



HAL
open science

Shocking! Powell on Sade.

Didier Girard

► **To cite this version:**

Didier Girard. Shocking! Powell on Sade.. The Anthony Powell Society Conference, 2016, 978-0-99562627_0_6. halshs-02568963

HAL Id: halshs-02568963

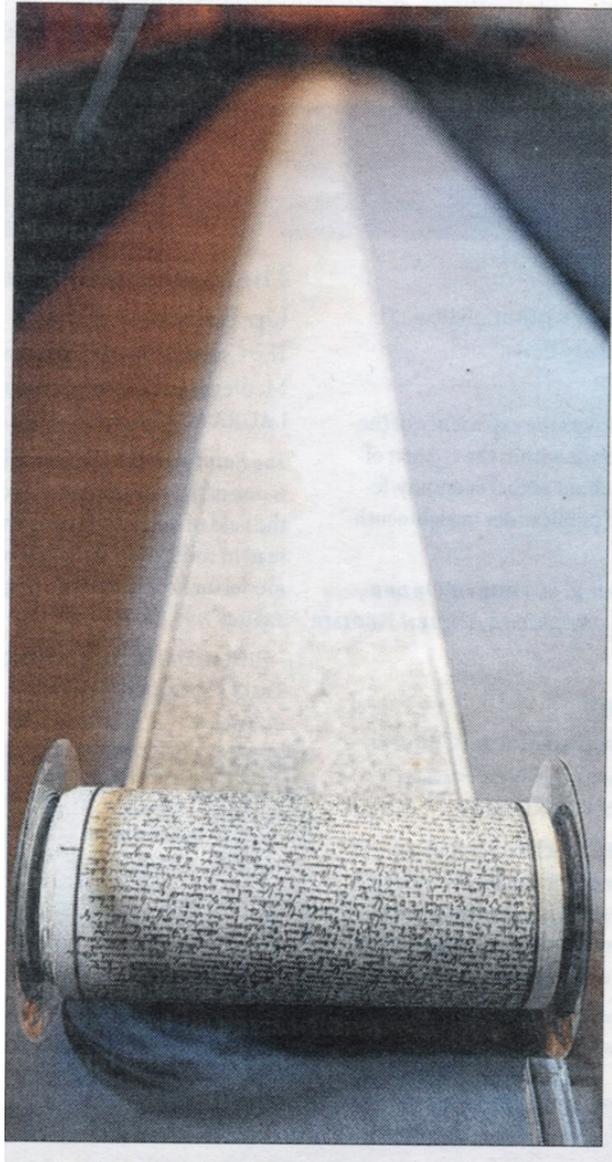
<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02568963>

Submitted on 18 May 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Shocking: Powell on Sade.¹



By Didier Girard.

Apparently, nothing could be more at odds than the revolting and thought/image-provoking graphic tableaux of Sade's vicious philosophical tales and the gentlemanly Italianate syntax of Anthony Powell's novels and their detached urbane galleries of portraits. Yet, the sardonic and cold eyes of Powell's narrators and those of the many perverse protagonists abounding in his *œuvre* did question my own reading of his novels, before or after *The Dance to the Music of Time*. In short, it is the Powellian *froidueur* that will be at the core of this paper that I am honoured to present on the occasion of this annual meeting of the Powell Society.

¹ In order to simplify and alleviate the critical apparatus in this article, page numbers are indicated in the main body of text after every quote from novels by Anthony Powell. Unless otherwise stated, the edition used is the Mandarin paperback one.

The academic expertise of Tony Powell on the *Grand siècle*, both in England and in continental Europe, is well-known, impressive and has been cleverly discussed by eminent scholars, but I'd like to explore more uncharted territories today and consider the novelist's response to the next century, often tagged as that of the Enlightenment.

To paraphrase Powell on Casanova, I would say that the English usually ignore Sade, either because they find him revolting and shocking to read, or because they find him embarrassingly boring, if not a source of cultural and moral hazard: Critic Roger Shattuck who died only a few years ago, did write of *Justine* that it was: "a 1000-page orgy of rape, murder, sodomy, incest, dismemberment and bestiality – the literary equivalent of toxic waste"². 'Toxic waste' is in itself a phrase that speaks volume for the excessive moral outrage of an art critic's response; I'd rather describe it myself as fertile manure! Nevertheless, two of my favourite English writers of the twentieth century read Sade with much more discernment. Aldous Huxley described Donatien Alphonse François de Sade as « the one complete and thoroughgoing revolutionary of History » and Anthony Powell, in his article on Gilbert Lély's biography published in *The Daily Telegraph* of 1962, and reproduced in *Under Review*³, explained better than anyone else that there are indeed two ways of reading Sade.

A large section of the article is devoted to Petrarch's Laura and Renée Pélagie née de Montreuil, madame de Sade in person, and after remarking that despite everything, "there seems to have been a genuine tie of affection between them" (i.e. between husband and wife, p. 356), the critic develops his view on this alternative way of reading Sade: Some see in him the writer of the highest originality, foreshadowing the Nietzschean superman – the disciple of pure power – preparing the way for Freud and Jung (but the shrewd and scrupulous reviewer adds that before him, Brantôme had already preceded him in this path with his *Vies des Dames Galantes*). And others, who resent the lack of poetry in Sade (especially when compared to Choderlos de Laclos, for instance): "There is much that is of interest about him, but he was not an artist. He could not command the required discipline and restraint". (p. 356-357)

Powell did of course write and comment on many other French writers of the late 18th century but they all seemed to have initially triggered Powell's interest for one particular reason: they had written long -very long, autobiographies of some sort and of a new particular kind. Restif Edmé de la Bretonne, Giacomo Casanova (if we accept that Casanova is also a French writer!), Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Mme de Staël, Benjamin Constant, to name but a few. What Powell had learnt from his favourite 17th century authors is that "they all appreciated the discovery of the individual" (p. 377), but he always seemed to dig for more singular voices in the following centuries (culminating with Proust or Italo Svevo) to actually feed, as a novelist in his own right, on how all these writers dealt with their own lives and experiences, be they true-to-life or fabricated through fiction. Concerning the 18th century, Powell always exact and

