

The Novelist and His Narrator: Anthony Powell and Nicholas Jenkins

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Kobe Yamate Women's Junior College, Japan,
Annual Report; Vol. 36; December 1993; pp77-91

ONE

Anthony Powell's twelve volume novel sequence, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, contains an enormous number of characters and spans a period of fifty years or so in the twentieth century. In a BBC television documentary on Powell (*Arena's Anthony Powell: An Invitation to the Dance*) it was noted that the amount of people the 'average' person knows, both well and by association, in an 'average' life is remarkably similar to the number of figures who people Powell's *Dance*. The novel includes a number of 'real' people in addition to the large cast of fictional creations, and is narrated in the first person by Nicholas Jenkins, through whom Powell conveys his story to the reader. However, Jenkins's story is not the story of his own life, which is seldom in the foreground of events. Through him we discover the details of life among the predominantly upper and upper-middle class collection of characters whose doings dominate the pages of *Dance*. We gain this knowledge of the protagonists by means of the narrator's ruminations from some undefined period in the future. Jenkins's method is to relate events, and through them, character, in the form of gossip and anecdote. Occasionally, he will pause to reflect and draw tentative conclusions along the way, but he is always careful to remind us that his version of events is just one view and may not be final. He is a fallible narrator, whose memory may not always be trusted. Jenkins does, however, try at all times to be fair to the characters in his tale, though his restraint in not overly praising or condemning them; and in not really getting involved, can almost be irritating at times for the reader.

In order to obtain a different perspective he will occasionally use the device of imagining how other

characters also involved in the action might have told the story. This is effectively brought off, for example, when Jenkins imagines how his Uncle Giles would have viewed the two parties that Jenkins attends in the early pages of *A Buyer's Market* had he been present. Later, in *The Military Philosophers*, Jenkins is interested in certain events for the sake of how they can or could be reported.

Anthony Powell's memoirs were published in four separate volumes and later collected as *To Keep the Ball Rolling*. In these pages he narrates his own story but, like Jenkins, he attempts to be modest about his own achievements and we finally learn much more of his friends and acquaintances than we do of the author himself. It is significant that Powell has written a memoir rather than an autobiography, as he is then left free to give us anecdotes of others, fairly randomly, rather than telling a more revealing story of his own personal life. Gorra has remarked, in reviewing the first three volumes of the memoirs, that the books confirm that Powell's sensibility and that given to Nicholas Jenkins are 'virtually indistinguishable'. Both are modest and both are reticent, more interested - in public anyway - in the lives of others than in their own story. Gorra continues:

"The basic facts are of course all there, most of them corresponding to the outline of the life Powell has given to Jenkins: born in 1905, his father an army officer, educated at Eton, then Balliol. *Messengers of Day* covers his life in London after leaving Oxford - working for Duckworth's, the publishers, and then the start of his career as a novelist, with *Afternoon Men* in 1931. *Faces in My Time* begins with his marriage to Lady Violet Pakenham in 1934, and then moves through

the war, ending with his plans for the *Dance*. Beyond that, Powell says little about his writing, except to bemoan attempts at an identification of his friends and relatives with his characters; still less about his emotional life as a young man, except to hint that he had one and that it's not particularly interesting."

It is on the subject of marriage that Powell is most reserved. In another review of *Faces in My Time*, Maddocks says:

"As this most seemly of chronicles begins, Powell, 28, is about to marry Violet Pakenham, 22. An opportunity, surely, for a passing brushfire of emotion, recollected in tranquillity? Not at all. Whatever may be hot or sweet is buried in the cool shade of 13 pages devoted to Violet's family tree ..."

This reserve brings us back to Nicholas Jenkins, as it is very reminiscent of the way in which he acts as the narrator of *Dance*. While acknowledging that it is always dangerous to think too much of real models for fictional creations, McEwan has noted of the memoirs that:

"[They] are full of clues to starting points for the novelist's imagination - or, in his phrase, 'creative fantasy'. The relation between fact and fiction, always problematic, is most interesting in the case of Nicholas Jenkins, narrator of *Dance*, whose career and personality resemble the author's. Powell told an interviewer, 'Nick is a person like myself', and added that 'if you're writing a novel you must have a point of view, and it should be one fairly near your own'."

Powell has also remarked that the novel is intended to be seen through the eyes of someone more or less like himself.

The career pattern followed by Jenkins is very similar to that of the real life author. The unnamed school and university of the first volume, *A Question of Upbringing*, correspond in many ways to Powell's experience at Eton and then at Balliol College, Oxford. Certain of the characters encountered by the young Jenkins, both at school and at university, may have been drawn in part

from Powell's real life experiences. (Sillery, for example, is in some ways similar to the Oxford figure, Maurice Bowra.)

However, Jenkins's life as a child before he embarked upon the activities at school and university of the first volume is described in *Dance* in a flashback chapter at the beginning of the sixth volume, *The Kindly Ones*. An examination of Powell's memoirs reveals that much of the narrator's childhood was drawn from Powell's life, including the haunted bungalow, Stonehurst, and appearance of the cult leader who runs past the gates from time to time with his followers.

Like Jenkins, Powell found rooms in the Shepherd Market area of London on graduating from the university and no doubt took part in many of the parties, dinners, dances and upper class and Bohemian social life of the period so vividly recorded in fictionalized form in the pages of *Dance*. McEwan writes.

