Chapter Two

ANTHONY POWELL AND HIS COMIC NOVELS

The best life that we find in his early fiction is that of the upper middle class society. So his characters are generally well-educated and lead a comfortable life. They appear to be leading a life of pleasure. In fact, there is emptiness beneath it, because they fear emotional involvement. His novels, thus, are a satiric picture of the 'lost generation'. However, they are entertaining and readable. It is because Powell observes life honestly and does not hide the ugliness of life.

In his novels we come across the fashionable ladies who are responsible for marring their own lives. In spite of this, we find that his protagonists give importance to tolerance, humanity and decency in their lives. It is this that saves their lives from becoming farcical, and it is this again that saves their world from becoming sour. It does not, however, mean that Powell does not observe any poetic justice. He does not forgive his characters that are callous. He brands them as villains. His fiction is, thus, not simply a glittering presentation of the surface of
gay life, but we also come across deep mysteries of life, hidden in this gay portrayal of life. So his novels give us a practical philosophy of life by stressing the importance of human relationship in the world, that is largely selfish.

In his first novel Afternoon Men (1931), the Protagonist, William Atwater, tries to find meaning in the fast-moving purposeless social life. The title of the novel is derived from Richard Burton's The Anatomy of Melancholy. In the novel there is a company of afternoon men. They are giddy-headed. The author discusses in the novel the place of genuine feelings in the world of triviality. The protagonist, William Atwater, appears to conclude this discussion by thinking that modern life is not suitable for genuine feelings.

In the novel the protagonist, William Atwater, finds himself involved in a few love affairs, but in the end he finds himself sad. It is a different matter whether his love affairs were saturated or not. The fact, however, remains that his love relationships lead him only to find out an outlet from those relationships. Not only this, they kill the growth of deeper relationship in him. Consequently, he avoids serious love affairs. Rather, he prefers to have love relationship on the surface. In this connection we can refer to Atwater's love affairs with Susan, Lora, and Harriet. They end in tame affairs. At best they are farcical, even banal. Consequently,
even his attempts at serious love-making remains flat, absurd and meaningless. We may appreciate, in this connection, the conversation between William Atwater and Lora. He wants to cohabit with her, but she asks him not to do that. He asks her as to why he should not. She tells him that he is not the person who should, and then ask him to behave properly. But the brooding edifice of seduction, creaking and incongruous as it is, comes into being. Their mutually adapted emotions are in harmony till the anti-climax is at hand. Then, they take their meal in a nearby hotel. We may appreciate all this in the words of the author in the book Afternoon Man thus: 'She said, 'I'm glad we met. But we must behave.' 'Slowly but very deliberately, the brooding edifice of seduction, creaking and incongruous, came into being... The mutually adapted emotions of each of them became synchronised until the unavoidable anti-climax was at hand.'

The same was the case with the other characters of the novel. In their lives, too, there is sexual emptiness, and marriage as an institution does not play any part. Even love in their lives remains as an excuse for a quick gymnastic performance. So their lives are trivial. Thenovelist establishes it ironically by pointing out permanent relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Chalk, parents of Pringle's maid servant.

So far as Powell's portrayal of life in the novel is

concerned, it is nothing but the brutal divisions of the English society. Naturally, we come across a big gulf between the middle and the lower classes. So the working class characters (lackeys and servants) are handled roughly by their masters. Not only this, they have been presented as ugly and ill or as ugly and stupid in the novel. However, the idea of presenting them in such a manner is at times not clear, and so we are unable to decide whether the idea of presenting them in such a manner is that of the author or of the hero himself. It is a different matter that later in the novel the author becomes sympathetic towards this class.

