“Temporary Kings”; The Metropolitan Novel Series and the Post-War Consensus

“The danger was that we were listening to ourselves. It was the occupational danger of this kind of politics: you cut yourself off from your enemies, you basked in the echo of your own voice.”

C.P. Snow, *Corridors of Power*, 273.

Early in *The Road to 1945*, his classic account of the Labour landslide responsible for the ousting of war-hero Winston Churchill and the institutionalizing of Britain’s modern welfare state, Paul Addison writes that “the history of consensus is more fundamental in politics (though less discussed) than the record of party strife” (13). Published in the final years of the post-war settlement, four years before Margaret Thatcher’s election, Addison’s book influentially reconstructed the political currents within both major parties that led to Clement Attlee’s iconic victory. A watershed event in the history of the British left, this was also a triumph of gradualism and pragmatism, a new center ground emerging from a wartime coalition in which a Conservative parliamentary majority shared power with those who would form the next government. Attlee had served as Deputy Prime Minister through a war that by necessity had normalized state intervention and given new political priority to the welfare of citizens from whom much was being asked in the state’s name. In the words of Peter Hennessy, political historian and now a cross-bench peer, the wartime coalition was “a brave, formidable and, by normal political standards, competent Government which had achieved more, far more, than cold reason might have suggested in the perilous moments of its formation five years before” (82).

The extraordinary demands of wartime, then, helped to create a political consensus that held for decades, and made Britain a more secure place to live than it had ever been for its predominantly working-class population. With differences more of degree than kind, that might have been true whichever party had won in 1945, or, given their tellingly centrist manifesto, had the Conservatives won the 1950 election that almost annihilated Labour's 1945 majority. Although Churchill was always more interested in foreign than home affairs, wartime coalition had presented opportunities to modernizing Conservatives such as R.A. ("Rab") Butler, the power behind the transformative Education Act of 1944, which made secondary education free and universal. Even Churchill was reluctant to dissolve the coalition, asking senior Labour colleagues to preserve the arrangement at least until the war in the Far East was won. They—Attlee, along with the Trade Unionist Ernest Bevin and the future Chancellor Hugh Dalton—wanted to agree, but it was clear that their party conference would never support it (Addison 257). Party memberships typically occupy more purist positions than their parliamentary party, but it was through bipartisan agreement that some extraordinary mid-century progressive policies were made resilient—the survival of the Attlee-era National Health Service is the obvious example—against the opportunisms of two-party democracy.

It is difficult to think of left politics as especially charismatic in institutional embodiments, with all the compromises attendant on institutional processes and personnel. This is one reason why it is historically significant that among the most distinctive, although now critically unfashionable, literary phenomena of the period associated with the post-war consensus were widely read novel sequences concerned with

public life and political culture, in all their contingency. And contingency is built into the sequences discussed in what follows, C. P. Snow's eleven-volume "Strangers and Brothers" series (1940-70) and Anthony Powell's twelve-volume *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951-75), both commenced without an end in mind, and written across decades. This essay addresses, first, how this body of fiction by authors with altogether different social backgrounds, literary ambitions, and political sympathies concerned itself not with the conflicts but the common ground of the post-war political world; and, second, these novelists' unstable reputations in relation to reading outside of one's own partisan affiliations.

"a sturdy going on and on": the post-war novel series

Although hardly the whole story of post-war fiction, one longstanding truism, largely established within the period itself, describes the self-conscious revival of traditional realist modes. That the *locus classicus* of this argument, Rubin Rabinovitz's 1967 book *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel, 1950-1960,* devoted two of its six chapters exclusively to Snow is extremely telling of this writer's remarkable mid-century visibility. Among Snow's main inspirations was his fellow civil servant Anthony Trollope, subject of a sympathetic biography in which Snow attributed some of Trollope's appeal to the access he afforded readers to closed institutions such as the church, the civil service, and parliament: "privileged and secretive social groups unknown to outsiders" (*Trollope* 110). No modern novelist did more than Snow to recover the inner workings of national institutions as a subject for fiction. His phrase "corridors of power" was in wide circulation even before he published his novel of that

title: “I console myself with the reflection that, if a man hasn’t the right to his own cliché, who has?” (*Corridors* v).

While realist fiction generally offers a sensitive record of social change, the novel-series vogue is especially interesting for thinking about post-war fiction’s attention to public life because it suggests so strong a contemporary impulse to understand personal experience in long-range, fundamentally historical terms. Of course, there are outliers such as Lawrence Durrell’s late-modernist “The Alexandria Quartet” (1957-60), with its compressed timeframe and multiple perspectives. More characteristic in their attention to the relationship between a semi-autobiographical protagonist and unfolding historical events are series such as Evelyn Waugh’s “Sword of Honour” trilogy (1952-61) and Olivia Manning’s “Balkan Trilogy” (1960-65) and “Levant Trilogy” (1977-80), drawing on their authors’ Second World War experiences, while Rebecca West’s projected “Saga of the Century” trilogy, of which she completed only *The Fountain Overflows* (1956), aimed to interweave the lives of a family like West’s own with the major historical events of their age. Henry Williamson’s fifteen-volume “A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight” (1951-69) could also be said to have more public interest than most, given its explicitness about the author’s fascist politics (the 1967 instalment is dedicated to Oswald and Diana Mosley), although the same sympathies render Williamson’s protagonist an increasingly isolated figure. In contrast, Snow’s and Powell’s series are centrally concerned with social life in the broadest sense, built as they are around what their semi-autobiographical first-person narrators observe as they move among different circles of acquaintance from youth into late life, interacting with people of all kinds of political affiliation, fixed or fluctuating, and none. At the other end of the political

spectrum from Williamson, Doris Lessing's five-volume "Children of Violence" (1952-69) has some features of the typical 1950s series at the outset, following another autobiographical surrogate, Martha Quest, from her girlhood in Southern Rhodesia through love, marriage, war, and political commitments. In addition to its explicit concern with intra-left conflicts, and most consequentially with left attitudes to race and decolonization, what is markedly unusual about Lessing's production is its quasi-futuristic ending, which retrospectively gives her series the sense of history tending somewhere in particular rather than simply trundling unpredictably onward as in Snow and Powell.

