

THE  
MESSAGE OF THE CITY

*Dawn Powell's New York Novels, 1925–1962*

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## “ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE YOU”

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*If you are asking yourself, “Who is Dawn Powell?” allow me to introduce you to one of the great American novelists of [the twentieth] century.*

—Carleen M. Loper, “Discovering Dawn Powell,” 2

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Ohio-born writer Dawn Powell, who lived from 1896<sup>1</sup> to 1965, was always prolific, writing fifteen novels;<sup>2</sup> more than a hundred short stories; a dozen or so plays; countless book reviews; several radio, television, and film scripts; volumes of letters and diary entries; even poetry.<sup>3</sup> So productive was she that, following one spate of housecleaning, she wrote to her editor at Scribner’s, Max Perkins, “I was appalled by the mountains of writing I had piled up in closets and file cases and trunks. . . . It struck me with terrific force that I just wrote too goddam much. Worse, I couldn’t seem to stop” (*Letters*, 134). Weighing her literary output against that of some of her contemporaries, Powell joked to her close friend, writer and literary critic Edmund Wilson, “If I don’t write for five years I may make quite a name for myself and if I can stop for ten I may give Katherine Anne [Porter] and Dorothy Parker a run for their money” (129). If in her lifetime Powell never did make either the name for herself or the money she had hoped, she did enjoy certain successes. In the year before her death, she was awarded the American Institute of Arts and Letters’ Marjorie Peabody Waite Award for lifetime achievement; a few years before that, she was granted an honorary doctorate from her alma

mater, Lake Erie College for Women. In 1963 her last novel, *The Golden Spur*, was nominated for the National Book Award; she appeared in a television interview with Harry Reasoner to discuss the novel, though it did not win. So far as I know, that interview is unavailable.

After she moved from Ohio to Manhattan in 1918 and began writing the many works that today are divided into the Ohio and the New York novels (with the exceptions of *Angels on Toast*, sometimes called a Chicago novel, and *A Cage for Lovers*, set in Paris), Malcolm Cowley hailed her as “the cleverest and wittiest writer in New York”; Diana Trilling called her “one of the wittiest women around”; and J. B. Priestley openly supported her work, as we shall see below. Other friends and admirers included Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Matthew Josephson, the afore-mentioned Edmund Wilson, and many more. Some of her books sold adequately, many less than adequately; none were blockbusters by any means, and virtually all were out of print by the time of her death in 1965.

Thanks to the late Gore Vidal and Tim Page—her biographer, the Pulitzer prize-winning former *Washington Post* music critic and professor in both the Annenberg School of Journalism and the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California—twelve of her novels, a volume of her letters, a collection of her diaries, and some of her plays and short stories have in recent decades been reissued to critical acclaim. Several of her plays have been either restaged or produced for the first time, and a 1933 film, *Hello Sister*, loosely based on Powell’s play *Walking down Broadway*, was in the 1990s released on VHS, if only out of interest in its famous director, Erich von Stroheim; it was shown in a Greenwich Village cinema in 2012.

Of course, more important than quantity of writing is quality. Powell’s novels are filled with astute observations, wry commentaries, spot-on characterizations. Despite her reputation as a tough and unflinching satirist, she is capable of moving tenderness and pathos, particularly in the Ohio novels. In an article originally published in the *New York Times Book Review*, Terry Teachout called *My Home Is Far Away*, one of the Ohio novels, a “permanent masterpiece of childhood” (“Far from Ohio,” 6). Few novelists are better at depicting young children than is Powell; one need read but the first several chapters of *My Home Is Far Away* to see that. Edmund Wilson found her books “at once sympathetic and cynical” (“Dawn Powell,” rpt., 236); Powell can make a reader weep in a brief portrait, as she does when describing old Mrs. Fox in *She Walks in Beauty*,<sup>4</sup> or when

in the same early Ohio novel she conveys the humiliation young Dorrie endures at the hands of her classmates. But most remarkable perhaps is her sense of humor. Few writers are wittier, more scathing, more insightful than Powell. Not only Gore Vidal, Terry Teachout, and Diana Trilling, but Margo Jefferson, John Updike, Michael Feingold, and many other distinguished authors and critics have found much to like in the novelist. As Jefferson writes:

So, we say to ourselves, another nearly forgotten writer ex-humed, cleaned up, reissued and put on display with endorsements from Edmund Wilson, Diana Trilling, and Gore Vidal. Then a friend says no, she's terrific, read her, and we do, and here it is, that infinitely distinguished thing,<sup>5</sup> a dead writer so full of charm and derring-do that literature's canon makers should sit back, smile and say, Dawn Powell, where have you been all our lives? (1)

In this project I examine Powell's New York novels as separate from her haunting books of Ohio, because including all of Powell's novels is beyond the scope of this project.<sup>6</sup> Also because the Ohio publications are generally considered very different from the New York, both in theme and in tone, they should be considered separately: for one commentator, they are so dissimilar that "it is not surprising that many of Powell's greatest admirers have resorted to writing off one group or the other of her novels and basing their admiration on only half her work" (Hensher, "Country," 1). The New York books, overall, are more satiric, more comic, than the lyrical Ohio novels are, and it is in the New York works that Powell writes about "the Midnight People," who, like the characters in Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, "drink and dance and rattle and are ever afraid to be silent" (Lewis, 327). Still, the Ohio series has much to say for itself. As one critic writes, "While the Manhattan novels are unquestionably wittier—urban pretensions and disputes seem to offer readier targets than rural—the Ohio novels are far from being simple accounts of grim life on the late Middle Border. The human comedy is no less comical" in Ohio than in New York (R. Miller, "Reintroducing," E8). Vidal, like many other Powell fans, preferred the New York novels: he said that it is with them that Powell "comes into her own, dragging our drab literature screaming behind her" ("Dawn Powell: American," xiii). Both cycles have much to recommend them, and a lengthy study of the Ohio novels still needs to be written.

As readers see in the *Diaries*, the *Selected Letters*, and Page's *Biography*, Powell's New York is largely the Village, a location that, Ross Wetzsteon reminds us, "has held such a mythic place in the American imagination that it has often served as a kind of iconographic shorthand. A novelist need only to write 'then she moved to the Village' to evoke an entire set of assumptions—she's a bit rebellious, artistically inclined, sexually emancipated, and eager to be on her own" (x). All of these characteristics prove true not only of the novelist's Village characters but of Powell and many of her friends themselves. Wetzsteon adds that "the mythology of the place has been created in large part by those who moved there from elsewhere," as Powell did and as nearly all of her principal characters do. Powell's love of the city she had known since her arrival there in 1918 never diminished; in novels from the 1930s to the 1960s she expresses her heartache about her once-vibrant but speedily deteriorating Manhattan.

I also look at the characters, including those based on the "real" people who populated the city, placing them beside the biographical facts of the author's life and using not only Page's biography but also Powell's own diaries and letters and other available sources. All of the players by now having long since departed, I discuss the real-life "victims" on whom she at least partly based some of her characters, among them Clare Boothe Luce, Ernest Hemingway, John Chapin Mosher, Dwight Fiske, Peggy Guggenheim, and others. Further, I place the works alongside the writings of some of her contemporaries, including Djuna Barnes, Edna Ferber, George S. Kaufman, William Carlos Williams, Virginia Woolf, Ruth McKenney, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Dorothy Parker, to whom Powell is most often compared—a Dos Passos biographer even calls Powell "the poor man's Dorothy Parker" (Carr, 283)—though many commentators agree that the Round Tabler "had a comparatively modest talent" (Begley, 7). Parker's witty lines have come down to us largely because she voiced them in earshot of her newspaper chums, who took note of them and reported them posthaste.<sup>7</sup> Powell, however, as friend, writer, and critic Matthew Josephson remembers, uttered many of her best lines "before a bibulous company whose powers of recall became clogged" (25). Which is not to say that Parker's companions were sober—far from it. Instead, the Algonquin crowd had to hasten from their lunch table to their typewriters, if they were to remain employed, Parker's witticisms fresh in mind, rapidly jotting them down to flesh out a column. Powell and her friends, on the other hand, returned to their garrets or typewriters to finish the paintings

