The Dance to Come: Powell and the Victorians

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This article traces some of the ways in which Anthony Powell thought about *A Dance* *to The Music of Time* in its formative years, how he conceived, both negatively and positively, the dance to come. The past and future are complexly at work - and at play - in Powell’s fiction and we can shed a particular light on their relationship through examining *A Dance’*s relationship to its Victorian literary precursors. To talk about the Victorians in relation to Powell might seem an unusual, not to say suicidal, choice of topic. But it was in the nineteenth century that the novel achieved its dominance as a literary form in England, France and Russia and extended its social range and formal possibilities so brilliantly that it produced some of the masterpieces not just of the novel form but of world literature. To most of the European figures of this epoch - Balzac, Flaubert, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy - Powell pays genuine if not uncritical admiration, taking particular pleasure in the work of Stendhal, about whom the narrator of *What’s Become of Waring* is writing a book and whom Nick Jenkins names as one of his favourite authors in *The Soldier’s Art*. But towards the leading English novelists of the Victorian period – Dickens, George Eliot, Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, Charlotte and Emily Bronte - Powell has a more complexly critical, hostile or neglectful stance. It was perhaps the depth and range of Victorian fiction, created in one of the greatest periods of innovation and high confidence of English letters, that made it a difficult and potentially intimidating presence for Powell’s generation of novelists: hard to avoid, impossible simply to follow.

Powell has many affinities to literary modernism, particularly in his earlier works but he also shares many of the same ambitions as his great Victorian predecessors. It is from the striction of those two forces that *A Dance* was born. Powell, I want to argue, thinks self-consciously about the form, practice, subject-matter and narrative stance of his nineteenth-century precursors at the moment that he conceives of and inaugurates *A Dance*. In what sense might the *Dance* to come be like or unlike the works of those Victorian forerunners who had, as Powell did, great ambition, a wide social range, a large fictional canvas and the wish to understand and dramatize the complexities and nuances of many diverse human lives over lengthy periods of time and through major historical change? In its panorama of English social life, how much does his work resemble, or differ from, the writings of Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot or Trollope? Or might there be more unusual models or precursors, such as the work of Robert Surtees, for example?

In his literary criticism and reviewing, Powell is characteristically robust and succinct in his judgements, so that it may take a moment to register the distinctiveness, oddity or sheer bloody-mindedness of some of them. In *Miscellaneous Verdicts,*for example, there is a striking composite article (based on three reviews written between 1952 and 1988) about the early nineteenth-century novelist, Robert Surtees. The most important passages of the article originate from 1952, the year of Powell’s *A Buyer’s Market*, a year after *A Question of Upbringing*, as *A Dance* is starting to be shaped, and it is from these that I quote. Surtees was the author of a string of once highly popular hunting novels such as *Jorrocks' Jaunts and Jollities* (1838) and *Mr Sponge's Sporting Tour* (1853) but an author read much less now. Without the prompt of this article, one would not, I think, naturally think of him as a Powellian antecedent, although of course fox-hunting plays a fatally important role in *From A View to a Death*. But Powell’s article is full of praise. Having pointed out Surtees's not inconsiderable flaws - lack of plot, obsession with hunting - Powell asks himself why should ‘non-fox hunting readers endure pages and pages about fox-hunting in shapeless, all but plotless, novels, however well written?’[[1]](#endnote-1) ‘There is no answer’, writes Powell, ‘except that Surtees at his best, gives far the most convincing picture that exist from early Victorian times of dukes, ostlers and a hundred other types.’[[2]](#endnote-2) It is a revealing set of critical and fictional priorities: shapelessness, even plotlessness, are venial faults, easily excused; good writing and the ability to portray dukes, ostlers and a wide range of social types are what matter.

