

Richard J. Voorhees

THE MUSIC OF TIME: THEMES AND VARIATIONS

BEFORE WORLD WAR II, Anthony Powell published five comic novels. Since the War he has been engaged on a series of novels constituting one long work called *The Music of Time*. Reviews of the five volumes already published have been extremely favourable but not always accurate: some of them give the impression that reading late Powell is like reading early Waugh. The novels that Powell wrote in the 'thirties are, indeed, comparable to the novels that Waugh wrote then; but supposing that Powell's current work is simply an extension of his earlier work is like supposing that *The Tempest* is a continuation of *A Comedy of Errors*. The fact that Powell's fiction falls into two periods should be clearly understood. His early novels will be caviar to many readers, and his later ones will be phenobarbital to many more, but we need not make matters worse by not distinguishing between the two periods.

The four novels that Powell published between 1931 and 1936 make up the initial phase in his development. The first one, *Afternoon Men* (1931), is very funny but at the same time very sad. A synopsis would make it sound like an interminable succession of parties and love affairs, but no other novelist has ever made party-going seem so dreary, and not even Aldous Huxley has made promiscuity seem so depressing. To be sure, the people in Huxley's *Antic Hay* lead lives just as wasteful and pointless as do the people in *Afternoon Men*, yet their bitterness gives them a kind of strength and their cynicism provides them with a kind of faith. The sleazy hedonists of *Afternoon Men*, however, are not cynical or bitter but simply muddled. Moreover, the undertone of the book is not that of mockery but of melancholy, as Powell hints in the epigraph which he takes from Burton: "as if they had heard that enchanted horn of Astolpho, that English duke in Ariosto, which never sounded but all his auditors were mad, and for fear ready to make away with themselves They are a company of giddy-heads, afternoon men."

In the second novel, *Venusberg* (1932), the comedy is similarly qualified. The adventures of the English hero take place in a Baltic country that appears at first sight to have come straight from comic opera: Powell supplies it with a roly-poly little king, an army in absurdly picturesque uniforms, a bumbling servant, romantic intrigues, and political plots. In this comic-opera world, however, assassins fire real bullets; they miss the little king, but they kill the hero's mistress and his friend.

The main action of the third novel, *From a View to a Death* (1933), occurs in the English countryside among characters who seem much like the silly young men, the eccentric old squires, and the village types that are the stock-in-trade of P. G. Wodehouse. But the air of Powell's countryside is charged with something very different from the innocence and amiability of Wodehouse. There is no Jeeves to find a way out of every scrape; the entanglements are sinister, and the farce is fatal. The plight of the city man who, having made false claims to horsemanship, is forced to join the fox-hunt, is one of the oldest of comic devices. Powell, however, turns it into a tragic one; the city man is thrown from his horse and his neck is broken. In the fourth novel, *Agents and Patients* (1936), the hero resembles Bertie Wooster in being fairly rich and extraordinarily stupid. Like Bertie, he obligingly pays out large sums of money, and he is rewarded by being caught in the machinery of some of the wildest farce ever invented. But the wounds that he suffers are not so superficial as Bertie's; he is as pathetic as he is comic. And again the epigraph of the novel comes from an unexpected source, the sermons of John Wesley: "So in every possible case, he that is not free is not an agent, but a patient."

The fifth novel, *What's Become of Waring?* (1939), has characteristics of both the early and the late work. Like the first four novels, it includes some splendidly preposterous characters (for instance, a publisher who hates books). The title character is a successful writer, not because of the merits of his work but because of his shrewd instructions for its promotion. Among other things, he insists that his modesty "be plugged all along the line." It turns out that he has much to be modest about, having plagiarized all of his books from obscure and forgotten volumes, one of them by his own grandfather. At the same time, the style of *What's Become of Waring?* rather resembles that of the later novels. And the narrator, who is much like Nick Jenkins, the narrator of *The Music of Time*, is becoming interested in the themes of *The Music of Time*, especially in the great variety of forms which the desire for power takes.

The sixth book is not a novel, but a study of John Aubrey, the seventeenth-century antiquarian and biographer, which Powell began sometime in 1938, worked at while on leaves during his six years in the Army, and finally published in 1948.

John Aubrey is a piece of solid scholarship, based on primary sources and boasting the usual scholarly apparatus, including an index of thirty closely printed pages. Still, it is perhaps a better indication than *What's Become of Waring?* of what the next five novels will be like. Powell's researches in public, private, and college libraries and his close attention to detail anticipate his elaborate reconstruction of the past in *The Music of Time*. Aubrey's awareness that he is witnessing the breakup of one world and the emergence of another is the equivalent of Powell's awareness of the transition through which his characters are living. Aubrey's antiquarian interests hint at Powell's descriptions of landscapes and old buildings, and his affectionate if sometimes ironical comments on pictures, *objets d'art*, and sheer junk. Even the appendixes of the book are significant. Two charts, "The Pedigree of the Aubrey Family" and "Aubrey's Relationships with the Families of the Lytes and the Danvers", are precursors of the fictional family trees that Powell cherishes in the later novels. And Powell's remark on Aubrey's method of composition is a tip-off to his own: "He was forever pursued by afterthoughts."