and novels on which they had been working. Once pressed during a 1999 NPR interview to compare Powell to Parker, Tim Page said, "What [writings] do we really remember of Dorothy Parker's? . . . In my own opinion, there's no comparison whatsoever. . . . I don't think Parker was fit to carry Powell's typewriter." Despite the differences in their literary output and creative talent, Powell always "lived under the burden of being known as the second Dorothy Parker"; the comparison was so unsavory to her that, according to friend Jacqueline Miller Rice, "If someone called her another Dorothy Parker, she'd hit them" (Guare, x). To Powell the comparison may have seemed even more belittling because, as Wetzsteon writes, this "stress on her wit reduced her carefully crafted comedies of manners to glib collections of one-liners" (510); further, it exasperated her to think that anyone would believe that there could be but one female at a time writing satire in New York. And the playing field is hardly even for the two women writers who shared the same initials: Parker wrote very little, Powell wrote volumes; one critic says that Powell "out-Parkers Queen Dorothy" at every turn (Salter). And though it may seem that Powell disliked her more famous contemporary, the two were actually quite friendly, often going out together. If Powell objected to being compared to Parker, it was because of the latter's negligible writing production, not because she disliked the woman; in fact, she admired Parker's generosity. In a 1963 letter to her sister Phyllis, Powell wrote, "I used to have some good times with Dorothy Parker who gets too much credit for witty bitchery and not enough for completely reckless philanthropy—saving many people, really without a thought" (*Letters*, 316). Parker, who would die two years after Powell, left her estate to the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Foundation; the funds went to the NAACP following King's assassination in 1968.

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Even though Powell on occasion maintained that what she wrote was not satire but the truth, often with a capital T, she more often did call it satire, as do many of her readers. Attempting to explain why the novelist never achieved the readership or the recognition she should have achieved, Fran Lebowitz, quoted in Ann T. Keene's introduction to Mark Carnes's edition of *Invisible Giants*, says that "satire as meticulous, as adroit, as downright prosecutorial as that of Powell's stands little chance of popularity in any era, regardless of its tastes, so long as its author, and more importantly its victims, draw breath" (230).

Although I have long been a voracious reader, student of literature, and a film and theatre buff, I had never heard of Dawn Powell until a snowy Sunday morning in 2002 when I turned to the Arts section of the *New York Times*. The black-and-white photograph of the interesting-looking woman I saw there, under the headline “More Than a Witty Novelist, She Wrote Plays, Too,” caught my eye.<sup>8</sup> The headline made it clear that the writer, Jonathan Mandell, presupposed that readers already knew Dawn Powell as a novelist. How was it, then, that I had never heard of her? The article provoked me to dig further, to order a collection of the novels, the biography, the letters. Reading her, I knew at once that I had encountered a most remarkable writer—a buried treasure, in fact.

Among Powell fans, an essay widely recognized as responsible for first reviving relatively recent interest in her appeared years before that 2002 *Times* article. In 1987 Gore Vidal’s piece, “Dawn Powell, the American Writer,” was published in the *New York Review of Books*.<sup>9</sup> In it he called Powell “our best comic novelist,” adding that, as he spoke the words, he could almost hear Powell “snarling” that “the field is not exactly overcrowded” (1). It is noteworthy that he called her not our best *woman* comic novelist, but our best comic novelist, period. Vidal, who had known Powell in New York in the 1950s, had admired both the author and her books.<sup>10</sup> On the strength of Vidal’s recommendation, a few of Powell’s fifteen novels—*The Locusts Have No King*, *A Time to Be Born*, and her last, *The Golden Spur*—were reissued in 1989 under the title *Three by Dawn Powell*. The book, though, “quickly slid into remainderdom” (Lingeman 39). In the *Nation*, George Scialabba had this to say of Vidal’s “find”:

Dawn Powell’s novels were all out of print in 1987 when Vidal’s long appreciation in *The New York Review of Books* pronounced her “our best comic novelist.” Her studies of genuine Midwestern dullness and ersatz Manhattan gaiety, rendered with fearless, pungent wit and entirely without sentimentality or euphemism, may have been, as Vidal claimed, “Balzacian” and as good a portrait as we have of mid-twentieth-century America. But in this they were fatally unlike the top ten bestsellers of 1973 or any other year. She died more or less obscure in 1965, and Vidal’s influential revaluation doubtless brought a smile to her long-suffering shade. (n.p.)

Not long afterward, in the early 1990s, Tim Page discovered Powell after reading in Edmund Wilson's 1965 essay collection, *The Bit between My Teeth*, an article called "Dawn Powell: Greenwich Village in the Fifties." Like Page, *Vanity Fair* contributor James Wolcott attributes his initial interest in Powell to that same piece in the same volume, which he had read a short time before the Vidal article appeared. Wilson's essay had originally been published, during Powell's lifetime, in a November 1962 edition of the *New Yorker*, a magazine to which Powell herself had contributed at least seven pieces of short fiction.<sup>11</sup>

"Dawn Powell: Greenwich Village in the Fifties" opened with a question that is still asked today: "Why is it that the novels of Miss Dawn Powell are so much less well known than they deserve to be?" (233). Because most of her works were out of print by the time of Page's discovery of her, it was difficult for him—and for Wolcott—to find copies of them, even though the afore-mentioned handful of paperback reissues had appeared. But still, where were the other thirteen? *Dawn Powell at Her Best*, a hard-cover collection of two of her novels, several short stories, and an essay appeared in 1994, introduced and edited by Page; and the following year, a well-received volume of Powell's diaries, also edited by Page, was issued. By 1996 three of her novels—*Angels on Toast*, *A Time to Be Born*, and *The Wicked Pavilion*—had been published by Vermont's Steerforth Press at Page's urging. Though Page says that *Angels on Toast* is "a weird hybrid of a novel; not really an Ohio novel, not really a New York," (telephone call, March 7, 2013) and though I do agree with him, I place it here with the New York novels because I believe it merits examination alongside the others Powell sets in Manhattan and because scenes in it do take place in New York, characters travel to the city on trains, and the acerbic, satirical wit here is more akin to that of the New York series than the Ohio.

Thanks to Page, other novels followed from Steerforth throughout 2001 until all but three had been reissued: *Whither*, Powell's first novel, which she disclaimed almost immediately upon its 1925 release; *She Walks in Beauty*, published in 1928; and *A Cage for Lovers*, first issued in 1957 (it was reissued in paperback several times). In 1998, Page's biography of Powell—called simply *Dawn Powell: A Biography*—was published, generating much critical acclaim. Gore Vidal, whose words appear on the book's jacket, had this to say: "Tim Page's biography of Dawn Powell is not only a distinguished work in itself but illuminates one of our most brilliant—certainly most witty—novelists, whose literary reputation continues to grow long after her

death: we are catching up to her.” *Publishers Weekly* called it “a meticulously researched, well-written and sympathetic portrayal of Powell’s life.” Following the release of the biography came a volume of diaries and a book of her letters, both edited by Page; a collection of four of her plays soon followed, edited by Page and Michael Sexton. Notably, in 2001 the Library of America published nine of Powell’s novels, selected by Page, in two volumes. Today interest in Powell seems to be climbing again (see “The Dawn Powell Revivals” section of chapter 2, below).