This is a more than fair-minded assessment of Surtees, one would think, but Powell goes even further. In a remarkable contrast, he considers the competition: Dickens, he writes, making a point that he several times repeats, both in reviews and his journals:

never really got the hang of the upper classes… nor for that matter of his soupily sentimental proletarians. What he wrote of with genius was the lower-middle class. Thackeray was familiar with certain worlds, describing them in a stylised manner, while always tormented by his own social uneasiness. Trollope can deal with a cathedral close or political machinations, but again takes conventional views and is often stodgy. Surtees, with recklessly knockabout humour (that can tail off into farce), strikes an uncanny realism that is always without humbug.[[3]](#endnote-3)

It is Surtees, not any of his more famous peers, who for Powell strikes the note of ‘uncanny realism’ and bears comparison with the great Russian master, Dostoevsky. Such a judgement, I should add, is not a momentary or aberrant judgment by Powell written under the pressure of a weekly deadline, but one confirmed by the later reviews and Powell’s decision to gather and reprint them.

It is, though, a remarkable and surprising set of judgments and relative weightings of the four novelists, without a parallel in the works of other critics. Since Powell wrote, Dickens and Thackeray have continued to gather readers; other mid- Victorian novelists – Wilkie Collins and Elizabeth Gaskell in particular - have been raised in both popular and critical estimation - but Surtees has slipped into relative obscurity. This positive assessment of Surtees is important but the limiting judgments on those usually thought to be the greatest Victorian novelists even more so, and are part of a wider pattern. In an essay on John Galsworthy, for example, Powell first praises Thackeray for saying ‘just as much qua Forsytism … as Galsworthy but in a hundredth part of the space’ but then qualifies that praise by disparaging his masterpiece *Vanity Fair*, on the grounds that ‘the treatment of character is not very subtle’, for its author has ‘rough and ready methods’ which lead to ‘the often trite machinery that animates Thackeray’s puppets’.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Characteristically, this dismissive assessment of a major mid-Victorian novel is made in passing. With the exceptions of Dickens and to a degree Hardy (both of whom Powell clearly read a good deal throughout his life), there is no full-dress engagement in his criticism. English nineteenth-century novelists do not command the attention in Powell’s reviews that, say, Henry James, Balzac, D. H. Lawrence, Wilde or Joyce does. What he is drawn to are often the ‘minor’ writers of the period, such as Surtees, Sheridan Le Fanu, Thomas Love Peacock, Cuthbert Bede and George Moore. Charles Dickens is, as always it seems, something of a special case and both the subject of several reviews and of many readings and re-readings in Powell’s *Journals*. The *1987-9 Journals*, for example, begin ‘I reread *Bleak House*, with ruthless skipping’.[[5]](#endnote-5) In the same volume, Powell also reads *Dombey and Son* (‘Captain Cuttle, much else, the most clotted rubbish’), *Little Dorrit* (I finished *Little Dorrit* … Dickens can do exceptional circumstances marvellously well ... what Dickens is quite unable to depict is the ebb and flow of ordinary upper-middle-class life, or for that matter working class life, except in the case of the latter through a thick veil of sentimentality’) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (‘with not more than reasonable skipping ... Most of the book is incredible nonsense’).[[6]](#endnote-6) The recurrent attention to Dickens is matched by recurrent criticism of his limitations. As the skipping suggests, Powell tended to follow his impatient nose, which quite often leads him astray: ‘The title’, he writes of *Bleak House*, ‘was surely intended to apply to the Dedlocks’ mansion in Lincolnshire, Chesney Wold.’[[7]](#endnote-7) (It wasn’t). ‘Dickens … of course sent his own sons to Eton’.[[8]](#endnote-8) No, again: Powell gets this fact as wrong in the *Journals* as he gets it right in his review of Philip Collins’s *Dickens and Education*: only Charlie the eldest went to Eton and then only at the urging of Angela Burdett Coutts who paid the fees; his other sons had much less elevated schoolings.[[9]](#endnote-9) A repeated criticism is Dickens’s ignorance of work: ‘Dickens never has the foggiest idea of how people earn a living; Balzac knows this very well’; ‘Dickens … never really possessed any clear idea of how anyone earned a living’; ‘Dickens had absolutely no idea how anyone (Dombey, Scrooge, etc.) earned a living (except by writing or acting), tho’ he is always good about losing money, going bankrupt, etc.’[[10]](#endnote-10) But there is praise as well as skipping, and nothing to compare with Powell’s despairing, ultimately brutal, dismissal of Thackeray’s *The Virginians*: ‘broke down after 50 pages. Nothing to be said for it, arch, longwinded, badly put together, characterization rubbish’ or Hardy’s *Mayor of Casterbridge*: ‘a series of beyond words improbable events, like a strip cartoon’.[[11]](#endnote-11)