Writing of the postcolonial novel series, Peter Hitchcock has described how trilogies and "quartets" by Wilson Harris, Nuruddin Farah, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, and Assia Djebar speak at the level of their extended form to the protracted, unfinishable business of decolonization. Hitchcock's main interest is in how such works, which seem variously to resist incorporation into existing institutional paradigms, offer a way of thinking about narrative transnationally outside of what Hitchcock considers marketized notions of "world literature." Nonetheless, his emphasis on how novel sequences foreground national consciousness as a matter of temporal duration as well as bordered space has clear relevance for understanding the metropolitan novel series, too, in the age of decolonization, and, specifically, for thinking about its shock-absorbing function in a country being transformed from an imperial superpower into a medium-sized welfare state. Snow's and Powell's post-imperial Britain is a place of taken-for-granted internal cohesion, notwithstanding their feeling for national and regional differences: Powell took great interest in his substantially Welsh ancestry; the autobiographical Lewis Eliot's

"provincial" origins, to use the novels' own language, are constantly recalled throughout Snow's series. At the same time, it is also a country with an increasingly doubtful world role.

In a brief but astute appraisal of this period's "remarkable revival" of the novel sequence, Steven Connor describes it as "an effort to assimilate the processes of historical duration in its own form" (136). This makes series fiction uniquely well-placed for writing about public events because of how effectively it can register the sheer unpredictability of an unfolding political history, since the developments recounted in each successive novel are necessarily and self-consciously incomplete. Powell's Nick Jenkins and Snow's Lewis Eliot watch the lives of friends and acquaintances develop in unexpected ways, as their fortunes work themselves out in relation to historical developments over which they have no control, and on which they can have only a limited perspective. Whereas Snow championed Trollope, Powell named Robert Musil among his favorites (*Journals* 116), and, although much less discursive, his fiction sometimes recalls Musil's passively inquisitive orientation toward the broad cultural and political trajectories that shape the novels' local events. Written across decades, Powell and Snow's multi-volume works are obviously vast projects, but their feeling for the unfinished makes them almost anti-epic and anti-encyclopedic; another of Powell's revealing favorites was Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, a narrative so loosely strung as to be only just a novel at all. Coincidences and correspondences take precedence over grand designs for Powell, concerned as he is with "events, dear boy, events," to recall the supremely urbane comment on the unpredictability of public life apocryphally ascribed to 1950s Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. The phrase retains its

currency in British political commentary not because Macmillan provably used it but because any politician could.

Exact contemporaries, born in 1905, what Powell and Snow most overtly have in common is that they are known for their mid-century series rather than the stand-alone novels they wrote before and after. Politically, they reflected different aspects of Britain's contemporary mainstream. Snow became the Labour peer Lord Snow in 1964, serving as parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Technology in Harold Wilson's government. Powell was widely known as the "High Tory" he half-jokingly called himself in old age (*Journals* 86). The leftish novelist Julian Symons also used this phrase of Powell in his memoir of their friend George Orwell, where he recalled their meetings back in the Attlee years with journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, the shrewd and witty but increasingly dogmatic right-wing journalist to whom Powell dedicated *John Aubrey and His Friends* (1948). Symons remembered Powell as "a High Tory, detachedly amused by Orwellian and Muggeridgean fervour" (41).

Although not intimates, Snow and Powell were evidently on cordial terms when Powell wrote a friendly note of congratulation to Snow on his elevation to the House of Lords (Marshall 11). One connection emerged from the international writers' conferences that formed so characteristic a feature of the cultural Cold War and around which Powell organized his penultimate volume, *Temporary Kings* (1973), which opens at a fictional 1958 symposium in Venice to which, ominously, an expected Iron Curtain delegate has not shown up. Powell's memoirs describe travelling with Snow to one of these symposia in eastern bloc Bulgaria, when he found Snow "serious, not in the least afraid of being thought pompous, essentially good-natured and obliging, did not himself deal much in

jokes, but had no objection to them" (*Keep* 425). This is among the kinder records of Snow's public manner: "a man much given to self-esteem," according to a civil servant who knew him in late life, a "self-appointed Grand Old Man" (Millin 549, 550). Stefan Collini has summed him up memorably as "an inveterate gong hunter with no low estimation of his own achievements" (47).