The novels of the 'thirties were critical but not popular successes. Like Somerset Maugham (whose success, of course, was with the public, not the critics), Powell might say, "I went my way, with a shrug of the shoulders." In *The Music of Time* his way is much less likely to be popular than the earlier one; indeed, he sets up some formidable obstacles to popularity. First of all, the work is a series with an enormous cast of characters (and Powell does not provide the *dramatis personae* that is helpful in such cases). The publishers say that each volume is complete in itself. But it is certainly not so meaningful by itself as it is in conjunction with others; reading one volume of such a work is like listening to one movement of a symphony. In some respects, isolated volumes are not even superficially intelligible; the reader will not see some of the jokes in the later volumes if he is not familiar with the earlier ones. Why, for instance, is Widmerpool so dismayed at the conversation of the doctor in *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* (1960)?

Powell could not expect to pick up many readers in the later stages of the story. Moreover, he was bound to lose some of his early readers as the series went on. Whereas novels such as *Venusberg* move at high speeds, the tempo in *The Music of Time* is so slow that in five volumes Powell has only got from 1921 to 1937. The tempo sometimes pays off in comic effects as well as others—for example, in the long, exhaustive, mock-serious analysis of the question of who drew the picture on the lavatory wall. But for many readers, both the narrative and the author's commentary will seem to dawdle intolerably. Nor will the syntax help matters. Powell has turned from the conciseness of the pre-War novels to elaborate

sentences full of colons and qualifications: "As a matter of fact, if absolutely compelled to make a pronouncement on the subject, he—or, so far as that went, anyone else investigating the matter—might have taken a fairly firm stand." Sometimes he is simply redundant: "I did not know how long in duration of time the affair had already extended."

Still another difficulty is the cultural superstructure of the series, which is altogether different from that of a Huxley novel. Huxley meets his readers halfway by alluding more often than not to major figures (Blake, Renoir, Bach), but Powell is inclined to cite minor and obscure ones (Webster, Pannini, Lortzing). And he carries intellectual refinement to a point that will seem to the average reader not only pompous but dubious, by discussing such matters as the differences between the *prose* of musicians and of painters. On the other hand, though he is capable of writing conversation as witty and amusing as that of Huxley or Douglas, his customary vein is quieter than theirs.

The Music of Time, however, is like the earlier novels in having episodes of low comedy (Widmerpool accidentally puts his car in reverse and smashes a large garden vase; he is hit in the face with an over-ripe banana). But these scenes do not really contradict the other scenes, or even the tempo of the novels: they do not have the speed which, as Eric Bentley points out, is the mark of farce in the theatre (by contrast, the farce in the earlier novels moves like that of the Marx Brothers at their best). Like the others, the farcical scenes are material for Nick's meditations; they illuminate the other characters and the world in which Nick moves; they are one way of stating the themes of *The Music of Time*.

One function of the farce is suggested by a scrap of conversation about opera in *At Lady Molly's* (1957). "'Did you ever hear him in *Lohengrin*?' demanded Pardoe, taking the ends of his own mustache with both hands as if to tear it off and reveal himself in a new identity." Through farcical gesture and episode people do, indeed, reveal themselves in new identities. When, in *The Acceptance World* (1955), Nick's aristocratic friend Stringham has drunk too much at an Old Boy dinner but refuses to go to bed, Widmerpool wrestles him into submission. Widmerpool, whom Nick and Stringham have always regarded as a joke, has become "in some mysterious way a person of authority." Other scenes equally outlandish if not equally violent provide Nick with other insights into the changes and contradictions of human character. Thus the stuffy Widmerpool gets himself involved with the sluttish Gypsy Jones; thus a woman whose whole personality seems summed up in her interest in spiritualism turns out to have as much of granite about her as of ectoplasm. Sometimes the farce is a sudden revelation not only of a single

personality, but also of an entire society, as when Nick perceives "a whole social upheaval" in the results of the wrestling between Stringham and Widmerpool.