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In a way, this is not at all surprising. For Powell and his generation, the Victorians were a rather troublesome presence, simultaneously too close and too far away, as familiar and as strangely different as say Edgar Deacon and Nick Jenkins are to each other, or Deacon’s ‘Boyhood of Cyrus’ and Stringham’s Modigliani nude. Powell, born in 1905, like every one of his generation, had Victorians for parents and grandparents, natural candidates for rejection. But the literarygeneration immediately before Powell’s, which we could call in shorthand ‘Bloomsbury and others’, had already done much of the work of displacing or revising that inheritance. Literary modernism of the generation immediately before Powell’s had already radically rejected the Victorians’ own self-evaluations, as epitomised by Lytton Strachey’s subversion of Victorian biographical convention and values in his 1918 *Eminent Victorians*. Powell along with many of his contemporaries seemed to share, particularly in his earlier novels, this wish to slough off his Victorian precursors. It is to film dialogue, to Hemingway or the *Neue Sachlichtkeit* that we look rather than to Dickens, George Eliot or the Brontes to find sources for or analogues to *Afternoon Men* or *Venusberg*, for example.[[12]](#endnote-12) There is as little of the wide social range, deep social empathy and complexly orchestrated plotting that characterises the greatest nineteenth- century fiction in Powell’s 1920s and 1930s fiction as there is in his friend Evelyn Waugh’s *Decline and Fall* or *Vile Bodies*.

Yet Powell’s generation also saw a corrective revaluation of the Victorians. Powell’s review of Michael Holroyd’s biography of Lytton Strachey notes that ‘the Bloomsburies were already thought of by the young [i.e. Powell and his generation] as a curious embalmed residue of another age’.[[13]](#endnote-13) For Powell, Strachey’s work ‘does not wear well’ and ‘at its best often offers no more than the Victorian approach turned the other way up’.[[14]](#endnote-14) *Eminent Victorians* is, he writes, ‘essentially a “Victorian” book, obsessed with Victorian values’: the archetypal anti-Victorian book was for Powell, writing in the 1960s, equally ‘Victorian’. The idea of what the Victorians were like for Powell has by this point directly inverted the judgement of the Bloomsbury generation, although he does not go so far as Evelyn Waugh who named in a late television interview the Victorian genre painter Augustus Egg as the painter he most admired. Indeed, these changes were already in embryo as early as the 1920s in the furnishing of Harold Acton’s rooms at Oxford with Victorian furniture and the revival of Trollope’s reputation in Michael Sadleir’s Trollope commentary and bibliography of the same decade.[[15]](#endnote-15)

As far as Powell is concerned, we can see a significant difference between pre- and post-war writing. In 1947, shortly before the two books about John Aubrey and not very long before beginning A *Dance*, Powell edited and introduced probably his least-known work, *Novels of High Society from the Victorian Age,* consisting of three rather obscure Victorian novels, with an introduction by Powell.[[16]](#endnote-16) It was his first post-war book and the first since *What’s Become of Waring* in 1939. The novels themselves form an odd and interesting selection, almost none of which would nowadays be read even perhaps by specialists in the Victorian novel. In the following year, F.R. Leavis published his massively influential *The Great Tradition* and it would be hard to think of a sharper contrast in the two men’s selections. For Leavis, it was only George Eliot, one Bronte (unspecified) and a single Dickens novel, *Hard Times* from the whole Victorian period that mattered, a canon of the English novel without Thackeray, Trollope, Hardy or Meredith, let alone Kipling, Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins or a host of other candidates. In sharp contrast, the three novels Powell chose were *Henrietta Temple* by Benjamin Disraeli, *Guy Livingstone* by G. A. Lawrence and *Moths* by Ouida. The choice shows the breadth of Powell’s reading, his independence of judgement and, perhaps most significantly for us, his fictional preoccupations at the time. For in a way, the preface to this collection is also a preface to *A Dance to the Music of Time*, which is at least in part a novel of high society. Powell’s reflection on the difficulties and challenges of the novelist’s task in the preface can be seen as part of his own preparation towards his major work.