Collini was discussing the "Two Cultures" controversy, when Snow's contemporary celebrity provoked F.R. Leavis into a scornful demolition of his credentials for talking about literature at all: "as a novelist he doesn't exist; he doesn't begin to exist. He can't be said to know what a novel is" (57). Reviewing a late Snow novel in 1979, Ian Hamilton wondered if Leavis's unseemly bluntness about the vulnerabilities of Snow's fiction had embarrassed others into overcompensating with "a generous tendency to praise the civil servant for his remorseless readability, for a kind of cumulative, hypnotic dullness, a sturdy going on and on." In contrast, Powell's reputation has proved fragile not because of his literary qualities—individual enough to be both hard to describe and hard to contest—but because of his material. This takes the form of characterizing *A Dance to the Music of Time* "as if it were just a handbook of toff sociology," in James Wood's phrase, identifying the standard method of summarily dispatching Powell in surveys of post-war fiction. Still, Powell's inclusion of so many representatives of the "Establishment"—in that highly symptomatic 1950s term—might serve as a useful starting point for considering the significance of his series rather than as a way of dismissing it altogether.

"the Cripps-Attlee terror": representing Labour government

One explanation for Powell's toff demographic is that post-war novel series are often so autobiographical as to come close to a distinctive form of life-writing. We might think of the sequence that Snow's protégé William Cooper began with *Scenes from Provincial Life* (1950), the immediate sequel to which remained unpublishable for decades after a threatened libel action from one of Cooper's "characters." Given that the Eton-and-Balliol-educated Powell married into the aristocracy, the socially rarefied side of *A Dance to the Music of Time* is probably as inevitable as C.P. Snow setting the early novels of his series among the lower-middle-class of Leicester and the later ones among the Whitehall great and good. "All novels must be written from a given point of view," Powell insisted, arguing that the upper-middle-class families of Ivy Compton-Burnett's novels had led critics to give "undue prominence" to social class, a topic in which he thought she was never much interested ("Ivy" 270).

Powell's other populations are also drawn only from walks of life that he knew at first hand, especially the military (three novels in the series are based on Powell's wartime experiences in the Army and Allied liaison) and intersecting subsets of the cultural world (poets, novelists, memoirists, painters, musicians, models, actors, dancers, scriptwriters, biographers, critics of literature, art, and music, journalists, historians, publishers, art dealers and collectors, filmmakers, television producers and presenters). The instalment set in the Attlee years, *Books Do Furnish a Room* (1971) is concerned with efforts to revive literary culture in war-battered late-1940s London. This is the Fitzrovia pub world of rackety novelists like X Trapnel (based on Powell's gifted but self-destructive friend Julian Maclaren-Ross) and of such hand-to-mouth publishing enterprises as the new little magazine for which Nick Jenkins organizes the book reviews.

This magazine, *Fission* (a title "thought to strike the right note for the Atomic Age" [*Books* 36]), is used to draw together the novel's two main plotlines: the political ascent of Kenneth Widmerpool, the unlovable but unstoppable Old Etonian who is now styling himself "a 'Man of the Left'" (50) and backing *Fission* as a platform for his political views, and the spectacularly ruinous love affair between the nihilistic Pamela Widmerpool and *Fission* contributor X Trapnel. Coming after the sober, sometimes quietly devastating war volumes, this novel is often surprisingly buoyant, even though Powell's memoirs recall the late 1940s as "grisly": "in some respects . . . harder to put up with than the war" (*Keep* 312).

Given Powell's real-life politics, a completely different treatment of this "grisly" period was possible. The novel registers the austerity of these years of rationing, restrictions, and shortages, while remaining completely devoid of political grievance even though one late scene is set in Parliament itself. In contrast, conservative writers such as Powell's old friends Waugh and Henry Green had a field day with what Waugh dubbed "the Cripps-Attlee terror" ("Manners" 589). Green's dystopian *Concluding* (1948) is set in a stately home now requisitioned by the State (capitalized throughout). The dispossessed owner is now merely "the life tenant, which was their way of referring to the private owner of this estate, from whom the State had lifted everything" (*Concluding* 17). Fearful lest the State claim his cottage too, protagonist Mr. Rock wonders whether "the curse of the time" is the swine fever threatening his pig Daisy or "the system we live under each one of us nowadays" (39-40). Another private estate is requisitioned for a luxury prison in Waugh's dystopian skit "Love among the Ruins" (1953): "In the New Britain which we are building, there are no criminals. There are only the victims of

inadequate social services" (476). Among those services is an overworked euthanasia center, a grotesque reflection of the national mood: "Euthanasia had not been part of the original 1945 Health Service; it was a Tory measure designed to attract votes from the aged and the mortally sick. Under the Bevan-Eden Coalition the service came into general use and won instant popularity" ("Love" 479-80). Importantly, Waugh is satirizing not Labour but what he evidently considered the left orientation of the entire post-war settlement, preposterously cast as a government led by the aristocratic Anthony Eden, Deputy Prime Minister once Churchill was returned to office in 1951, and Labour's Aneurin Bevan, former miner, socialist, and the driving force behind the National Health Service. Waugh alludes to Bevan's resignation from Attlee's cabinet over proposed NHS charges when the director of the euthanasia center suggests instituting a fee in order to manage the overwhelming demand from Britain's now-suicidal citizenry ("Love" 482).