Powell uses a device closely associated with farce to indicate an identity shared by all human beings. The number of characters in *The Music of Time* who have ordinary names is small compared with the number who have made-up names that flatly label or broadly mock them; the series is full of people called Wentworth, Pilgrim, Foxe, Truscott, Stripling, Templer, Sunny Farebrother, Chandler, and the like. There is an absurd side, the names say in effect, to the most dignified of men; and, in fact, the stately General Conyers is not altogether different from the ridiculous Uncle Giles. Nick's uncle drifts from job to job, and disappears for intervals during which some people fear that he has gone for good, and some hope that he has. Then he abruptly reappears to try to draw extra money from the family trust. But the General, too, has his weak spots. He is, Powell says on one occasion, like an accomplished actor playing himself; his manner is a bit too urbane, his voice a shade too resonant. Moreover, there is something ludicrous about his passion for music; the cello that he plays is a noble instrument, but it is also a comic property, suggesting, for instance, Lady Jane in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*. Much of *The Music of Time* might be described in the words that Powell uses to describe the life of John Aubrey: "moving and a little tragic, not less so because its course is never far from becoming ridiculous."

Finally, the farce represents a kind of revolt. We must all dance, Powell tells us in the opening pages, to the music of time. Throughout the series he tries to demonstrate that the steps and figures that we follow are determined not so much by our preferences and needs at any moment as by our past actions and former partners, by the special obligations and restrictions of our professions, and by society's notions of what is fitting. Obviously, it is necessary that life should be more like a ritual dance than a riot of eccentrics. Decorum and authority have their uses. But they can also bore and constrain and provoke to violent rebellion. Thus a butler announces guests by snarling out their names, which he deliberately mispronounces, in a coarse and contemptuous voice. Yet he is less subversive of the establishment than some members of it. A boy at a good school plays a trick that gets his housemaster arrested. A girl at a fashionable dance pours sugar over another guest. A practical-joking nobleman in the memoirs of Lady Sybil Amesbury turns loose at an ambassadorial ball six monkeys in white ties and tail coats.

In *The Music of Time*, Powell explores thoroughly a part of English society that he merely glanced at in his earlier novels. (He has known it, however, all of his life. His father was a career officer in the British Army; his wife is the daughter of an

earl. He went to Eton and Oxford. During the War he was a major in the Intelligence Corps.) When, in *A Question of Upbringing* (1951), Nick goes to London with his friend Stringham, he takes the reader of Powell out of the raffish world of *Afternoon Men* and into a world where people have money, position, and a history. The pillars of the Stringham house are "flanked on either side with hollow cones" in which linkmen once extinguished torches. The first room that Nick enters contains, among other impressive objects, Regency furniture, a Romney portrait, and a huge malachite urn presented to a nineteenth-century member of the Stringham family.

Powell does not, however, neglect his earlier world. Nick has connections with Bohemia long after he ceases to live in Shepherd Market; the most recent volume is full of rackets painters, writers, musicians, and actors. Indeed, Nick's life might be summed up in the phrase that one painter uses to sum up that of another: "the pilgrimage from the sawdust floor to the Aubusson carpet and back again." If Powell does not champion the aristocracy by razzing the lower classes as Evelyn Waugh does, still he takes his outlandish characters from the lower strata. Quiggan, the ambitious but awkward journalist, has a working-class background. Widmerpool is the son of a dealer in fertilizers. Widmerpool and Quiggan eventually move into the Stringham world, but they never quite manage to fit into it. As Nick remembers a party at Lady Molly's, when her pet monkey sat in an upholstered basket and held out his paw to greet the guests as they approached him, he says, "There was something of Quiggan in his air of seriousness and self-absorption" The reader, however, may see something else in the monkey's performance: a parody of the customs, manners, and preoccupations of the class that reluctantly admits Quiggan. Before the end of *At Lady Molly's*, Nick himself has come to realize that he is taking some elements of this society too seriously, that his interest, for example, in the countless sisters and cousins and aunts of his friend Lovell has "grown into something like the furtive interest in the comic strip of a daily paper"

Nick also perceives that the society that fascinates him so much is, for all its snobbery, unstable. The symptoms of its instability are all around him. On the one hand, rich and aristocratic families like the Stringhams and the Templers are losing power to a calculating middle class represented by Widmerpool. On the other hand, they are yielding it up to a class of actors and artists represented by Raymond Chandler, who virtually takes over the running of the house and lives of Commander and Mrs. Foxe. Furthermore, the exchange of power is accelerated by marriages between the classes.

Long before he is aware of the changes taking place in English society, Nick is aware of the importance that some people give to power. In some cases the acquisition of power is a practical matter. Widmerpool, for instance, starts life in straitened circumstances and decides to live by the will to get what he wants. In other cases it has no practical advantage at all. One of the tutors at Nick's college conducts his researches in *Who's Who*, in county directories, and in telephone books, where he gets information about the families of undergraduates who may be useful to him. Although the people whose acquaintance he decides to cultivate may do no more than prevent a colleague in archaeology from digging in the Near East, this is enough to satisfy him. Everywhere Nick goes, he sees the arbitrary and perverse exercise of power. A famous hostess delights in assembling guests who will be mutually embarrassing. A doctor buttonholes a composer and bores him with amateur musicology. A servant keeps putting a collection of ceramic elephants in a file across the mantelpiece precisely because he knows that the owner wants them to face out into the room in a rank.