The problem with writing a high society novel, Powell writes, is that the author who decides to describe ‘Society’ (i.e. upper class society) ‘had … a task that laid him open to criticism of a peculiarly searching kind’, being liable to exaggerate either the closedness or openness of the society world being depicted.[[17]](#endnote-17) By this question of ‘openness’ or ‘closedness’, Powell seems to point to three distinct things. First, to the social exclusiveness or otherwise of the social world depicted and thus the range of characters who can be brought together within it; secondly, to the role of the narrator and his or her ability to move within that world; and thirdly, to the form of the novel itself, its relative open- or closed-ness to a variety of different kinds of social action in different locations. *A Dance* is a novel or sequence of novels fascinated by questions of both social and fictional openness and closedness, in locations and institutions - parties, schools, journals - that constantly flaunt and doubt their inclusivity and exclusivity. It both opens itself to a remarkable range of individuated characters and memorable events, and closes itself at its end only to simultaneously reopen itself in Nick’s inaugurating and concluding memory at the brazier, a snake swallowing its own tale.

One self-evident parallel to Powell’s work, signalled in its title, is Marcel Proust’s *A La Récherche Du Temps Perdu*. In Powell’s preface to the *Novels of High Society*, Marcel Proust is twice mentioned as an exception to the problems that these Victorian novels create, and in some ways as an exemplar, because within *A La Récherche* for Powell ‘the narrator may speak as a social inferior, a point of observation accepted without demur by so pre-eminent a writer in this *genre* as Marcel Proust’.[[18]](#endnote-18) Powell here seems to be working out how to write about upper-class society while simultaneously avoiding ‘the note of patronage’, being accused of ‘giving the show away’ and risking contradiction by those who know better.[[19]](#endnote-19) Mediating the internal and the external, those in the know and those who are not, those within the privileged circles and those held at bay, is for Powell the central problem in writing about high society. In a way this becomes the formal and substantive centre of *A Dance*. Is Widmerpool, for example, in or out? Is Nick Jenkins? I have written elsewhere about doormen in Powell’s work, those who stand at the threshold of privilege and guard its entrances and how brutally Powell often characterises them: in *Afternoon Men* as ‘two Shakespearean murderers, minor thugs from one of the doubtfully ascribed plays’, a ‘senile cretin’ and an ‘ape-faced dotard in uniform’.[[20]](#endnote-20) Doormen too mediate the internal and external, have a privileged knowledge, and must not give the show away: bad others of the successful novelist.

Proust is one clear affiliation for Powell but so too are the Victorian novels to which the Proust remarks provide a preface. The Victorian multiplot novel is in many ways the nearest English fictional analogue or precursor to Powell’s work. In social range, Dickens’s *Bleak House*, for example, takes us from the abjectly poor Jo the crossing sweeper to the wealthy baronet Sir Leicester Dedlock. Powell’s social range goes less deep: he does not walk the lower depths as Dickens does, but does broaden the social range he presents into the fringes of the bohemian, political, and literary worlds. There are significant formal differences too. The Victorian multiplot novel binds together its huge range of material in three ways: through plot; through parallels, contrasts and analogies between characters and plot strands; and through binding all the different pieces together into what comes to be perceived as a single, multipart action. In the forgiveness Powell extends to Surtees’s fiction we have seen what relatively low value he places on this third kind of connectivity. Indeed, as with the repeated impatience he shows in his reviews of Thomas Hardy (‘beyond words improbable events’), Powell seems to find the kind of integrated plotting that we find in much Victorian fiction a key factor in its lack of realism. Like most novelists from the later nineteenth century onwards, Powell cannot assent to its essentially providential organisation. His 1920s and 30s novels, from *Afternoon Men* to *What’s Become of Waring* repeatedly find not design in human affairs but lack of it, shown in their characteristic melancholy, flatness and sense of the absurd.[[21]](#endnote-21) There is a pattern to *A Dance*, butan essentially subjective one in the mind of Nick, as Powell simultaneously unbinds and multiplies the kinds of organising bonds between characters and events that we might find in a Victorian multiplot novel. Analogies remain but are improvised, ironic or occasional, products of Nick’s partial viewpoint rather than that of an ‘omniscient’ narrator. Rather than progress or resolution, we are given temporal reappearance amid a welter of particulars. It is a matter not of pattern but of patterning: to adapt Henry James’s phrase, not a figure in the carpet but a figuring of the carpet.