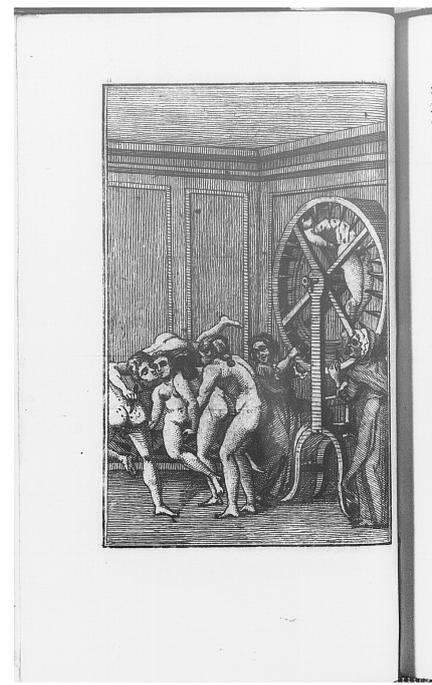
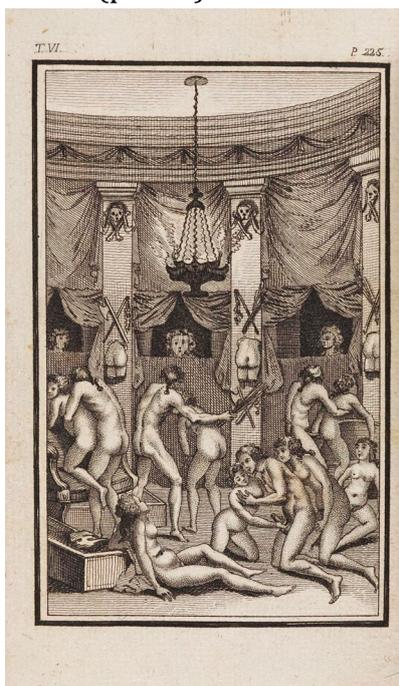
² Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge : From Prometheus to Pornography* (New York City: St Martin's Press, 1996) p.146.

³ Anthony Powell, *Under Review* (London: Heinemann, 1991). Francophile Powell fans will maybe rejoice to learn that large sections of *Under Review* and *Miscellaneous Verdicts* are published in one French volume edited and translated by the author of this article and with a preface by Stuart Preston. Anthony Powell, *Écrits sur les écrivains: Convictions singulières* (Paris: José Corti, 1995).

singular himself, remarks that Restif was not as intelligent as Rousseau and had a total lack of sense of humour. According to the brilliant critic, his book is not an autobiography as such, not a confession, but his ambition is “to lay bare the springs of the human heart”. He does not either believe that Casanova was honest, sober or an early riser but much prefers to insist on his “masterly” (p. 350) handling of narrative & his objective way of dealing with what happened in his life, whatever that may have meant to him, “his extraordinary powers of self-examination and self-expression”.

But there is something in Sade which resisted Powell and which remained at the back of his mind even when he was reviewing books on much later generations of writers such as Swinburne. In another article to be found on page 96, this time in an issue of *The Daily Telegraph* of 1974, Powell devotes an article to Swinburne openly discussing the poet’s habits at St John’s Wood Brothel, emphasizing his “totally divided nature”. Once totally subservient to the whip, and after years of lauding Sade, Swinburne became prudish, accused Zola of being filthy, and Solomon for the erotic illustrations he enjoyed so much before. He also reviewed Guillaume Apollinaire in an article published in 1952 in the *Times Literary Supplement* and reprinted in *Some Poets, Artists and a Reference for Mellors* (p. 132). In it, he explains that Apollinaire -who was fond of Jean-Henri Fabre the famous entomologist- used to give male and female names to the different insects described. The literary result of which being to “donner à ces passages un épouvantable aspect d’humanité trop réelle à la Marquis de Sade”. The fact that Powell was so sensitive to Apollinaire’s parlance (something which to me is always a proof of Powell’s outstanding quality as a literary critic – so much noticeable in his comments on Proust for example- and which places him far above any other on this or other side of the Channel) shows that he understood the humane, too humane quality of Sade’s literary gesture, something which is far more problematic in Powell’s own fiction.

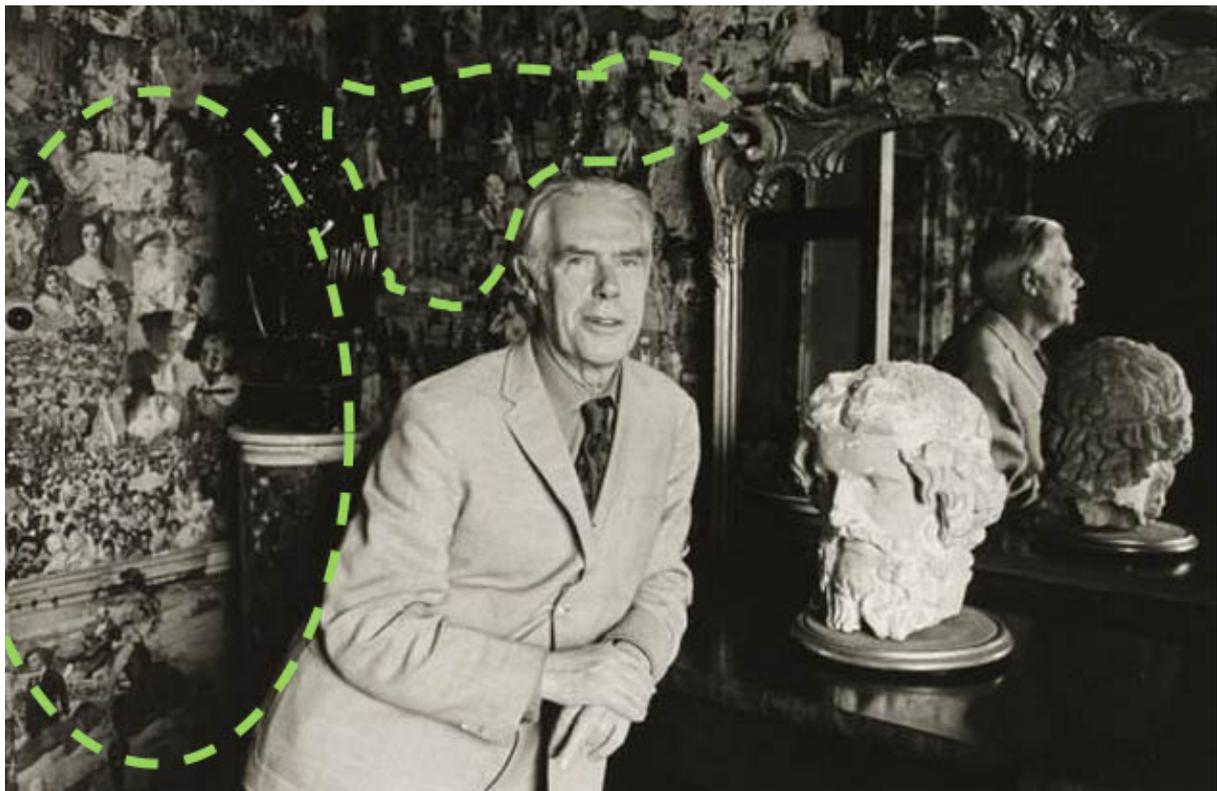
The same article on Sade finishes with this remark: “However, if he is at times wearisome as a novelist, Sade must certainly be granted extraordinary insight into the causes of his own difficulties. <...> Live women he may have flogged, but not dead horses (p. 357)”.