Bevan makes another arresting appearance in the work of an older conservative writer. A paean to a martyred British aristocracy, Dornford Yates's *Lower than Vermin* (1950) is so unblushingly snobbish as to cast in the shade even Waugh's own recent *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). *Lower than Vermin* opens in the 1890s with the murder of a rosy-cheeked wench by a local pervert whose known "socialistic principles" (40) should plainly have pointed to his depravity; it ends in the late 1940s with the elderly protagonists being evicted from their country estate by Labour's Ministry of Town and Country Planning. Yates took his title from Bevan's unstatesmanlike denunciation of the Tories on the eve of the NHS inauguration in 1948. In lines that implicitly registered the Tories' ostensible move to the center, he notoriously described how "no attempts at

ethical or social seduction[] can eradicate from my heart a deep burning hatred for the Tory Party . . . So far as I am concerned they are lower than vermin" ("Mr Bevan's 'Burning Hatred'"). After all the multidirectional diplomacy needed to create the NHS, this untimely speech appalled Cabinet colleagues, not least those who had served in the wartime government with Bevan's (sub)vermin. In taking "vermin" to refer to aristocrats, Yates ironically confirmed Bevan's treatment of the Conservatives as the party of unearned privilege; but in any case, and perhaps reflecting Yates's views on even the Tories' direction of travel, Churchill's return to government in 1951 was not enough to recall Yates to England from his exile in Southern Rhodesia.

This context of partisan invective shows what Powell was *not* doing, at least, with the changes wrought by 1945. When Dominic Head contends, in another survey of postwar fiction drawing on the "toff sociology" mode of dispatch, that *A Dance to the Music of Time* "now seems irredeemably anachronistic" because of its "projection of a comic mood that eludes social change" (23), he certainly captures the urbane tone of the series. What he underestimates is how far Powell's comic equanimity can itself be seen in historical terms, assisted as it is by the consensus-era retrospection through which Powell finds continuities and echoes rather than the violent ruptures that other Conservative writers pretended to find back in the 1940s. Changes that Powell would never have voted for himself become objects of amused interest rather than outrage. Thus, by way of situating the reader in the early post-war period, the opening chapter of *Books Do Furnish a Room* reveals the effects of the 1945 election on politically minded characters from prior volumes. Undertaking research in Oxford, Nick visits the gossipy tutor Sillery, recent recipient of a life peerage from the Labour government. In attendance is another

former university acquaintance, now a civil servant, who, Sillery announces, "has forgone his former Liberal allegiances in favour of Mr Attlee and his merry men" (*Books* 12). They discuss how an absent Oxford contemporary Bill Truscott, once tipped for greatness, is now with the Coal Board (Labour nationalized the coal industry in 1946): "Once Bill's been well and truly inducted there, he should be safe for a lifetime," Sillery concludes (*Books* 10). Sillery's left commitments are evidently not so stringent as to disallow mischievous quips about Attlee as Robin Hood and the sinecure potential of nationalized industries. Meanwhile, Nick's Tory brother-in-law, the self-admiring and ultra-conventional Roddy Cutts, has retained his seat in 1945 by only "a few hundred votes" (*Books* 39) and is "almost pathetically grateful to be back in the House of Commons" (*Books* 40). (In life, Powell had a more interesting politician brother-in-law; Frank Pakenham, later Lord Longford, a minister in Attlee's government, known for crusading/crank stances on politically sensitive issues of crime and rehabilitation.)

Meanwhile a by-election has allowed the indefatigable Widmerpool to become a Labour M.P. This development does not seem connected to any of Widmerpool's prior political attitudes nor, more generally, to any prior commitment to civic duty, but it is altogether continuous with his instinct for power. Why Widmerpool should be attracted to the Labour Party in 1945 can be deduced from his quoting at Nick the notorious comment from Attorney-General Sir Hartley Shawcross that "we are the masters now" (*Books* 73). Yet any temptation to read Widmerpool's meteoric ascent through the Labour Party in pejorative party-political terms is ruled out in the next novel, when it is a Conservative government that awards Widmerpool a life peerage when he loses his seat in the House of Commons, in an elevation that is received unenthusiastically by his own

party, where he and his suspected pro-Soviet views are deeply unpopular (*Temporary* 39). Roddy Cutts, now holding minor office in the government as Widmerpool had in the previous administration, clarifies that "Hugh" (alluding to Hugh Gaitskill, center-left leader of the Labour Party) must have agreed to it "in spite of his reputed dislike for Widmerpool himself" (*Temporary* 38). This episode is characteristic of Powell's handling of politics throughout the series—politics in the narrow party-political sense, and in the broad sense of cultural politics—in that his characters are never readable as representatives of their broader social category. In the novel, as in his political life, Widmerpool stands for nothing but himself.

In a neatly self-reflexive—if recondite—joke about political even-handedness, the narrator overhears Widmerpool lecturing Cutts about the practice of "pairing," the parliamentary convention that withholds the vote of a designated member of one party to ensure parity when a member of the other party is unable to vote (*Books* 171). Pairing works as a narrative principle here in relation to Cutts and Widmerpool, when the disquisition on parliamentary pairing is followed by an exchange in which their likeness is expressly underlined:

> "I had quite enough of shuffling the bumf around when I was in the army. As a result I've developed a positive mania these days against pushing paper. Man-to-man. That's the way. Cut corners. I fear pomposity is not one of my failings. I can't put up with pompous people, and have often been in trouble on that very account."
>
> Roddy was determined not to be outdone in detestation of pomposity and superfluous formality. For a moment the two MPs were in sharp competition as to

> whose passion for directness and simplicity was the more heartfelt, or at least could be the more forcibly expressed. (*Books* 172)

Aptly, Widmerpool is trying to recruit Cutts for an explicitly cross-party project. Throughout the novel, the two are drawn toward each other in various social settings in conformity with "that law of nature which rules that the whole confraternity of politicians prefers to operate within the closed circle of its own initiates rather than waste time with outsiders; differences of party or opinion having little or no bearing on this preference" (*Books* 77). While both Powell and Snow take as given the limits of party-political purity, Powell adopts the more ironic attitude toward the complacent parliamentary clubbiness that could be seen as a kind of parody of mid-century political consensus.

