allow us to answer these questions. Or, rather... we are at liberty to create in our minds almost any picture of the sort of person she is. That is taking relative interpretation too far. Really, a character you can do that with is scarcely a character at all." 75 Precisely: one can make sense of Pamela only by abandoning the conventions by which the novels implicitly ask to be read and instead employing the kind of critical remove which my reading exemplifies. Pamela's sacrifice is ultimately pointless, since it cannot re-establish the
legitimacy of the novel of character as plausible socio-historical explanation. As the “centre” of the novel, her character is a ruse of the unconscious, a dream-figuration of the “real” dramatic centre which is the subversion of the realistic project. The novel thus resembles a sixteenth-century historical text examined by Antonio Benítez-Rojo — a text “built on a dramatic structure whose nub, whose bundle of conflicts, permits a reading of the literary uncanny that follows Freud’s way of reading such things... this nub or conflictive “center” has displaced, within the text, an unavoidable historical presence, and has usurped its place in the tale.... The uncanny comes from “within”; it has much in common with certain dreams — hence its asymmetry, its inscription within the catalog of the extraordinary —, since in Freud’s experience it precedes the repression of a castration complex that appears in disguise.” Powell’s representation of Pamela as a castrating female allows him to both figure and repress the real threat, which is the gelding of his realistic novel by a social text that refuses to adhere to a stable system of differences.

As we have seen, *A Dance To The Music Of Time* was launched in the faith that fidelity to the contour of contingency — “getting it right” in matters of detail — would yield a vision of the meaningful pattern constituted by all the apparently-meaningless details; chronicle would be redeemed as History. As the sequence progressed, however, that initial faith became harder to sustain. The world’s recalcitrance was initially apprehended only as a new and unpleasant but quite limited and specific social phenomenon, and it was personified as Kenneth Widmerpool in the confident belief that it would eventually turn out to be a central thread in the yet-to-be-revealed pattern. But

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when Powell came to deal with the immediate postwar period, the period of *Books Do Furnish A Room*, he was writing in the late ‘Sixties, and the uncertainties and turbulences of those years did not provide a vantage-point from which a redeeming pattern could be glimpsed. In the eyes of the patrician Right to which Powell belongs, things had gone horribly wrong, but to an extent which could not all be laid at the door of the real-life counterparts of Widmerpool. No character, in fact, could represent a plausible, naturalistic explanation for a confusion too diffuse and widespread to be attributed to a single type of social agency; so Widmerpool’s centrality is usurped by his wife, who is not the cause of what ails the novel, merely the scapegoat.

Pamela’s sacrificial expulsion from *A Dance To The Music Of Time* could not allay an increasing and manifest uneasiness about the project’s prospects of success as originally conceived, so Powell attempted to redefine the aims and methods of the work. In *Books Do Furnish A Room* Powell uses X.J. Trapnel as a mouthpiece for what must surely be his own anxieties about the way in which his work is perceived. Trapnel calls himself a naturalist writer, but insists that Naturalism is not to be understood as the faithful registration of contingent fact. “People can’t get it right about Naturalism. They think if a writer like me writes the sort of books I do, it’s because that’s easier, or necessary nowadays. You just look round at what’s happening and shove it all down. They can’t understand that’s not in the least the case. It’s just as selective, just as artificial, as if the characters were kings and queens speaking in blank verse” (214). This assertion is, of course, quite unexceptionable; what is interesting however is Powell’s felt need to recur
to Trapnel’s pronouncements on the subject again and again in the last three novels, alerting the reader to the fact that the “Truth” of art is quite different from the “truths” of biography, for instance (Harmonies 85). Powell is certainly trying to preempt a particularly prevalent misunderstanding of “naturalism” (a term which I have been using interchangeably with “realism” in this study), but the fact he feels it necessary to hammer the point home again and again surely has something to do with the new direction his novel is taking. There is less preoccupation with the registration of surface detail and increasing recourse to myth and symbol to supply organizing patterns in the two final novels in particular. Temporary Kings is replete with references to myths and works of art seen as repositories of essential, eternal Truth; much of the book takes place in Venice under the aegis of Tiepolo’s Candaules and Gyges, which is held to represent the type not only of various Widmerpool-Pamela-lover triangles but also of all heterosexual relationships: “This last minute retardation in coming to bed had, at the same time, something of all women about it; the King’s anticipatory complacence, something of all men” declares Jenkins (84). Hearing Secret Harmonies invokes an even greater array of literary, artistic and mythological models, forsaking “realism” for something like the “magic realism” of Shakespeare’s last plays to adumbrate its themes of regeneration and redemption.

There is a distinct difference between the modality of these books and that of the earlier ones, suggesting that the Powell/Trapnel disquisitions on Naturalism are not merely clarifications of the original project but markers of a substantial modification of it.

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Powell, in other words, is finally driven to the allegedly-timeless patterns of Art to seek the meanings that have refused to emerge from the overflowing stream of history. His scapegoating of Pamela can hardly have been the result of fully-conscious intention; it was more probably the expression of an unconscious wish, the performance of a magical rite that provided psychological satisfaction but of course changed nothing. Powell’s novel killed her off and buried her, but what she represented finally did the same to *A Dance To The Music Of Time* as originally conceived. The final installments tacitly admit this by abandoning history and turning to Myth, deserting “life” for “Art”. Near the beginning of *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, Jenkins discusses Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* and its representation of Time, which is “a writer’s Time... far less relaxed” than the “unhurried” figure of Time (“a painter’s Time”) in Poussin’s famous picture “where the Seasons dance, while Time plucks his lyre to provide the music” (33). Since the novel is a temporal art form, it is Ariosto’s Time, a Time whose ministrations constitute our human lives as transient and ephemeral, that ought by rights to preside over Powell’s work. But history frustrates History, and change overwhelms his attempt to make sense of modern England; it is Poussin’s Time — a Time which is timeless because it belongs to a spatial art form — that supplies the novel’s final stasis: “Even the formal measure of the Seasons seemed suspended in the wintry silence” that accompanies Jenkins’ bonfire of the “miscellaneous debris” of life (272, 243). And it is Poussin’s *A Dance To The Music Of Time* — a dance which is no dance because it is without motion — that graces the dustjacket of Powell’s novel.
Despite the refinements of naturalist theory Anthony Powell puts into the mouth of X.J. Trapnel in the later volumes, *Dance to the Music of Time* represents (in its ambition, if not its achievement) one of the strongest forms of realism — the belief that meaning is intrinsic to the phenomenal world, a property of events rather than interpretations of events. The art of the realist, on this view, consists of depicting the phenomenal world in such a way that its meaning simply announces itself. This entails "showing" and not "telling," because to "tell" is implicitly to admit that meaning belongs not to events and objects but to ideologies — to stories told about events and objects. The aim of a "strong" realist project such as Powell's sequence is to tell a story about the world while concealing from itself the fact that it is telling a story. Instead of self-consciously taking responsibility for the meaning embodied in its story — which is what the self-reflexiveness of the postmodern novel performs — the realist enterprise wants to believe (and to make its reader believe) that its interpretation of the world is not an interpretation at all, but the true structure and meaning of Reality. Realism, in other words, constantly aspires to the cogency of non-fiction, but non-fiction so conceived is an impossible dream, as I shall try to show in the next chapter.

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