A. 18th century intertextuality

Anthony Powell's first encounter with the 18th century was certainly the erotic etchings that his father collected. Powell mentions them in *Dream Memories* (a volume covering the period between the 1920s to 1934) as they were part of his first scrapbook containing faded photos, random mementoes, newspaper clippings, and some strange peraphernalia from a deranged great uncle on whom we'll come back later. The second scrapbook, it is said, contained a collage of pornographic etchings and Watteau-like scenes.

In the basement boiler-room of the Chantry, Powell indulged in his writer's routines and obsession for snapshots, as described by Gerard Reitlinger (1900-78) who spent many week-ends with the Powells at Woodgate House, Beckley, Sussex. The pictorial imagination that collage triggers off is a strange and fascinating creative process and if we are to believe Annie Le Brun who was the curator of an exhibition entitled "Petits et grands théâtres du Marquis de Sade" (Paris Art Center, May 2009), there is something vertiginous in the temptation to represent everything exactly: "la tentation de représenter absolument" as one should never forget that representing is accompanied by a haunting dream of a looming vacuum ("ne jamais perdre la conscience du néant qui hante toute représentation", catalogue p.15-29).



Surprisingly enough there are very few intertextual references in Powell's whole *œuvre* to 18th century British writers. Except for a rather obtruse reference to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (title and author not being mentioned), the only British artist actually mentioned is William Blake in *The Military Philosophers*: "Blake was a genius, but not one for the classical taste. He was too cranky" (p. 224) and is immediately disparagingly compared with a more admirable Abraham Cowley (1618-1667)... "but

who reads Cowley today?”. Yet, as everybody knows, two titles from *The Dance* are explicit quotes from the 18th century: “From a View to a Death” is a line from a poem by Cumberland huntsman John Peel (1776-1854), a song notably popular in the army, and “Agents and Patients” which derives from a poem by John Wesley (1703-1791) who laid the foundation of Methodism with his brother Charles at the Holy Club, Christ Church. (“He that is not free, is not an agent, but a patient”). And the only 18th century item to be observed in the novels is a pair of coloured prints of Whessel’s (unnamed in the book) racehorses that hang in Stringham’s rooms (the same etchings are mentioned again in *The Acceptance World*):

<Trimalchio and the Pharisee, with blue-chinned jockeys> which hung above a picture, cut out of one of the illustrated weeklies and framed in passe partout, of Stringham’s sister at her wedding: the bridegroom in khaki uniform with one sleeve pinned to his tunic (*A Question of Upbringing*, p. 9).

All this is very odd, all the more so if -like me- you heartily agree with Kingsley Amis when he described the *serio ludo* (the Club of the Dilettanti’s motto) manner in which Powell writes in *Afternoon Men* for example. In fact, most explicit references to the 18th century allude to France or Italy in the late 18th century. There is obviously the whole passage in *Casanova’s Chinese Restaurant* when Barnby, Macklintik, Moreland, and the narrator are talking about girls and waitresses.

The idea of Casanova giving his name to a Chinese restaurant linked not only the East with the West, the present with the past, but also, more parochially suggested by its own incongruity an immensely suitable place for all of us to have dinner that night. (p. 29)

<Describing a company of Asians, a “few Negroes” sitting with “very” blonde white girls> a sprinkling of diners belonged to those ethnically indefinable races which colonise Soho and interbreed there. Along the walls frescoes tinted in pastel shades, executed with infinite feebleness of design, appealed to Heaven knows what nadir of aesthetic degradation. (p. 30)

This lascivious conversation is very appropriate to the memory of the distinguished Venetian gentleman after whom the restaurant is named, said Maclintick harshly. What a bore he must have been. (p. 31) <...> Having to hear all these stories about the girls he had, never could read the Memoirs, but Moreland objects and says that it is precisely because he never got tired of all the girls he conquered that the man is fascinating. There is inevitably something critical, something alarming to personal vanity, in the very suggestion of intelligence in another. (p. 33)

Later in the same novel, Maclintick (who is convinced that all novels lack in probability) and Moreland have the famous conversation about Laura de Sade (which is discussed too in Powell’s critical review on the writer) and the first intimation of a link between sadistic passions and the married state is broached upon:

But Moreland thinks probability is the bane of the age <...> Maclintick taken by the argument says that it is certainly true about women. I used to feel with Audrey this can't be marriage – and now it isn't. (p. 212)

In *The Kindly Ones*, Dr Trelawney is compared with Cagliostro: “He must be getting on age now. Cagliostro in his latter days, though he had avoided incarceration up to date, thought there would always be a position for a man with first-class qualifications” and in *The Soldier's Art*, a literary conversation takes place between General Conyers and Gal Liddament:

Whom do you like, if you don't like Trollope? - For the moment, I could not remember the name of a single novelist, good or bad, in the whole history of literature. Who was there? Then, slowly, a few admired figures came to mind – Choderlos de Laclos – Lermontov – Svevo. (p. 47)

The French Revolution pops up here and there in *The Dance*. At a dinner party at Lady Walpole-Wilson's, Nick is engaged in small talk with Lady Anne (Stepney, who will later on flee to France) about Botticelli and books by St John Clarke, which reminds her that “there was one on the French revolution - I was on the side of the People, she said resolutely.” (*A Buyer's Market*, p.46). The scene is remembered in *The Acceptance World* when Barnby asks Nick who this girl on the photograph is or rather used to be. He does remember the phrase (p. 72) and a few pages later, adds: “Nothing to the Left. You know this is a quotation. Robespierre” which infuriates Quiggin because “nobody seems to know anything about history, and also no one takes politics seriously these days.” (95)

Last but not least, the outskirts of Shepherd Market in *A Buyer's Market* provide a splendid mindscape for the novelist to conjure up the decaying architecture of *rovine*-like paintings of late eighteenth century painters-poets:

The spot seemed one of those clusters of tumble-down dwellings depicted by Canaletto or Piranesi (arches viaducts, obelisks) <...> As I penetrated farther into the heart of that rookery, in the direction of my own door, there even stood, as if waiting to greet a friend, one of those indeterminate figures that occur so frequently in the pictures of the kind suggested – Hubert Robert or Pannini – in which the architectural subject predominates. (*A Buyer's Market*, p. 154)