Besides, Powell's art in his novel *Afternoon Men* shows that he has stage-managed his scenes but has done them excellently. It is this that shows how insignificant is the life of the characters that he presents. A few scenes in the novel absorb the major part of his narrative technique. The novel opens with the description of a party. It is this that establishes the tone. It is because of this that we come across the description of such parties at regular intervals in the novel, and it is these that show very clearly that in Atwater's social circle, the social relationship of convenience is formed. Besides, in the description of these parties we also come across Atwater's travel to Priggle's Cottage, and it shows people's vehement reactions to the tragic happenings there. It also shows that they might lead to a supposed suicide.
It follows, then, that the plot of the novel is constructed loosely. In it, scenes follow one another without having proper links, that is, without being based on cause and effect theory. The same is the case with his character's life in the novel. Characters come and go according to the demand of the scenes. They do not appear as leading an independent life of their own.

So his style is functional and the linguistic niceties in it have been reduced to the minimum. Naturally, the dialogues are brief and dull. It may be that the author wants to satirise Atwater's showy social group by writing such dialogues. Of course, at times, once or twice, the author has used the prose style using difficult words and images. He has used it just to show the jocularity of a semi-literate character. When all is said about this novel, the fact remains that it is a remarkable book, no matter there are signs of immaturity in his art, specially in his art of characterisation. It is remarkable in the sense that it is entertaining. It combines wit, farce, and parodies of accepted mannerism in such a manner that it has become entertaining. For a serious reader, there is a note of sadness in the novel as the world in it is shown as imperfect. Atwater and his circle have obsession with the lower class of people, showing the basic flaw in the modern materialistic life.

Besides, Powell has used sub-titles to reveal the course
of the story in the novel. For example, he has given the sub-title "Montage" to the first part of the novel. It is like the scenes of a film, super-imposed on one another. They (scenes) introduce characters and show their lives as if pasted together. They also present the hero pursuing conjugal love hopelessly. The second part is given the sub-title "Parihelion". In this part Atwater seduces a girl, although he does not love her. He enjoys her passively. The word, Parihelion, means the point closest to the sun. The third is given the sub-title "Palindrome", which means a word or a sentence that reads backward or forward. In this part Atwater goes to a country for a week and from there he comes to London, where he comes to know that the girl who he enjoyed passively, has gone to America. This part comes to an end in a despairing and boring gossip. It begins with the night club and ends in the same night club.

It brings us to the study of his second novel Venusberg (1932). In this novel the journalist Lushington goes to the capital of Finland, a newly independent country in the North. Here he develops a love-relationship with a noble woman. She is murdered before he returns to England, where he finds that he is not interested in his former lady-love, Lucy, who is willing to marry him. So his original love, that is love to Lucy, is now soured beyond redemption. Lucy says that she thinks that she is more or less his. Lushington
answers in affirmative and adds that he may be hers if she still wants him. Thus Lushington loses Lucy. He loses his lady-love in Finland also, because she is assassinated.

Thus, we find that the novel shows the irony of life in the sense one is able to win the object of one's love when the love itself for the object comes to an end. But it is not a pure irony in the sense that it is mixed with determinism, and as such luck, good or bad, plays a role in the resolution of the conflict in the novel. For example, Lushington loves Lucy but Lucy does not love him. On the other hand, she loves his friend, DaCosta, but he does not love her -- Lushington is a correspondent, whereas DaCosta is a diplomat. While going on a boat, he develops a love affair with one Ortrud Mavrin. Her husband, on the other hand, thinks that she is in love with DaCosta. Fate acts in this situation. Ortrud and DaCosta are killed in an ambush. Thus, their supposed love-affair is linked. In this situation Lushington returns home to claim Lucy's love for him. Lucy agrees to marry him but, in the meantime, he thinks that it is not desirable on his part to marry her, as he no more loves her. Thus, fatalism, even cynicism, plays its role in life and so it does in this story. Thus, Venusberg shows Europe undergoing cultural shocks -- massive social collapses like the Russian