"the centre of things": imagining the political middle

In *Corridors of Power* (1964), too, Snow initially seems to be indicating a degree of critical detachment when he writes of "House of Commons gossip, as esoteric as theatre-gossip, as continually enthralling to them [politicians] as theatre-gossip was to actors" (3). On the contrary, the "esoteric" qualities of Westminster are precisely what speak to Snow's surrogate self, Lewis Eliot, who senses that he has arrived, socially, because he knows "the pleasure, secretive but shining . . . from being at the centre of things" (*Corridors* 197). Powell's and Snow's narrators are usually at an angle to political events: a long section of Snow's *Homecomings* (1956), which covers the period from Munich to the end of the Attlee government, is even titled "Condition of a Spectator." However, where Powell sees the pursuit of power as faintly ludicrous—and his series exploits its long historical perspectives to underscore the contingency of power—Snow treats it as a

universal motive. Lewis Eliot's preoccupation with "being at the center of things" might be thought a little unworthy, rather Widmerpoolish, but the equation of Eliot's social and political life in *Corridors of Power* shows how Snow rhetorically creates a middle ground by normalizing the circle of acquaintance radiating out from the narrator. This is the most interesting political effect of Snow's using a first-person narrator instead of the unrestricted narrative omniscience of, say, his admired Trollope: those who are not part of the narrator's social world become minor characters, reducible in political terms to faintly known fringe figures, merely outlying ideologues.

The dilemma in *Corridors of Power* is whether or not Britain should remain an independent nuclear power: the atomic program is unaffordable, but "we had got on to an escalator, and it would take abnormal daring to get off" (33). The novel begins in the mid-1950s with the Conservatives in government, and the main character is Eliot's friend Roger Quaife, a Tory moderate from the 1950 parliamentary intake. Quaife and the other modernizers in his party are "fighting on two fronts" (126), as one of them puts it, when their government undertakes the invasion of Suez ("the last charge of Eton and the Brigade of Guards" [123]) for the same considerations of national prestige as drive the party's right wing on the nuclear question. In short: "Countries, when their power is slipping away, are always liable to do idiotic things" (118). While Suez was a distinctively Conservative venture, it is significant that Snow renders it parallel to one of the post-imperial dilemmas that cut across party lines, the problem of Britain's nuclear status inherited by Attlee in 1945. Explaining why the Labour government had given high priority to the creation of an independent British weapon, Hennessy strikingly finds that their deliberations were more concerned with the United States than the Soviet Union

(248). Security was needed against another spasm of American isolationism, but equally decisive was the perceived need to bolster the nation's diminished prestige relative to the United States: "Great powers had to have great weapons" (Hennessy 268). Snow has a character in *The New Men* (1954) voice both considerations when he argues that if Britain gives up its independent nuclear program, "there are just two things that can happen to this country—the best is that we can fade out and become a slightly superior Spain, the worst is that we get wiped out like a mob of [Z]ulus" (203). Instructively, the security problem has already collapsed into the shame of post-imperial decline with this ugly, anachronistic idiom of "a mob of [Z]ulus."

The New Men and *Corridors of Power* remain among Snow's most readable novels because the power games with which the entire series is concerned find a meaningful correlative there in the political efforts (and the cross-party attempts to arrest these efforts) to reinstate the global authority of a declining power. Elsewhere in the series, it can be hard to care as much as the novel requires about Lewis Eliot's causes. This seems to have been among the problems that Powell experienced with *The Masters* (1951), when in his *TLS* review he wondered at Lewis Eliot's loyal efforts to get elected as Master of their Cambridge college the completely unsuitable Paul Jago—in Powell's words, "undistinguished as a scholar and handicapped by uncertain temper" ("Mantle"). Powell's reservations may help to account for an otherwise inexplicable moment in *Corridors of Power*, when Eliot recalls his backing of Jago as an example of how his personal "affections" have sometimes led him to "forget function, or justice, or even the end to be served" (43-44): inexplicable, that is, because Snow's series would be unimaginably different if there were any real indication that Eliot's judgements were not

to be taken at face value, even when they depart (implicitly heroically) from the expected institutional norms.

Thus, Eliot's Whitehall superior in *Corridors of Power* asks him if he is not "rather close to Roger Quaife . . . Closer, that is, than one might expect a civil servant, even a somewhat irregular civil servant, to be to a politician, even a somewhat irregular politician?" (122). Characters in Snow's novels routinely say the plot out loud like this, so often more interesting is what Snow does not think needs underlining with a clarifying summary from an insightful onlooker. Here, it is evidently not worth emphasizing that the closeness between Quaife and Eliot cuts across party-political loyalties. Committed Snow readers would already know that Eliot is on the left, but those coming to the novel cold are told early on, of the Conservatives, that "[t]hese people's politics were not my politics. They didn't know the world they were living in, much less the world that was going to come" (*Corridors* 7). Nonetheless, Snow takes for granted throughout the novel the extent of social and political affiliation across party lines. Tory political hostess Diana Skidmore hosts not only government ministers but members of the Labour shadow cabinet and backbenches at the same gathering (*Corridors* 161). At another such event, Caroline Quaife, the politician's upper-crust wife, finds herself seated beside a member of the Labour shadow cabinet, who "teased her as though he fitted as comfortably as anyone there, which in fact he did" (*Corridors* 191).