Nick also observes that those who take power seriously are willing (even determined) to forgo the pursuits of the ordinary person. Widmerpool tells Nick that he will never become involved with a woman who distracts him from his career, and Nick's tutor, the better to prosecute his schemes, turns himself into "a sort of sexless wizard or shaman." Nick begins to see most men's lives as a conflict between "the imagination and the will, reason and feeling, power and sensuality." In General Conyers, however, he meets a man who seems to have resolved the conflict. On the one side, the General has obviously enjoyed the authority of command. On the other, he has always enjoyed music. He reads the old and the new novelists, and he has recently taken up the psychologists, not because they are fashionable, but because they appear to have something important to tell him. For one thing, they confirm what he has long believed about men who elect to live by the will alone:

Widmerpool strikes me as giving himself away all the time by his—well, to quote the text book—purely objective orientation. If you are familiar with tactics, you know you can be up against just that sort of fellow in a battle. Always trying to get a move on and bring off something definite. Quite right, too, in a battle. But in ordinary life a fellow like that may be doing himself no good at all as far as his subjective emotions are concerned.

Though Powell has been a serious comic novelist from the beginning, the most recent volume in *The Music of Time* is serious in a sense that none of the earlier volumes is. In *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* Nick has reached the age at which he cannot just go on talking and thinking of power or sensuality, this

kind of girl or that, marriage or bachelorhood; he must decide what he wants to do, and enjoy or suffer the consequences of his decisions. He decides to marry Elizabeth, one of the innumerable Tollands. Sunday luncheons with the Tollands provide, Nick says, "a kind of parade of different approaches to marriage." In fact, that is what the whole book provides, not only in the persons of Nick and his Tolland relations, but also in those of various old and new friends, and even—at a distance—in that of King Edward VIII (for the book covers the period of the abdication crisis). *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* has a new note, not only of seriousness, but of grimness. In the parade of various approaches to marriage there are some frightening sights. The suicide of the music critic Maclintock after professional disappointment and bitter quarrels with his wife reminds the musician Moreland of "the disagreeable possibilities of the world we inhabit." In the parade of world events the Spanish Civil War is in progress, foreshadowing World War II as Maclintock's quarrels with his wife foreshadow his suicide.

The difference between *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* and the earlier volumes of *The Music of Time* can be indicated by two metaphors, one of which constitutes the final paragraph of *A Buyer's Market* (1952) and the other the final paragraph of *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*. Certain stages of experience, Nick says in the former book, are like Russian billiards: at a determined point in the game a hidden gate goes down; the balls no longer return to be replayed, and scoring is doubled. Similarly, there are times in human life

when events begin suddenly to take on a significance previously unsuspected; so that, before we really know where we are, life seems to have begun in earnest at last, and we ourselves, scarcely aware that any change has taken place, are careering uncontrollably down the slippery avenues of eternity.

In *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* the musician Moreland uses the ghost railway at the amusement park as an image of human life, and at the close of the novel Nick remembers a ride on such a railway:

slowly climbing sheer gradients, sweeping with frenzied speed into inky depths, turning blind corners from which black, gibbering bogeys leapt to attack, running headlong towards iron-studded doors, threatened by imminent collisions, fingered by spectral hands, moving at last with dreadful, ever increasing momentum towards a [body that lay across the line.

Will Powell attempt to make the form of *The Music of Time* hold the great grimness to come to England after September 1, 1939? An American weekly magazine has reported that the series will run to as many as ten volumes. But Pow

originally planned only six; and at the present rate a sixth volume would just about bring him up to the outbreak of the War. I suspect that *The Music of Time* will end there, and that Powell, who has shown himself the master of two very different forms of fiction, will employ yet another form to say whatever he wishes to say thereafter.*

* Prediction is a dangerous trade. The sixth volume, *The Kindly Ones* (1962), does, indeed, bring the story up to the outbreak of the War. But in an interview with Robert Gutwillig (*The New York Times Book Review*, September 30, 1962) Powell says that he plans six more volumes in the series, three about the War and three about the post-War years to 1950.

LOG FOR A VOYAGE

Elizabeth Bartlett

We have taken to words on page
without speech
We have taken to birds in cage
within reach

Forsaken the meaning of stars
Forsaken the freedom for bars

We have shaken the fruitful tree
of belief
We have shaken the brutal sea
for relief
Mistaken the apples for gold
Mistaken ship's haven as hold

Then who of us shall slake the salt wound on the tongue
Who shall wake the nightingales marooned here among

O wander the world for the garden that lies
On the floor of Atlantis or roof of the skies

From its seed breed a new race of life-loving men
From its reed and papyrus make music again