Revolution. Naturally, much of the irony and humour in this novel originate from the contrast of the Chaotic reality with the fixed posture of the lost feudal class. Count Michael Bobel, a Russian expatriate, reflects on the anarchic theme of the novel. Bobel is a Sales Executive who boozes and womanises without taking any thing into consideration. His reflection may be appreciated by considering the Russian expression, 'nitchero'. The expression means nothing. Thus, he represents social confusion, the forces of Vehement disturbance. So Powell is subdued in tone and reports second-hand reminiscences. We can exemplify it from what Lushington does in the novel. He does not participate in the action. Things happen to him. However, his portrayal of Ortrud is complex. She is an arrogant coquette. She is strangely susceptible to wounds. However, the style in the novel is simple, even flat, as is the case with his novel *Afternoon Men*. Since the action is reported, the dialogues in the novel do not play their full role. But it does not mean that they are completely dull. There are certain dialogues in the novel that anticipate the good prose that we find in his novel *A Dance to the Music of Time*. In short, Powell's prose style is controlled and sensitive, but we may see in it occasional flashes of wit and repartee.

Let us now study his third novel *From a View to a Death*

(1933). It has taken its title from "John Peel", a hunting song: "From a find to a Cheek, / From a Cheek to a view, / From a view to a death in the morning." In this novel Zouch, an unscrupulous, bearded artist, takes himself as a super man. He wants to belong to the country gentry by marrying a girl from the Passanger's family. Besides, he thinks that he will be one of the country gentry if he fulfil his aim of marrying a girl from the Passanger's family. It so happens that his chase becomes extended in the sense that Zouch as the fox seeks Mary Passanger in the hen-house. There Major Passanger, as the hunter, is present. Besides him, there is a large number of eccentrics ready for the ride. In this novel, Robert Morris gives each and every details of the chase. He tells us that Zouch's initial appearance at Passanger's Court creates confusion. He goes back to London but for re-appearing at Passanger's court for autumn hunting, but this appearance becomes a stage before the final stage of the end of his life. It may be appreciated in the words of the critic thus: "...
Leaving the safety of his London lair after a brief interlude, he reappears at Passanger's for autumn hunting, exposing himself to the 'view' which becomes the pen-ultimate stage in his destruction." Thus when Zouch dies, it does not surprise us because, in the hunting song, John Peel deals with two

5 Anthony Powell, From a View to a Death, (Boston: Little Brown and Company, N.D.), p.III.
deaths, his own and that of the Fox. It is also because the novel *From a View to a Death* deals with the life style of the pampered English gentry. Zouch represents certain sources that threaten the old order of the gentry. The old order of the gentry is holding on in spite of the fact that the new order, the middle class, has come into being. The old order of the gentry is keeping the new order at a distance. Zouch tries to bring this distance to an end, but the representative of the old order, Passanger, understands his plan and brings it to the end by making Zouch fall ultimately. Vernon Passanger, only a caricature of the old order, faces Zouch and defeats him in his design. So the novel deals with two view-points: Zouch's, new attitude — a product of the two world wars; and of Vernon Passanger's, attitude of the old order of the gentry. It is this that makes this novel different from Venusberg.

Besides, in the novel Powell experiments with different forms of narrative. It is only in his novel sequence *A Dance to the Music of Time* that he realises that the central figure as the narrator may connect the different parts of the story in the novel, but we do not find such a central figure in his novel *From a View to a Death*. The absence of the narrator makes the presentation of the material inconsistent besides creating confusion about the preference of the author. However, the fact remains that Powell uses the language, in
this novel, with greater confidence than he does in any of his preceding novels. Also, in this novel his style is not full of mannarism, as is the case with his earlier novels. Rather, his style in the novel is brisk, functional and straightforward. A close look, however, may reveal that it is still anaemic and non-dramatic. So far as the dialogues in the novel are concerned, they are terse and witty but the note of sadness runs through them. In short, this novel shows that Powell has taken a leap in his narrative technique. Powell uses a narrative technique in this novel. This is suitable for a narrator having an omniscient point-of-view. Instead of taking position for and against the established rural institutions, he simply sees the common men's threat against the bourgeois and hints that the privileged classes are bound to lose their grounds to the relentless social, cultural and economic compulsions. Thus, his novel *From a View to a Death* projects the future class war that may take half of the world into its orbit. Thus, this novel and his earlier novels point out that Powell prefers social disintegration as the theme of his novels.