B. Attached, detached: a cold heart.

In Sade's *Dialogue between the Priest and the Moribond*⁴, one reads that there is a tragic instant in a man's life when he becomes fully aware of the cruel tableau of his past mistakes and vices. According to the narrator, one should not feel any guilt because it is the very hopelessness of the human condition that is at stake⁵. Neither Rétif nor Sade, although ferocious rivals in revolutionary literary Paris, would have condemned individuals for their vices and ability to commit crimes. In his youthful "Réflexions sur la morale et la liberté de l'Homme" (vol. 4, p. 476), Sade opposes desire to what he called "des lois tyranniques" (Nature's tyrannical laws). According to Sade, it is dreadful to punish Man for some unavoidable evil over which he has no control ("il est odieux de punir un Homme du mal qu'il ne pouvait éviter") and tells the anecdote about Mingrelians and Georgians (p. 485) who are two peoples reputedly prone to the most atrocious vices and crimes, but also endowed with the best physical attributes and advantages, hence the conclusion that there is a furious contradiction in so wise a Mother Nature ("une furieuse contradiction de la part de cette mère si sage."). As for Restif de la Bretonne, the Rousseau of the gutter, the Voltaire of chambermaids, explains his own position in the prologue to his *Anti-Justine* (1798): "Honteux, je me fis un Erotikon savoureux, mais non cruel <...> au-dessus de tout ce qu'a pu inventer l'imagination exquisément bourrelle de l'auteur de *Justine*". Needless to say, all these pornographic texts are pregnant with mysogyny because whatever the form their several libidos took, female characters are relentlessly depicted as espousing their male partners' fantasies: Restif's girls, or filles de chambre, are supposed to enjoy what they are doing to the full ("Toute la sagesse d'une femme ne vaut pas la folie d'un homme. <...> La fille est l'être le plus intéressant qu'il y ait dans la nature, les vices des femmes sont toujours l'ouvrage des hommes"⁶) and in Sade, they are either the prey and deadly game to their sadistic predators, or they vie for cruelty and perversion with their male counterparts.

With Powell (who paradoxically could be so eloquent on, and so sensitive to the nuances of such philosophical stances), we have a much colder, more detached, less sensual and passionate depiction of the world around his protagonists, although his mysogyny –it must be admitted- is everywhere present. In *The Valley of Bones*, there is a comic episode in which two characters crack jokes: "Look you, Shoni, this balloon is not safe at all, and the air is leaking out of it terrible, we shall have to jump for it, and Shoni said to Dai, But Dai, what about the women? And Dai said, Oh fook the women, and Shoni said, But have we time?"(55) and later in the same novel, Gwatkin says to Nick: "Make you glad you're married, he said. Don't have to bother any more about women" (p. 91). Although the cues are intended for comic relief, it is interesting to notice that the joyful double entendre and sauciness of certain remarks always originate in foreigners, whereas cues on the same subject, when uttered by British characters, always sound far more sardonic or bitter.

⁴ D.A.F. de Sade, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1986) Vol. 1: p. 501.

⁵ In French verbatim: "Arrivé à cet instant fatal où le voile de l'illusion ne se déchire que pour laisser à l'Homme séduit le tableau cruel de ses erreurs et de ses vices, ne vous repentez) vous point, mon enfant, des désordres multipliés où vous ont emporté la faiblesse et la fragilité humaine?"

⁶ Rétif, *Oeuvres érotiques* in *L'Enfer de la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris: Fayard, 1985) Vol. 2 : 200 & 221.

Indeed, most of the main characters in Powell's novels, especially in *The Dance* series, seem far too smart and emotionally handicapped to sound true. As Jocelyn Brooke once remarked, it would be impossible to conceive anyone seriously contemplating suicide in a Powell novel. Neither is there any portrayal of childhood, nor heartfelt descriptions on the beauty of nature, and certainly no explicit sex. Harold Nicolson commented on *From a View to a Death* with the following verdict: "Mr Powell essentially is a metropolitan. I regret to find him in rough brogues tripping across the fields. I always rejoice in the bland cruelty of Mr Powell's style" (p. 84-85, in Michael BARBER). I also personally remember James Lees-Milne telling me how sinister he had always found Tony Powell the man and even at his best, he simply remained inscrutable behind his affable manner. One must indeed admit it is difficult not to draw parallels between the writer's social life and the detachment of all the narrators of his novels, in which the first-person narrator is technically homodiegetic but so little so when it comes to psychological introspection and readers' sympathy! It is something that always struck me as being really idiosyncratic in Powell's fiction and it might explain why the early novels, in retrospect, sound more refreshing and convincing. This is probably due to the explicitly bawdy or more erotic scenes that coexist with the frightfully smart ones. *Agents and Patients* or *Venusberg*, for instance, are excellent cases in point. In the latter one, Count Bobel asks Lushington: "Now in London, Mr Lushington, how is it with girls? Always I collect addresses. Is it true there are no *maisons*? No *quartier réservé*? – Absolutely. – That I cannot understand. *Comment s'amuse la jeunesse*? (p. 28) and when he later invites his friend, he luridly suggests: "There is a small hotel along the coast that we could reach in time for dinner. Outside I have a sleigh. It occurred to me that with a fourth there would be more pleasure for all concerned. Will you not therefore join us? In that way we shall be *une partie carrée*. <...> Ah, your English stiffness!" (p. 135). This is really in the libertine spirit of a Rétif de la Bretonne. It will not be surprising to remember that the narrator of *Le Pied de Fanchette* (later retitled *Le soulier couleur de rose*, 1768) is called Cupidonnet who, as a mouthpiece for its author, endlessly recounts his first sexual arousals provoked by nice shoes worn by young girls, something clearly unimaginable in a Powell novel, or at least in explicit form.

At the other end of the sensual and emotional spectrum, most protagonists in Powell's novels, be they early or late ones, keep on repeating such platitudes as: "In love, there is no rationality", something that is parroted on and on everywhere but which appears several times in *The Acceptance World*. As a matter of fact, the passages in which the author tries to give us a realistic account of the different characters' emotional dilemmas are almost embarrassing to the reader:

Pondering in his mind whether he would go home and finish the article and go to bed, or call on Lucy and sit up all night and finish the article, Lushington went down the stairs, which were of stone like those of a prison or lunatic asylum and were, in effect, used to some considerable extent by persons of a criminal tendency or mentally deranged. In the atmosphere there was a smell of icy damp paint permeating the rawness of the night. (*Venusberg*, p.2)

Lucy, or any other girl for that matter, seems to be quite low on his mental list, since even his "evening shoes" clearly matter much more than any form of emotional attachment or sexual desire. Likewise,

In this (a German silver vase) Zouch examined his face, wondering what sort of an impression he would make when he arrived. Not too good a one, he felt, if the mirror was to be relied upon. <...> The V comprised by the lapels of his coat and enclosing his shirt, collar and tie was all right. ? It had that touch of ingenuousness that was expected of a painter. (*From a View to a Death*, p. 7)

Of all protagonists, Nick Jenkins is undoubtedly the most cynical, self-conscious and the less emotionally expansive of them all. In a passage where he lists all his early loves (Jean Templer, Suzette, and now Barbara), Jenkins revealingly refrains from any emotional outpour of any sort to focus on stultifying concerns and issues:

My frame of mind – **perhaps I should say**⁷ the state of my heart – remained unchanged, and dances seemed pointless unless Barbara was present. <at least having her under one's eyes, the fact that she does not respond at all to the painting he likes so much> but love of that sort – the sort where the sensual element has been reduced to a minimum – must after all, largely if not entirely, resolve itself to the exercise of power. (*A Buyer's Market*, p. 24) When you are in love with someone, their life, past, present and future, becomes in a curious way part of your life; and yet, at the same time, since two separate human entities in fact remain, you merely carry your own prejudices into another person's imagined existence. (p. 143)