Snow produces a political center rhetorically through the naming of extremes. To appreciate Roger Quaife, for example, we need to know that he makes his progressive case in the context of the backbench Tory diehards for whom "the *New Statesman* and the *Observer* looked like Lenin's paper, *Iskra*, in one of its more revolutionary phases"

(*Corridors* 227-8). A quip like this assumes a reader altogether immune to such ignorantly partisan simplifications—for example, a reader like Snow's own publisher, the Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. Macmillan himself was the author of a pre-war political treatise, *The Middle Way* (1938), arguing for a more robust welfare state. (Macmillan was the interwar MP for the northeastern seat of Stockton-on-Tees, an area of abject deprivation even by the standards of the 1930s.) He was still defending the importance of a "middle way" twenty years later. Any party can pick up cheap votes by championing a particular class interest ("whichever class it chooses to back"), Macmillan told a Conservative audience in the late 1950s: "But a national Party like ours, whose concern is not to exacerbate or profit from the divisions in society . . . must by its very character and tradition avoid sectional or extremist policies. It must therefore, by definition, occupy the middle ground" (xxi). Snow's fiction reminds us that the middle ground is as much created as discovered.

Meanwhile, in Powell's *Books Do Furnish a Room*, the election of a Labour government has rendered marginal the more extreme and schismatic varieties of left politics. The novel's title is the nickname of a literary journalist known as "Books-do-furnish-a-room Bagshaw," so named from an apocryphal pronouncement said to have been made either having tipped a bookcase over in the course of quote-checking while drunk, or while seducing a woman in her husband's book-lined study. Bagshaw is one of those characteristic post-war figures whom Snow describes as—with reference to his own Edgar Hankins—"as it were, high up in the civil service of literature": "earn[ing] a professional income not so much by writing as through broadcasting, giving official lectures, advising publishers" (*New* 169). A one-time member of the Communist Party,

rumored to have lost his political faith while reporting on the Spanish Civil War, Bagshaw retains an encyclopedic knowledge, now largely academic, of the likely allegiances of others: "who was a party-member, fellow-traveller, crypto, trotskyist [*sic*], anarchist, anarcho-syndicalist, every refinement of marxist [*sic*] theory, every subtle distinction within groups" (*Books* 31). As a connoisseur of left affiliations, Bagshaw is fascinated by Widmerpool's illegible views. Sometimes he finds Widmerpool "positively Right Wing Labour" (93), sometimes "far, but anti-Communist, Left" (94), sometimes "like a crypto . . . repeating pure Communist arguments" (142). The observer's point of view in Powell's series means that we can infer Widmerpool's views only through what Nick hears: for example, that Widmerpool is involved in "societies to cement British relations with the new régime" of an eastern bloc dictatorship, or what Widmerpool euphemizes as the country's "single-party government" (102, 103). Bagshaw provisionally settles on the view that Widmerpool is a "crypto," attributing the obscurity of his politics to his wish not "to get too far the wrong side of his Labour bosses in the House" (*Books* 142). These potentially equivocal attachments become important in *Temporary Kings*, when Widmerpool, now Lord Widmerpool, is implicated in a Cold War scandal after the post-Stalin overthrow of a regime from which he may have been profiting financially. Widmerpool has put himself beyond the pale of his country as well as his party and only narrowly escapes a treason trial. However, in the final novel, *Hearing Secret Harmonies* (1975), we learn not only that Widmerpool has abandoned politics long before Labour's return to power in 1964, but that the old story of his "dubious international dealings" has faded such that "by now, no one could remember whether he was the hero or the villain" (42-3).

Notwithstanding this (perhaps realistically) muted treatment of Widmerpool's political scandal, insofar as any political anger can be detected in Powell's writing, it is directed not against the parliamentary left but against the Soviet Union and its apologists. The final volume of *A Dance to the Music of Time* is dedicated to Powell's old friend Robert Conquest, the poet and historian known best for *The Great Terror* (1968), his lacerating account of the murder of millions in Stalin's purges. This was the once-controversial book that their friend Kingsley Amis, dedicatee of Powell's *Under Review* (1991), suggested should later have been retitled "*I Told You So, You Fucking Fools*" (Conquest). During the war, Powell was working in military liaison with Allied governments in exile when the Katyn massacre was discovered, exposing the premeditated Soviet slaughter of thousands of Polish prisoners. Powell was sickened by the new political imperatives that made such atrocities completely unmentionable now that the Soviet Union had been forced to change sides and was recast accordingly as our gallant Russian ally. Well into his eighties, Powell still recalled with approval the Prime Ministerial efforts of Attlee—Attlee, of all people—in "attempting to reverse the adulation of Stalin, to which wartime propaganda had been so disastrously slanted" (*Miscellaneous* 3).

The evil of Stalin's regime was an unusual point of political agreement between Powell and Orwell, who had become a close friend in the 1940s. Powell's biographer Hilary Spurling casts a nice sidelight on a teasing friendship when she recounts how Orwell, leaving for Jura in 1946, arranged for the delivery to Powell's home of six months of the socialist *Tribune* "so as to do Tony good"; "'I can't say it has had a very strong effect yet,'" Tony reported after the first few issues, "except to confirm my