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In his reviewing, Powell shows quite a full and at times sympathetic engagement with Victorian novels, though with a very different canon to that of his contemporaries. George Eliot, so important to twentieth- (and indeed twenty-first-) century academic literary criticism, is nowhere to be found in Powell’s reviewing, and there are no articles or reviews on Thackeray, Trollope, Wilkie Collins or George Meredith either. The great women novelists of the nineteenth century do particularly badly in his critical writing, and he seems to publish nothing on the Brontes, Jane Austen or Elizabeth Gaskell. William Makepeace Thackeray is one of the most striking absences in Powell’s reprinted criticism: the most melancholic and ironic of the great Victorians, also the most interested in the visual arts, himself an illustrator, the author of novels whose characters sometimes reappear in later works (*Pendennis* and *The Newcomes*), a writer fascinated by the louche and bohemian worlds as well as that of the upper classes, a great anatomist of snobbery (indeed author of *The Book of Snobs*), a literary journalist and editor: here, one would think, would be a kindred spirit for Powell. But apart from one striking analogy in *The Soldier’s Art* to Colonel Newcombe (from *The Newcombes*), Thackeray barely troubles Powell’s pen. There is a good showing in Powell’s criticism for 1890s writers but from the bulk of the Victorian period he tends to concentrate on the more minor instances, such as Surtees, Benjamin Disraeli, Thomas Love Peacock and Sheridan Le Fanu. Two of Powell’s book titles come from the poetry of Robert Browning: *What’s Become of Waring?* (from Browning’s poem of the same name) and *The Soldier’s Art* (from ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’: ‘the soldier’s art’ is, according to Browning’s poem, or rather according to the deeply misleading and possibly demented Childe Roland to ‘Think first, fight afterwards’. Overall, though, Victorian poetry does not come out well in *A Dance*: it is Le Bas who quotes Mathew Arnold, as well as the minor poet (and Etonian) John Leicester Warren, Lord de Tabley; it is Sillery’s youthful verses that were influenced by Coventry Patmore; the 1901 Kashmiri love Song by Adela Nicholson, “Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar” is heard from the blonde woman on crutches outside the bombed out Mortimer. They are shards, for the most part, signs of an outmoded taste.

 But one Victorian author appears in a more substantial way in *A Dance to the Music of Time*: Anthony Trollope. There is little about Trollope in Powell’s criticism, except for a few glancing references such as this in a review of Galsworthy:

Whatever may be thought of real literary value of Galsworthy’s work, as a true- story romance of How-I-made-my-pile, it is hard to beat. Trollope is nothing to it.[[22]](#endnote-22)

So much, it seems, for Trollope. But Trollope is, like Ariosto, Poussin and Burton, the subject of an important passage in *A Dance to the Music of Time*, when Nick is asked his views on him by General Liddament in *The Soldier’s Art*. Trollope is in many ways a difficult presence for a writer of the *roman fleuve* in English in the twentieth century. The sequence of linked novels, tracing a complex of interrelated characters over two generation or more, is not a frequent form among major English writers. Thackeray writes *The Virginians*, which continues the dynastic history of the Esmond family from *Henry Esmond,* andDefoe creates sequels to *Robinson Crusoe*, but one struggles to find equivalents to the sustained long-term multi-volume narratives of Zola or Balzac, let alone Proust or Musil. In Fielding, Sterne, Smollett, Austen, Scott, Dickens, Eliot, the Brontes, James, Hardy and Gissing, there is no real ambition to build character and plot development across time and volumes in this way. That is partly of course because the nineteenth-century novel itself is very capacious: what on earth might a successor to *Middlemarch* or *Bleak House*, each at about 350,000 words look like, for example?