It takes us to the study of his novel *Agents and Patients* (1936). The novel gives an account of the exploitation of a young heir by tricksters who are his confidants. Blore-Smith, the young heir, falls an easy prey to Chipchase, an art critic, who poses as a Psychiatrist, and to Maltravers, who
uses his (Blore-Smith's) money in movie. They remind us of Bobel of Venusberg. Like him they want to create a place for themselves in this rough and selfish world. They may also be compared with Zouch of From a View to a Death in the sense that, like him, they too are social climbers and parasites. In short, they need money, and so they exploit Blore-Smith, who has. Arthur Mizener terms this novel as a serious farce. The title has been taken from a Wesley's Sermon (IXXIII): "So in every possible case, he that is not free is not an agent, but a patient." Blore-Smith is Chipchase's first patient. He does not use his free will, but applies it only when he is asked by others. If at all he becomes free from the clutches of Chipchase and Maltravers, he falls prey to Col. Teape, who is an aged homo-sexual. Thus, Blore-Smith never becomes an actor or agent. Rather he remains a patient because crooked persons, like Chipchase and Maltravers, need his money to survive. So such persons want a place for themselves. They do not threaten the social order, because their aim in exploiting the rich Blore-Smith is economic. Thus, the novel Agent and Patients, presents Blore-Smith as a man who cannot assert. He is shy to the point of abnormalcy -- pathologically shy.

In order to unfetter the chains of his ignorance and timidity,


he visits a brothel, where he loses both. Later on a beautiful socialite patronises him, but she too leaves him in the lurch. It is at this stage that he falls prey to Chipchase and Maltravers. They exploit him to a great extent. In the end, he falls prey to one aged homo-sexual, Col. Teape. Thus, Blore-Smith in the novel learns from this cunning. Powell, thus hints that it is the caginess that is the tool in the hands of man in this mad, bad world. It is also possible that Powell wants to tell us that human beings cannot be free agents in this world. They cannot become so because their own personalities prove prisons for them. That is to say, Powell wants to tell us that we are victims of our personalities — our phobias and manias. He wants us to understand that we, human beings, cannot come out of jails of our own personalities. In spite of the fact that man, like Blore-Smith, is ever free, but persons, like Chipchase, Maltravers and Col. Teape, will ever be after him, and so he can seldom act freely.

It is this truth of life that Powell reveals in this novel. It is a different matter that his revelation is full of comedy and laughter. However, the fact remains that the novel is more pessimistic than the preceding one, as Chipchase and Maltraver's exploitation of Blore-Smith in this novel is more bitter than Zouch's for position in the Society in the novel *From a View to a Death*. Powell reveals his dislike, rather hatred, for shallowness and greediness that
Chipchase and Maltravers suffer from. However, the revelation would have made the novel a worthless piece if there had been no sharp witty dialogues. Besides, they are brisk, splendid and full of glitter. Such under-statements in the dialogues may be seen wherever the socialities cross swords in bars and ante-rooms. Of course, sometimes his dialogues show banality and ludicrousness; but they are compensated by the context in which they occur. In order to appreciate what we have said above, we may appreciate the following from this novel: "... Mrs. Mandoza sais: 'Who is the Frenchman?' / 'Gaston de la Tour D'Espagne'.../'Is he married?' / 'He's had at least three wives in one time. Whether or not he has one at the moment I can't say' / 'I'm mad about him.' / 'I'm not surprised.'"