Predictably, the narrator tends to dodge the subject of his own desire, inclinations or emotions to reconsider affections and affairs of the heart within the social conventions (or prejudices) of marriage. In the early novels, this gives birth to very funny episodes and tongue-in-cheek cues: In *From a View to a Death*, the curiosity of a young female character is aroused by a bickering couple, the Dadds: "Anyway it did not much matter. She felt that this would be a good opportunity for learning about married life, as she was quite interested in this as a subject. But Mrs Dadds only shook her head and said: The filthy beast!" (p. 89). In *Venusberg*, Waldemar tells Lushington: "I am glad that we have the night before us so that each can put forward the convictions he may hold on the much discussed perplexities of the married state" (p.122). But the wit turns sour and more sardonic in the *Dance* novels. In *Afternoon Men*, Pringle's family background is summarized as: "Pringle came of a go-ahead family. His father, a businessman from Ulster, had bought a Cézanne in 1911. That had been the beginning. Then he had divorced his wife. Later he developed religious mania and jumped off a suspension bridge" (p. 2-3) and in *Casanova Chinese Restaurant* for instance, Moreland says to Nick how melancholy Maclintick is, "disappointed at himself as a musician, always hard up and his wife like any wife... But you know one does begin to understand all the music-hall jokes and comic-strips about matrimony after you have tried a spell of it yourself <...> I think he hates women really – only like whores. <...> He found them easier to converse with than respectable ladies (p. 106-107). It is equally puzzling to notice how little information we receive as readers of a 12-novel saga about the protagonist's own married life and Powell himself has disseminated in his novels numberless reasons for not discussing in depth the intricacies of one's own marriage,

⁷ My emphasis (note by the author).

but this seems to go against what he so rightly says in his reviews about Dostoievski versus Tolstoi⁸:

It is doubtful whether an existing marriage can ever be described directly in the first person and convey a sense of reality. Even those writers, who suggest some sort of the substance of married life best, stylise heavily, losing the subtlety of the relationship at the price of a few accurately recorded, but isolated aspects <...> To think at all objectively about one's own marriage is impossible, while a balanced view of other people's marriages is almost equally hard to achieve with so much information available, so little to be believed... even casting objectivity aside, the difficulties of presenting marriage are inordinate" (*Casanova Chinese Restaurant*, p.97).

Probably inspired and struck by those justifications, Cassidy Carpenter, in an elaborate and somewhat self-righteous article to be found on the anthonypowell.org website, "A Word Without Definition: Marriage", describes at length and – to my taste – with far too many telescoped metaphors what might explain such a shattering silence on the married state which I would rather tend to associate in Powell's work as a severe form of alienation:

A song lasts all of five minutes, while a marriage is supposed to last forever. When the music stops, the intimate union ends. The struggle with marriage is to find a constant rhythm that keeps each member gripping one another as they spin, whirling into the future. <...> Some marriages are mere waltzes, a temporary upbeat with a quick crescendo into divorce, as seen with Maclintick and Matilda. Nick is able to objectively describe the intricacies of other marriages because he is merely an outsider. As Nick has now found his partner on the dance floor, he is struggling with the challenge of conveying the importance of his own marriage in writing. The lack of detail about Nick's married life is due to his deep love and respect for Isobel and the realization that marriage is something that, with or without objectivity, defies definition.



⁸ See Anthony Powell, *Under Review* op. cit. Relevant articles are to be found on p. 400-411 and 423-429, respectively.

In his novels, Powell never fails in having something sarcastic to say about marriage through his characters. But the temptation to identify the narrator and the author on this topic would be easily resisted should Powell not insist so heavily on it in his critical reviews of other artists and writers as well. When he discusses for instance the Pearsall Smith family (first published in *The Daily Telegraph*, 1985), or the Berensons, he adds this particularly middle-class remark: "Everyone must live their marriage in their own way..."⁹, which is very surprising indeed under the pen of such an otherwise worldly and first-class reviewer.

I would rather suggest that we consider, for example, his passion for Benjamin Constant, which heavily relied on his worship of the latter's *Astolphe*. This novel published in 1816 is not about reminiscences of the couple he formed with Germaine (de Stael), but about the introspection of a man who is still enslaved by the power a former lover still holds over him even after the emotional and sexual ties have worn away. This is the key, I think, to the many literary circumvolutions Tony Powell the man and the novelist uses in order to avoid plunging in the deepest recesses of his libido, preferring to dwell on more socially-constructed themes such as marriage and power games. It would indeed be difficult to imagine Lady Violet carry a bucket of raspberries to her husband every week, had he been imprisoned in the Bastille in 1784 and receiving shortly afterwards a letter like the one Donatien Alphonse François de Sade amorously wrote to R n e P lagie de Montreuil in June 1785:

But I who was taught by Father Sanchez <Jesuit> not to swim in a vacuum any more than necessary (Descartes says Nature abhors vacuum). I cannot agree with Madame Cordier: never discharge in anything but the vessel of propagation. You though are a philosopher. You have a very pretty misconception and a manner of moving and a narrowness in that misconception and heat in the rectum, that makes me get on with you quite well.¹⁰

There is one novel by Anthony Powell with a more obviously Sadian dimension, namely *The Kindly Ones* (1962, the year when he published his first in-depth article on Sade, reproduced in *Under Review* and discussed here). The title is a direct reference to the Eumenides, and its exegesis reads: "The Furies bringing in their train war, pestilence, dissension on earth; torturing, too, by the stings of conscience". The place in Tottenham Court Road at the beginning of Chapter 2 is a place where no one eats but in the small hours, only sulky prostitutes. The main plot is interspersed with wild scenes: a dinner party is organised with a tapestry representing "The Seven Deadly Sins", "sitting right under the panel Luxuria" (p. 117) and photo shoots take place as sophisticated theatrical performances. The atmosphere is clearly decadent:

Here, before us, in these two, was displayed the nursery and playroom life of generations of 'great houses': the abounding physical vitality of big aristocratic families, their absolute disregard for personal dignity in uninhibited delight in 'dressing up', that passionate return to childhood,

⁹ Anthony Powell, *Under Review*, op. cit. p. 129.

¹⁰ Letter quoted in Maurice Lever's biography, *Sade* (New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux, 1993) p. 117.

never released so fully in any other country, or, even in this country, so completely by any other class. Sir Magnus was enchanted. (p. 129)

And there are many references to the surrealist atmosphere of Paris (“Violence – revolt – sweep away the past! Abandon bourgeois values. Don’t be a prisoner of outworn dogmas. <...> Does action consist in having or loving?”, p. 76) or to occultist and theosophical circles, with mentions of the Beast Alastair Crowley (1875-1947), Cagliostro and even Cyril Connolly (!) who is supposed to bridge the gap between Wilde and Hitler...