impression that the greater part of the present House of Commons are totally unfitted to govern"' (286-7). Everything Powell wrote about Orwell across the decades after his death—Powell outlived his near-contemporary by fifty years—speaks to the depth of his affection, not least the movingly reticent account in his memoirs of Orwell's funeral ("one of the most harrowing I have ever attended" [*Keep* 321]). (Powell was not simply an attendee but among the core organizers.) But Powell's writing speaks not just to personal fondness but intellectual respect even across their vast political differences, in his acknowledgment of "what [Orwell] felt to be the path of duty" ("Orwell" 284). Orwell was "one of the most enjoyable people to talk with about books" (*Keep* 74); Powell admired the "courage" it had taken for someone on the left to write *Animal Farm* (*Keep* 76); he praised the stylishness of Orwell's social reportage and the wit of his essays ("Orwell" 280). He could even find political common ground in Orwell's conviction "that abstract ideas could not be used in government without some admixture of decency and commonsense" ("Orwell" 289). Whatever Orwell, had he lived, would have thought of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, which includes among its most memorable mid-series characters a leftwing renegade from the upper class whose sociological research entails tramping around England incognito, who fights in Spain, and who owns a guilty stash of old-fashioned boys' weeklies, Orwell made their mutual friend Symons laugh when he explained apologetically that "Tony [Powell] is the only Tory I have ever liked" (41). Orwell was chagrined that Symons thought this funny.

"the only Tory I have ever liked": partisanship and reading

Among the other once-admired novelists of the 1950s who are now read little is Angus Wilson, a prominent Labour supporter, although it was under Thatcher's government that he was knighted for services to literature. To the extent that Wilson is remembered at all, it is as a novelist of the liberal-humanist conscience in the E.M. Forster tradition, although among his mid-century works was the institutional novel *The Old Men at the Zoo* (1961)—a novel about fictional political power struggles among the management of London Zoo—which reads in its early chapters almost like a pastiche of Snow. In an essay written shortly before that novel, Wilson reflected on the "worldliness in the most serious sense of that word" of the Victorian novelists, who "all could command the attention of men and women of affairs, of people who had tasted responsibility in government, law, industry, social service and so on." This is a fascinatingly 1950s aspiration for fiction, that it should be meaningful to the people in public life who take decisions for the country, "men and women of affairs." This is the context that helps to explain Snow's extraordinary mid-century reputation. Acknowledgments for *Corridors of Power* underscore that this is a novel written from Lewis Eliot's "centre of things" when Snow avows his debts to "[p]oliticians on both sides of the House of Commons" (vi). While he regrets that the full credits "would look too much like a roll-call" (vi), he conspicuously singles out the Conservative M.P. Maurice Macmillan and, from his own side, Maurice Edelman, a journalist, novelist, and, according to historian David Kynaston, "one of Labour's more thoughtful MPs" (262). A fascinating figure in his own right, Edelman was a journalist, war correspondent, novelist, and author of a never-finished trilogy about the most famous of novelist-politicians, the Conservative Benjamin Disraeli.

Whereas Snow's once-disproportionate public standing points to the social rewards that could attend the writing of such worldly fiction, Powell seems instead to have apprehended its literary risks. Above all, Powell was attuned to the way in which the "men of affairs" mode could shade into philistinism and parochialism. A telling episode in *The Soldier's Art* (1966) has Nick Jenkins come upon a senior officer reading Trollope, much admired at mid-century not only by Snow, of course, but also by such men of affairs as Harold Macmillan (Watson 596). General Liddament is amazed by Nick's indifference to his favorite: "Whom do you like, if you don't like Trollope?" he asks, incredulously:

> Who was there? Then, slowly, a few admired figures came to mind—Choderlos de Laclos—Lermontov—Svevo . . . Somehow these did not have quite the right sound. The impression given was altogether too recondite, too eclectic. Seeking to nominate for favour an author not too dissimilar from Trollope in material and method of handling [. . .]
>
> "There's Balzac, sir."
>
> "*Balzac!*"
>
> General Liddament roared the name. It was impossible to know whether Balzac had been a very good answer or a very bad one. (*Soldier's* 47-8)

Nick Jenkins recalls some of the—for these diplomatic purposes—spectacularly unsuitable novelists whom Powell admired most. Powell's *Miscellaneous Verdicts* (1990) and *Under Review*, late collections of reviews and short essays written across forty years, indicate a wide-ranging and longstanding interest in continental European novelists. What Nick's faux pas reveals is Powell's sense of how ostensible "worldliness" can

prove ironically compatible with the most complacently narrow of perspectives. Of course, Powell understood why Trollope appealed to certain readers: "Trollope can deal with a cathedral close or political machinations," Powell conceded, but he "takes conventional views and is often stodgy" ("Robert" 70). He also knew that among the admirers of *A Dance to the Music of Time* were people who, as in Wilson's aspiration for fiction, had occupied many positions of public responsibility.

Miscellaneous Verdicts is dedicated to one of them, the politician and writer Roy Jenkins. Formerly a Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer and Home Secretary, Jenkins is also known as a cautionary tale about attempts to break with the two-party system even at its most dismally polarized. In 1981 Jenkins was among the founders of the short-lived Social Democratic Party, which emerged as the Conservatives' rightward move under Thatcher coincided with Labour's drift to the unelectable left. This was the era of entryism by Militant, a Trotskyist successor to the Revolutionary Socialist League that was plainly out of step with Labour's social democratic and parliamentary traditions, although eradicated from Labour only with extreme difficulty. Meanwhile, Labour's commitment to a proto-Brexit from the EEC, revoked only in the late 1980s and now largely forgotten, was another dismal provocation for center-left politicians like Jenkins, who had served as president of the European Commission between 1977 and 1981. But the range of his readership could surprise even Powell himself, as when Norman Willis, General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress, wrote Powell upon his being made a Companion of Honour in the 1988 New Year's Honours list: "never met," Powell noted in his journal, "perhaps my most notable congratulatory letter" (74).