What's Become of Waring is his last pre-war novel. It appeared in the year 1939. The central character of this novel takes a fancy to Robert Browning's poem "What's Become of Waring" that he read in his childhood. Like Domet of the above poem, the title character of this novel also leaves England. He assumes the name, Waring, and writes accounts of his travels for carrying on his life. So his whereabouts are a mystery. Thus, the plot although deals with the

activities of Waring, but the reader does not feel so. Rather he feels that by making references to plagiarism in this novel, the novelist brings in Robert Browning's poem into the story. It is a different matter that Waring's writings are nothing but copies from others. For example, Waring in his first book has taken material from an Italian book, and so the central character of this book, Hudson, writes the history of his regiment by taking material from another man's diary. Besides, in his book the narrator sleeps and remembers a line ("In Vishnu-land what Avtar?") from Browning's poem "What's Become of Waring". This line refers to both the original Waring and the central character of the novel, but to the reader they appear to be the different incarnations, of course, of the same being. Thus, we can say that the novel is based on Browning's poem.

Besides, it is an attempt at Story-telling. It is a story that tells us about an author who leads a life not known to others, but it is not another story presented with the help of a plot. One special point about the plot of this novel is that its denouement is achieved when one-fourth of the story in the novel remains to be told. The last one-fourth of the novel, thus, deals with the characters' reactions to what is revealed to them in the first three quarters of this novel. Thus, we find that the author takes interest in the study of characters, no matter the plot is there. Besides,
the novel does not deal with social and political problems, as is the case with his other earlier novels. However, his choice of the narrator, a neutral onlooker, shows that he has better control over his art of fiction.

These are Powell's earlier novels. In these novels his primary aim is to show how the established social order in modern Europe is disintegrating. The young men and women of this class lead a purposeless life. They indulge frantically in cocktail parties, so that the destruction that may overtake their class, in the course of time, may be avoided. A close study of these reveals an obsessive quality that Powell shares with the best works of the late 1920s and the early 1930s, 'The Waste Land' Syndrome. In "The Waste Land" T.S. Eliot points out how boring the privileged classes are. The novelists, Evelyn Waugh and Anthony Powell, reveal the emptiness of life in their novels through bleak but witty dialogues. Powell takes the idiom of T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Waste Land" and expresses it with the help of bleak but witty dialogues. So, his depictions in his novel do not bore the readers. There is nonsense, but it is inspired one. There are clownish characters, but they are exploited for the comic purpose. Likewise, farcical situations in his novels are exploited for comic laughter. It is they that make even the doom of the privileged class as comic and entertaining.
Thus, we find that his earlier novels reveal the darkness of life in the then Europe. Of course, his characters make love and laugh also. But the fact remains that there is a current of "Sparring Snubbing and Gimlit-Eyed Dislike," which runs behind the love-makings and laughters of the characters. It is evident from the fact that Powell had used stupidity, neurosis and a state very close to real insanity in his earlier novels. That is why even the funniest of his characters, Major Fosdick in his novel From a View to a Death is an unfortunate character in the sense that he suffers from a shock of being found but by Vernon Passenger in his own drawing room. Rather, he suffers mentally so much that he is removed to a sanatorium. If the author uses his mental disease as a source of laughter, it should certainly be questioned. Not only this, even Passenger suffers a shock when he discovers Fosdick in the latter's drawing room. So the shock on the part of the Passenger is also made a source of comic. Thus, Powell demonstrates how he may be pathetic, and reveals tragedy by exploiting comic or farcical situations. This capacity on his part leads us to compare him with Evelyn Waugh or P.G. Woodhouse. This he could accomplish by writing not only with Wit but also with sympathy. Further, he could do so by writing not only with irony but

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also with pity. This is also the result of his observation that human beings are both funny and pathetic. This is also the result of his observation that if there is farce in life, there is seriousness also. That is why, he gives such names to his heroes that produce laughter, but he also takes epigraphs from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and John Westley's "Sermons" and connects them with the lives of his heroes.