Anthony Powell was too self-conscious not to recognize that there was a form of contradiction between a very straight and “restrained” sexual life and an obvious vicarious delight in learning about his friends’ sexual exploits. But contrary, for instance, to other heterosexual friends such as Henry York and Christopher Sykes who in later age confessed publicly that they regretted not having fallen like everyone else for some boy during their school days (according to the proverbial saying “everybody was gay at Balliol”, especially at the Hypocrite Club), Anthony Powell never expressed such views, and although he admitted a taste for Erotica, he strongly drew the line at hard porn. But this is not to imply that Powell was a timid voyeur either, future biographies of the man will probably surprise some of his most dedicated aficionados with concrete evidence of certain sexual practices still to be unveiled. But what carries Powell in the literary direction of Sade and not Casanova’s or Rétif’s is the notion of Power. Rétif hated Sade for the tormented and deadly passions, the destructiveness that he <Sade> associates with sex, whereas Casanova never tired of celebrating the pleasure shared and communicated between or among the various partners. To both Sade and Powell, the pleasure principle was something psychologically far more complex.

Very early on in his life, Sade commented and insisted on the “pleasure principle”. For him, the necessity of confinement, and what he called **isolism** (the radical impossibility of communication between human beings) was absolutely essential to reach pleasure. This of course can be explained by his early biography. When he was 13, he was more or less given by his father the Count de Sade (brother to the author of *Petrarch* which built up the myth that Beatrice was in fact based on Laure de Sade) to one of his mistresses, Madame de Raimond. In this environment, Mme de Longeville and Mme De Vernouillet were often around (see p. 68-69 and 95) to arouse and humiliate the passionate young Donatien. All sorts of giggles surrounded the teenager...¹¹. Fifteen years later, madame du Deffand was a contemporary witness who had just heard about the Divine Marquis’s frolics in the maison d’Arceuil with Rose Keller. Here is what she wrote to Horace Walpole:

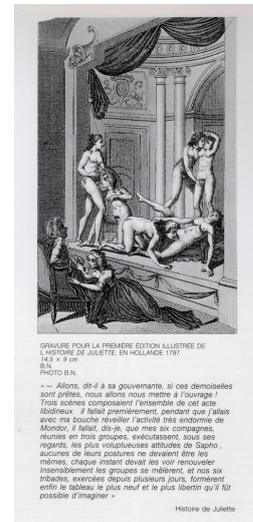
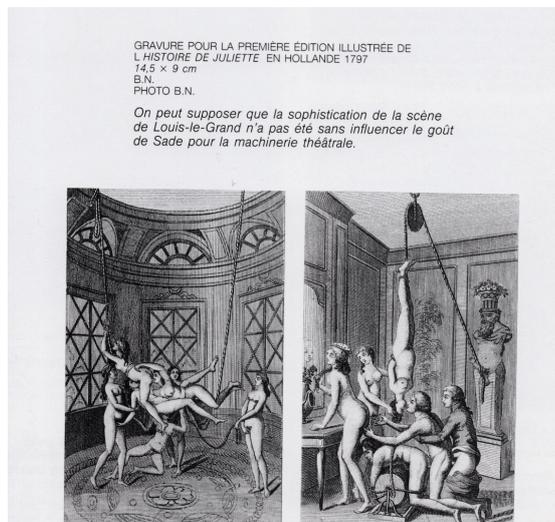
¹¹ See LEVER, *op. cit.* 68-69 and 95.

Paris, ce mardi 12 avril 1768

« [...] Un certain comte de Sade¹²⁸, neveu de l'abbé, auteur de *Pétrarque*, rencontra, le mardi de Pâques, une femme grande et bien faite, âgée de trente ans, qui lui demanda l'aumône ; il lui fit beaucoup de questions, lui marqua de l'intérêt, lui proposa de la tirer de sa misère, et de la faire concierge d'une petite maison qu'il a auprès de Paris. Cette femme l'accepta ; il lui dit d'y venir le lendemain matin l'y trouver ; elle y fut ; il la conduisit d'abord dans toutes les chambres de la maison, dans tous les coins et recoins, et puis il la mena dans le grenier ; arrivés là, il s'enferma avec elle, lui ordonna de se mettre toute nue ; elle résista à cette proposition, se jeta à ses pieds, lui dit qu'elle était une honnête femme ; il lui montra un pistolet qu'il tira de sa poche, et lui dit d'obéir, ce qu'elle fit sur-le-champ ; alors il lui lia les mains et la fustigea cruellement. Quand elle fut tout en sang, il tira un pot d'onguent de sa poche, et pansa ses plaies, et la laissa ; je ne sais s'il la fit boire et manger, mais il ne la revit que le lendemain

matin. Il examina ses plaies, et vit que l'onguent avait fait l'effet qu'il en attendait ; alors, il prit un canif, et lui déchiqueta tout le corps ; il prit ensuite le même onguent, en couvrit toutes les blessures et s'en alla. Cette femme désespérée se démena de façon qu'elle rompit ses liens, et se jeta par la fenêtre qui donnait sur la rue. On ne dit point qu'elle se soit blessée en tombant ; tout le peuple s'attroupa autour d'elle ; le lieutenant de police a été informé de ce fait ; on a arrêté M. de Sade ; il est, dit-on, dans le château de Saumur. L'on ne sait pas ce que deviendra cette affaire, et si l'on se bornera à cette punition, ce qui pourrait bien être, parce qu'il appartient à des gens assez considérables et en crédit ; on dit que le motif de cette exécration action était de faire l'expérience de son onguent [...]. »

Two centuries later, his reputation was no longer based solely on his outrageous sexual habits and debauchery, and Simone De Beauvoir, of all people, developed an odd and keen interest in his biography, diagnosing a form of autism in him. She saw in the great philosopher-pornographer some incapacity to forget himself and recognize the presence of others. According to Beauvoir, his hot temper made him rush toward external objects that he was incapable of embracing, leading him thus to invent extraordinary ways to lay hold of them. Strangely enough, this verdict could also apply to both Marcel Proust and Anthony Powell. Although their sexual energy or talents for promiscuity were in no way comparable, they maybe shared the same disgust for physical contact. As will be remembered, Proust once remarked that sexual pleasure was weaker than a glass of cold beer (as can be seen in the brothel scene in *La Cluzat*). André Aciman called this syndrom in his article “Proust Regained”¹²: speculophilia.