Posthumous champions of his fiction would be no less "notable," to use Powell's serene notation for total political incompatibility. Writing in 2001 of the obituary observations on Powell's death the previous year, his great-nephew Harry Mount regretted that Powell's fiction seemed to be valued now only by "a melange of ageing dons and literary journalists" (90). But it proved to be a highly distinctive political subset of journalists who would champion Powell in the following years: Christopher Hitchens, Tariq Ali, and, most recently, Perry Anderson. "We need to dispense with the blinkered view that his *A Dance to the Music of Time* is a novel series that can be enjoyed only by English "toffs" or readers of the *Daily Telegraph*," Ali announced in a memorial lecture in 2008 picked up by the left-liberal *Guardian*: "It's a prejudice that has dogged Powell for far too long." That the highest-profile admirers of *A Dance to the Music of Time* in the twenty years since Powell's death should be the heavyweights of the *New Left Review* is almost too good to be true, given that the series is built around exactly this kind of pleasingly ironic turn-up-for-the-books. Indeed, the vicissitudes of reputation are among the series' recurrent themes, as figures from early novels posthumously reemerge from obscurity in much later and often surprising contexts. For example, left critics of the 1930s attempt to give a new lease of life to Edwardian society portraitist Horace Isbister, R.A. by finding in his seemingly sycophantic work a subversive critique of his establishment subjects. Edgar Deacon, forgotten Edwardian painter of massive canvases on homoerotic classical themes, gets recovered in the 1960s for his "fearless sexual candour that must have shocked the susceptibilities of his own generation, sadomasochistic broodings in paint that grope towards the psychedelic" (*Hearing* 245). Their Galsworthyesque Edwardian contemporary St John Clarke also benefits in Powell's final volume from another

"stupendous rescue job from the Valley of Lost Things" (247). For Nick Jenkins's interwar generation in the series' second volume, Edwardian bestseller St. John Clarke has become unreadable ("windy, descriptive passages, two-dimensional characterization . . . the emptiness of the writing's inner content" [*Buyer's* 244]), but then in the 1950s Clarke is rediscovered when the period flavor of his fiction makes it an attractive possibility for film adaptation. "Above all others, St John Clarke might be judged, critically speaking, as gone for good," muses Nick Jenkins: "Not a bit of it" (*Hearing* 36). Watching a television program about St. John Clarke in the late 1960s, he finds Clarke being queered, so to speak, for the age of the sexual revolution. Amused, Nick contemplates how astonished the "prudish" Clarke would have been "to hear much surmised, before so large an audience, on the subject of his sexual tastes" (*Hearing* 40).

What links these otherwise unpredictable fictional recoveries in *A Dance to the Music of Time* is that they are about the reshaping of past figures according to new political agendas. Seen from that angle, it is striking that Hitchens's comments on Powell should instead have suggested that characteristically "left" moves are almost as unsatisfactory a way of reclaiming Powell as they have been of dismissing him:

> Powell's fiction is "democratic" because it is realistic and humane and somewhat given to the absurd. If you like, it also shows an acute awareness of a stable and long-settled society in transition. It confronts sex and death and unfairness, and brushes against love, poverty, and war. (278)

"If you like" is tellingly offhand, as are the scare quotes Hitchens set around "democratic." In other words, the standard perception of Powell as an unregenerate Tory writing about his grand friends could be refuted—"[i]f you like"—by pointing to a formal narrative

technique that disperses interest and attention with extraordinary evenness across characters of all kinds; or by emphasizing the pseudo-sociological significance of the series as a document of national transformation. On the one hand, this is a defensive recognition of Powell's politically compromised reputation; on the other hand, it is an ironic comment on the leftwing reader's putative need for some joyless pretext for pleasure, that you could make an entirely conventional case for the political relevance of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, if you felt obliged to, but its main function would be as an alibi.

Anderson joked about this perceived need for an alibi as he brought to an end his long and warmly appreciative two-part essay on Powell in the *London Review of Books* in the summer of 2018. He attributed to an unnamed crony among his former revolutionary acquaintances the view that the only kinds of art are "good reactionary art" and "bad reactionary art," a proposal Anderson quoted by way of "offering any self-respecting *enragée* licence to enjoy *A Dance to the Music of Time* with a good conscience" ("Time Unfolded"). The first part of Anderson's essay had already offered another alibi along the lines of Hitchens' half-ironic "democratic" by insisting on "the variety of Powell's world, and the equity in his inventory of it: both indeed unequalled in his time, or since"; *A Dance to the Music of Time* is "capable of impartially attracting any reader" ("Different Speeds"). Anderson's circle writing about Powell at all might be taken to confirm this point. But if the first claim ("variety . . . equity") says something about Powell's generous-minded, humane, ecumenical approach to the differences among people, the second says much about Anderson, through its refusal to take seriously the preemptively partisan *enragé(e)* who neither expects nor seeks to find anything interesting in a writer like Powell. In the end, there is something hopeful about this assumption-by-default of a reader who is willing

to be persuaded by *A Dance to the Music of Time* on its own terms. Or, as Hitchens disarmingly wrote, "I hope I have conveyed something of the worthwhileness of hearing him out" (280). Even in so polarized a climate as ours—not just adversarial in temper but often self-righteously so—it might still be possible to experience as readers rather than merely reconstruct, as I have tried to do here, a moment when binary political differences could coexist with an appreciation, however self-protectively ironized, for other kinds of commonality and affinity.

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