But there is Anthony Trollope. He is not alone in creating long novel sequences; his mother Frances Trollope, a major novelist in her day, published the *Widow Barnaby* trio of novels, and there is Margaret Oliphant’s *Chronicles of Carlingford* (1863-76). But none is as close to Powell as Anthony Trollope in his two great novel series, the Barchester novels (six novels over twelve years) and the parliamentary or Palliser series (six novels over 15 years). Trollope’s mass is greater, of course, but as in *A Dance* individual novels can be read as single coherent volumes but are strengthened and deepened by their part in a wider sequence, in which everyday life engages with and is counterpointed by the public world of affairs. The time-frames of each sequence stretches over more than one generation and in both everyday middle- and upper-class life is counterpointed by the public world of political and social life. Trollope’s social range is similarly wide to Powell’s, running from the Duke of Omnium down to Quintus Slide, the sleazy editor of the *People’s Banner* newspaper. There are parallels in the lives of the two authors: both went to public school, had slightly rackety phases as young men and had to make a living from their pens, remaining socially within and yet at a certain distance from ‘high society’. As well as being writers of fiction and biography, both men had careers as literary journalists: Trollope as editor of *St Pauls*, Powell as literary editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and the *TLS*. There are differences in narration, of course – Nick Jenkins is very different from Trollope’s impersonal narrators - but the major works of both men nevertheless bear comparison: multi-novel sequences, concerned with a group of interlocking characters, drawn mainly from the literary, political and professional worlds of the English upper and middle class, some of whom survive and flourish, some of whom die or drop away, many of whom reappear later in the sequence, as minor characters turn out to have major significance, or vice versa, in subsequent volumes.

Trollope erupts at a surprising juncture into *A Dance to the Music of Time*. In *The Soldier’s Art*, Major-General Liddament, clearly respected by Nick, asks him, innocently enough one might think:

‘What do you think of Trollope?’

To which Nick replies:

‘Never found him easy to read, sir.’

….My answer had an incisive effect. He kicked the chair away from him, with such violence that it fell to the ground with a great clatter. Then he put his feet to the floor, screwing round his own chair so that he faced me.

*‘You’ve never found Trollope easy to read?’*

‘No, sir.’

He was clearly unable to credit my words. This was an unhappy situation. There was a long pause while he glared at me.

‘Why not?’ he asked at last.

He spoke very sternly. I tried to think of an answer. From the past, a few shreds of long forgotten literary criticism were just pliant enough to be patched hurriedly together in substitute for a more suitable garment to cover the dialectical nakedness of the statement just made.

“… the style … certain repetitive tricks of phrasing … psychology often unconvincing …sometimes downright dishonest in the treatment of individual relationships … women don’t analyse their own predicaments as there represented … in fact, the author does more thinking than feeling … of course, possessor of enormous narrative gifts … marshalling material… all that amounting to genius … certain sense of character even if stylised…and naturally as a picture of the times ….’

‘Rubbish,’ said General Liddament.

He sounded very angry indeed. All the good humour … had been dissipated by a thoughtless expression of literary prejudice on my own part. It might have been wiser to have passed some noncommittal judgement. Possibly I should be put under arrest for holding such mutinous views.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Nick’s first answer is one way a surprising one, One might think indeed that no-one, let alone someone of Nick’s intelligence, could find Trollope ‘hard to read’. For those who have encountered the demands of literary modernism or even Shakespeare, he might seem almost too easy to read, not resistant enough to our customary habits of attention. The contrast between this moment and Powell’s citation of Burton and Ariosto is strong. The latter two are incorporated into the texture of the novel, provide analogues to it; Trollope here represents not an analogy but a contrast, the opposite of everything that Nick and indeed the novel wishes to affirm. Trollope’s fiction, we are led to think, is a kind of anti-*Dance*, the ‘nakedly dialectical’ antithesis of the kind of fiction - in style, phrasing, psychology and understanding of women — that Nick and Powell care for and admire.