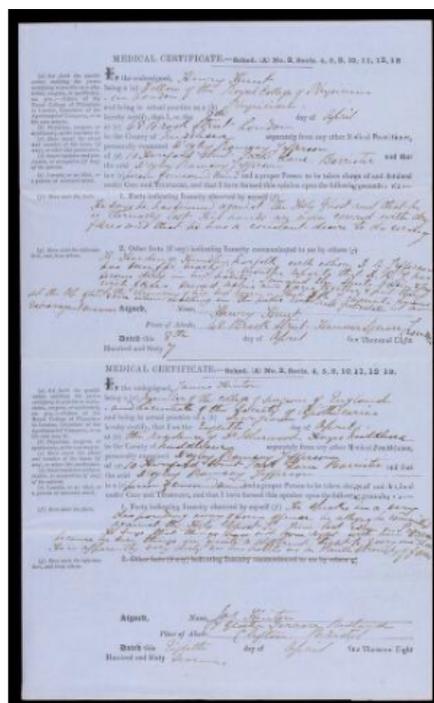


¹² André Aciman, “Proust Regained” in *The New York Review of Books* (18.07.2002).

When Powell published his article on Sade in 1962, his two sons had become young adults and one may wonder if this is pure coincidence if he finished it with a few and perfectly-chosen examples from *Justine* to shrewdly highlight the fact that there certainly was an anticipation of psychoanalysis and the hormone theory in Sade (in other words, infants' drives towards cruelty and incest).

Some quick research on the Internet gives you the (almost) full picture¹⁶. D'Oyly Ramsay Jefferson (1839-1911) was the only son of Thomas Robert Jefferson, a "private gentleman" living at 33, Gloucester Square who resorted to taking his son to Henry Hunt on April 8th 1867 because of a behaviour that had become untenable for the previous 10 months (D'Oyly would frequently get into very excitable states, gesticulating and shouting noisily, often being disagreeable, but not dangerous to other people but to a large extent living in his own world, dressing eccentrically). The Brook Street-based physician diagnosed him as "a person of unsound mind" and sent him, with his father's authorization, to a first asylum, Moorcroft House in Hillingdon. We also learn that he was 28 years old, single, had been called to the Bar in 1865, and had been contemporary with Swinburne at Eton and Balliol. Two years later, on May 3rd 1869, not his father this time but his sister's siblings, Edmund Lionel Wells Dymoke, (1814-1892) and Georgiana Pennington (died in 1881) signed the documents to transfer DRJ -as he was usually referred to- to Ticehurst 9 days later. The details listed on the documents reveal the naked truth.

DRJ was convinced that he had "sinned against the Holy Ghost" (we even learn that everything started in Paris, 10 months before, in June 1767) and that he felt "eternally lost". According to Dr Hunt, "his hands are now covered with dry fæces and says he has a constant desire to do wrong". A certain H. Harding, a young man from Hemsley, Norfolk, who had been living with him for 4 months in late 1866 says that DRJ had developed dirty habits, which consisted in smearing the sheets, basin and jug with a mixture of fæces and ashes and putting it on the chimney in his bedroom.



¹⁶ The Patients certificates and notices of Ticehurst House Hospital can be consulted by anyone through the Wellcome Library: <http://wellcomelibrary.org/item/b19701081>. The D'Oyly Ramsay Jefferson documents are to be found in the 1869 file, including the two pages reproduced here.

In *Agents and Patients* (1936), the character Blore Smith is introduced as a rich, bored and inhibited bachelor who transfigures his existential malaise by starting to buy his first modern paintings. His first score is truly orgasmic: "I should like to buy it, Blore Smith said. The room went black around him" (p. 27). Later when he becomes the prey (and guinea pig) to the protagonist couple formed by Chipchase and Maltravers, his schizoid self-consciousness becomes more and more painful:

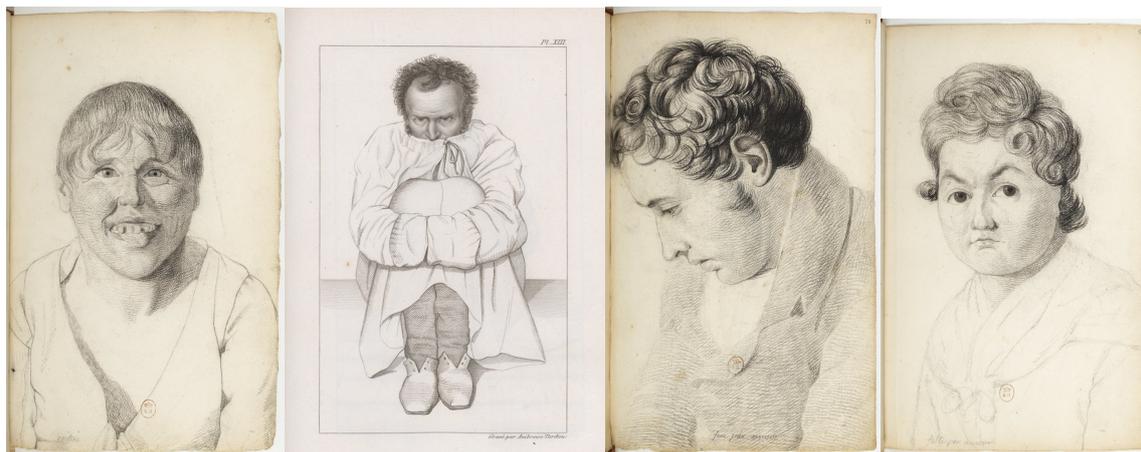
Blore-Smith knew that his cuffs were distinctly dirty and tried to forget this by staring up towards the white and gold ornamentation of the ceiling. He noticed that Maltravers's check suit seemed out of place in these surroundings, but as Maltravers seemed unconscious of any incongruity he decided that it must be all right and that perhaps it would not matter after all about his cuffs. (p. 46)

Chipchase and Maltravers form an experimental dramatic plan that consists in reenacting a street scene (a man in chains lying on the ground and another holding a sword hovering over him) that they witnessed at the beginning of the novel: "What a grand couple, said Maltravers. Chipchase stood on tiptoe to see over the shoulder of an elderly Negro in spats and a brown bowler hat who was obscuring his view of the performance. This is magnificent, Maltravers said. *The rectangle they formed, the theatre nearby, the brick walls* <...> The street ended in an open space and in the south-east corner people had collected to watch certain mysteries which were being enacted there". Their flight of fancy becomes a wild aesthetic almost constructivist design which takes shape into a film in which various people would be locked up (including Blore Smith) and filmed: "It's their actions that count. With the best will in the world one can't photograph a passive man subconsciously hating his father" (p.55) but Chipchase cannot help interviewing Blore Smith a few pages later: "Do you, said Chipchase, coming closer, ever feel an overpowering impulse to cruelty?" (p. 66). Indeed, rereading certain pages of *Patients and Agents* makes one wonder what other literary directions Anthony Powell the novelist could have taken had he let his wildest drives take the upper hand.