The violence of the passions invoked in Liddament and Nick’s fear of imminent arrest are of course highly comic but the scene also has significance as one of the more extended passages of literary criticism in the book. Hilary Spurling has written of the importance of the ‘technical analysis’ that we see in Nick Jenkins’s ‘polemic’ against the fiction of St John Clarke, which she calls ‘a short course in the art of writing, as instructive as it is diverting.’[[24]](#endnote-24) The very thought of Clarke’s ‘inexactitudes of thought and feeling’ in his ‘trivial, unreal, vulgar’ novels ‘moves Jenkins’, she writes, ‘by turns to “savagery” and nausea’.[[25]](#endnote-25) Something of the same animus that is directed at the fictional fictions of Clarke is also present here, directed at the real, non-fictional fictions of Trollope, albeit constrained by the fearsome presence of General Liddament. An explicit aesthetic, moral and emotional contrast is drawn through the contrast with Svevo and Laclos and the violent reaction evoked in the General. But the critique of Trollope’s work is in one way a more serious one than that of St John Clarke, in that we can match it against novels that can actually be read. We should take Powell seriously as a formal innovator who self-consciously attempts to create a different kind of novel form, one which draws on many of the strengths of his Victorian fictional precursors - social and fictional amplitude; long-term attentiveness; complex actions - and decisively reshapes them, through a complex mixture of attraction and discriminating repulsion, which we see both in Powell’s criticism and the form and content of his great sequence. The exchange about Trollope is thus an *apotropaic* one, which seeks to ward off a powerful fictional precursor, whose presence is felt to be both threatening (‘possibly I should be put under arrest’) and absurd. A writer who in many ways seems one of the closest twentieth-century successors to Trollope - an English novelist of the middle and upper classes who writes a sequence of linked novels about contemporary life – places himself as his ‘dialectical’ opposite, allowing his presence briefly to appear in the novel, only to be immediately rejected. For Spurling, the criticism of St John Clarke is one ‘framed according to the uncompromising laws of an aesthetic rather than moral or emotional system’ but I do not think we should separate off the aesthetic from the moral and emotional in understanding the violence of Jenkins’s rejection of the fictional novels of Clarke and the real novels of Trollope. Aesthetic, moral and emotional are closely bound together in his characterisation of the ‘odiously phrased and “insincere”’ work of Clarke, and of Trollope’s writing as repetitious, unconvincing and ‘dishonest’. The difference, of course, in the latter case is that we can test Nick’s judgements against our own.

1. Powell, Anthony, *Miscellaneous Verdicts: Writings on Writers 1946-1989*, London: Heinemann, 1990, 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Powell, *Miscellaneous Verdicts*, 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Powell, *Miscellaneous Verdicts*, 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Powell, Anthony, *Under Review: Writings on Writers 1946-1990* London: Heinemann, 1991, 279. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Powell, Anthony, *Journals 1987-1989,* London: Heinemann*,*1996, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Powell, *Journals 1987-1989*, 112, 128, 214 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Powell, *Journals 1987*-1989, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Powell, *Journals 1987-1989*, 128. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Powell, *Miscellaneous Verdicts*, 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Powell, *Under Review*, 383; Powell, Anthony, *Journals 1982-1986*, London: Heinemann, 1995, 240; Powell, *Journals 1987-1989*, 112. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Powell, *Journals 1987-1989*, 123, 122. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Bowen, John, ‘The Melancholia of Modernity: Anthony Powell’s early fiction’ in *Recharting the Thirties*, ed. Patrick Quinn, London: Associated University Press, 1996, 102-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Powell, *Under Review*, 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Powell, *Under Review*, 91. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Sadleir, Michael, *Trollope: A Commentary*, London: Constable, 1927. Sadleir, Michael *Trollope. A Bibliography*, London, Constable, 1928. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Novels of High Society from the Victorian Age,* selected by Anthony Powell, London: Pilot, 1947. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Powell, *Miscellaneous Verdicts* 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Powell, *Miscellaneous Verdicts*, 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Powell, *Miscellaneous Verdicts*, 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Bowen, John, ‘The Melancholia of Modernity’ 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Bowen, John, ‘The Melancholia of Modernity’, 109-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Powell, *Miscellaneous Verdicts*, 280. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Powell, Anthony, *The Soldier’s Art*, London: Arrow, 2005, 45-7. First published London: Heinemann, 1966. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Spurling, Hilary, *Invitation to the Dance: A Handbook to Anthony Powell's A Dance to the Music of Time*, London: Arrow, 2005, xix. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Spurling, *Invitation to the Dance*, xix. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)