It is often forgotten that Sade's many forced stays in Sainte Pélagie, the Bastille or Charenton (especially in 1789-90, and for a longer stint between 1803 and 1814) were seminal in reinforcing his artistic rage. As early as 1780, Sade was convinced that "a firm soul has never and will never be malleable"¹⁷. His years of imprisonment, especially those spent in the Charenton asylum, were also years of theatrical practice. Pioneer "psychiatrist" Philippe Pinel (1745-1826) trod in the footsteps of William Battie, author of the famous *Treatise on Madness* first published in 1758. His pupil at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris (an asylum and a prison which did not turn into a psychiatric asylum until after the Revolution), Jean-Étienne Esquirol

¹⁷ Sade wrote to Mlle de Rousset: "Si de toutes les races d'animaux que nous connaissons sur la terre, il y en eût une qui se fût faire des prisons, et puis qui se condamnassent mutuellement à ce joli petit supplice, ne la détruirions-nous pas comme une espèce trop cruelle à laisser substituer ici-bas?" (22.03.1779). "*Le malheur ne m'avilira jamais. Je n'ai point dans les fers pris le cœur d'un esclave et ne l'y prendrai, je l'espère, jamais, dussent-ils ces fers malheureux, oui, dussent-ils me conduire au tombeau - vous me verrez toujours le même, j'ai le malheur d'avoir reçu du ciel une âme ferme qui n'a jamais su plier et qui ne pliera jamais.*" (20.02.1780).

(1772-1840), succeeded him and revolutionized the way mental disorders were treated. Esquirol (who gave his name to today's hospital) considered passions as causes, symptoms **but also** possible curative treatments of alienation. He published *Les Passions considérées comme causes, symptômes et moyens curatifs de l'aliénation mentale* in 1805 and found in the local priest, François Simonnet de Coulmiers (1741-1818), an old regime authoritarian hunch-back dwarf with progressive views, a soulmate. Coulmiers was convinced – and he wrote so to the Emperor – “innocent pleasures such as shows, balls, and music can awaken the spirit of those unfortunate, totally blanked by the cruel disease called insanity”. Coulmiers is also responsible for authorizing Mme de Sade to stay in Charenton to make her husband's daily life less frustrating, and for providing him with paper (one should not forget that the literary destiny of Sade in the 18th century was literally as thin as paper; the manuscript of the *120 Days of Sodom* reproduced at the beginning of this paper was minutely copied by hand in 37 days by Sade at the Bastille in 1789 on a roll of paper later hidden in a dildo, and after a long series of incidents¹⁸, was finally available in print in the twentieth century). More important of all, Coulmiers allowed stage rehearsals with the other inmates... with whom Sade could interact but not exactly communicate: an ideal situation for an “isolationist”.



“Têtes d’aliénés de Charenton” 1823 dessinées par Georges-François-Marie Gabriel, (1775-1846) Bibliothèque Nationale de France.
(La Créatine, Le Mélancolique, le Fou d’amour, La Folle d’amour)

In *Agents and Patients*, Chipchase and Maltravers develop very weird scenarios and, at some point, they even consult their producer, Herr Direktor Roth, a dwarf, to envisage a scene that would take place on an island with men of different nationalities fighting over a native girl:

¹⁸ After Sade was transferred from the Bastille to Charenton on the night of July 3rd 1789, Arnoux de St Maximim searched the room and gave the precious roll to the Villeneuve family who kept it for several generations when they sold it to a Berlin-based psychiatrist, Iwan Bloch who published a very poor unreliable transcript in 1904. Social and artistic lionness Marie-Laure de Noailles (née Bischoffsheim and a descendant of the Marquis) bought it from the Bloch family in 1929 and commissioned Maurice Heine to publish a faithful, albeit limited edition between 1931 and 1935, which has remained the reference edition up to these days. In 1982, the manuscript was stolen from the heirs of the Noailles, sold illegally to Gérald Nordmann in Geneva. Swiss legislation contradicted the verdict, but the Nordmann heirs eventually sold it in 2014 for 7 million euros to the current owner, Gérard Lhéritier. Lhéritier has promised to bequeathe it to the Bibliothèque nationale by the end of 2019 but numberless recent legal actions against the businessman and MS lover could add more episodes to the *120 Days* saga.

As he lies dying, while the surrounding tribes of cannibals advance towards the hut, the German says: "Mut verloren, alles verloren, Da wär as besser, nicht geboren." The Frenchman says: "J'irai loin – bien loin, comme un bohémien, par la Nature, heureux comme avec une femme". The Englishman says: "Play up and play the game". (p. 122)

Such hysterical scenes abound in Powell's novels, but they are diluted in a more mundane bohemian general social background. In *Dance*, they usually involve the most complex character of the saga, Widmerpool, who often can be seen as a mad psychiatrist and a catalyst for the fury and madness of the world: "Widmerpool was still staring rather wildly at Gypsy Jones, apparently regarding her much as a doctor, suspecting a malignant growth, might examine a diseased organism under the microscope." (*A Buyer's Market*, p. 89). This sends us back to Powell's contrastive critical approach to Tolstõ and Dostoievski. In Tolstõ, characters are not exactly like life, the novelist tells his readers what they want to hear, as opposed to Dostoievski, the true genius, according to the critic. But although there is in Powell a temptation for something bigger, more intense, the social and personal consequences of such a subversive track in his creative process were something Powell was not ready to embrace. It seems that Powell the novelist was to his characters what Le Bas the headmaster felt towards the boys under his authority:

He was inclined to feel suspicious of all boys in his house as they grew older; not because he was in any sense an unfriendly man, through abrupt and reserved, but simply on account of the increased difficulty in handling the daily affairs of creatures who tended less and less to fit into a convenient and formalised framework.... (p. 28)

What matters is neither the identification of historical characters in the guise of fictional characters, nor the veracity of autobiography, but what the novelist does with what little life actually had to offer to strong individuals. In that respect, there is a common poetical gesture both in Powell and Sade. Sade would not leave anything out, whereas Powell conveys far more with the unsaid, he was more of a Thackeray (than a Dickens, for instance), more of a Tolstõ than a Dostoievski, more of an Aubrey Beardsley (than an Oscar Wilde), as Jocelyn Brooke so strikingly commented: "just like in Beardsley's, the blank spaces in Powell's novels are essential to the total effect as the lines and masses which surround them" (p. 6-7, in Michael BARBER). This is also what makes both writers timeless, neither revolutionary nor reactionary, but on the edge. And also maybe too what makes them despicable in the eyes of some critics like D.J. Taylor who viciously condemned Powell for his "snooty conflation of hauteur and vagueness".

Powell, probably the greatest literary critic of the second half of 20th century Europe, but a withdrawn/restrained artist, is not trying to catch or regain Time Lost, but to catch the spirit and the movement of Time passing. One of his most famous lines "You know growing old's like being increasingly penalized for a crime you haven't committed" (which appears twice in his novels *in verbatim*) is repeated in *The Temporary Kings*. As a conclusion, one may wonder if what unites Powell, Sade, and obviously Proust, it is not the solitude/or seclusion they had sought and lived with all

their lives; and which followed them like a shadow, a form of solitude that was also the most authentic and enduring thing about them.