"Like Jenkins, he [Powell] frequented dinners and balls in Mayfair and Belgravia, and also 'rackety' but not necessarily low-life goings-on in pubs and restaurants in Soho. The latter included Maxim's Chinese Restaurant in Gerard Street, which resembled Casanova's Chinese Restaurant in *Dance* and Castano's, run by an Italian in Greek Street, the prototype of Foppa's. The Ritz is still the Ritz in the novels, with a bronze nymph like the one Jenkins meditates in *The Acceptance World* - 'although stark naked, the nymph looked immensely respectable' in its palm court. Interaction between the different but overlapping social worlds represented by Belgravia and Soho presented Powell with good comic opportunities, as we see, for example, when Mr. Deacon and Gypsy Jones attend Mrs. Andriadis's party, in *A Buyer's Market*."

Jenkins marries Isobel Tolland - Powell marrying, after a very brief romance, Lady Violet Pakenham, daughter of the 5th Earl of Longford. Many readers and critics have noted the resemblance between the large Tolland family of the novel and the Pakenhams. Powell, always interested in such matters, pursues the Tolland family, its history and connections, somewhat remorselessly in *Dance*.

Jenkins enters employment with a firm of publishers involved in art books, while Powell's own experience of publishing came with the firm of Duckworths. Later, they are both engaged on work as scriptwriters with film companies, though in Powell's case this took him further afield than his narrator creation, as he went to Hollywood for a time, where, among others, he met F. Scott Fitzgerald. During the war, both Jenkins and Powell become officers in the army, both serving a period in Northern Ireland, and both ending up in Military Intelligence. At the end of the war, Jenkins goes back to his old university to do some research for a book that he is writing about Robert Burton, the author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, a passage from which ends the entire *Dance* sequence. By this time, Jenkins - like Powell - has published a number of novels, but this is his first attempt at a non-fiction work. Eventually it is published, in 1947, as *Borage and Hellebore*. Interestingly, Powell also followed a similar path to his narrator here, though in his case, the book he wrote and which was published in 1948 was *John Aubrey and His Friends*, a study of the seventeenth century biographer and antiquarian. The following year Powell published an edition of Aubrey's *Brief Lives*.

Throughout this time we learn very little of Jenkins's personal life, but it is revealed that - again like Powell - he has two sons, the second being born in 1946. Later in life, Jenkins moves to the country, where his final reflections on life take place. Powell himself moved to Somerset in 1952.

If Jenkins's career is very much shaped by Powell's own fortunes, much of the personality and characteristics of the narrator seem also to be drawn from the author's own attitudes and disposition. These could be said to include such things as modesty and reserve, love of gossip and anecdote, general detachment, and an interest in literature and writing.

Both Jenkins, in *Dance*, and Powell, in his memoirs and other writings, show comparatively little of their feelings and are anxious to present a modest front while at the same time not being by any means devoid of a point of view. Gorra sees the modesty of Anthony Powell as simply 'the attitude Powell has found essential to the production of his fiction, something more than a pose yet less than the truth'.

The modesty in Jenkins, however, can on occasion come across as a prim or even priggish attitude (such as his surprise, perhaps disapproval, when, in *The Acceptance World*, the door is opened to him by a naked Jean).

It has been mentioned earlier that Powell's memoirs are rather reticent concerning the details of his marriage. Similarly, the narrator of *Dance* is unable to give us very much information concerning the details of his own personal life with Isobel, and it is his affair with his former lover, Jean, which is described in considerably more detail. Jenkins is given a lengthy passage of reflection in which he explains his reasons for the almost complete absence of detail of his relations with Isobel:

"A future marriage, or a past one, may be investigated and explained in terms of writing by one of its parties, but 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 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 marriage is almost equally hard to achieve with so much information available, so little to be believed. Objectivity is not, of course, everything in writing; but if one has cast objectivity aside, the difficulties of presenting marriage are inordinate. Its forms are at once so varied, yet so constant, providing a kaleidoscope, the colours of which are always changing, always the same. The moods of a love affair, the contradictions of friendship, the jealousy of business partners, the fellow feeling of opposed commanders in total war, these are all in their way to be charted. Marriage, partaking of such - and a thousand more - dual antagonisms and participations, finally defies definition." (CCR p.96)

If Jenkins is reluctant to tell us of his own personal details, he is more than happy to relate stories of others throughout *Dance* and this method of anecdote becomes one of the main features of the novel. Jenkins acknowledges his interest in others

when he says:

“For my own part, I always enjoy hearing the details of other people’s lives, whether imaginary or not ...” (LM p.211)

Likewise, the memoirs are full of stories of other people, Powell having seemingly met all of his major literary contemporaries. Jenkins and Powell are both, adept at telling their stories in this form - Jenkins perhaps even more successfully, or at least entertainingly - owing to the many odd characters created for *Dance*.

Although Jenkins is interested in gossip, he always tries to retain a sense of detachment, or objectivity, from the passions of the figures around him and events he describes. He is essentially an observer of life. McEwan says that Powell, the author, is neither cynical nor sentimental:

“His fiction plies a humanist belief in the art of living, disciplined and relaxed, sustained by the arts, and by humour, tolerantly sceptical about ultimate questions. There are places, however, where he finds the human disposition to believe amusing in itself, and where some generally sympathetic readers are disturbed by the degree of detachment in his humour.”

Both author and narrator are suspicious of passionate involvement and Tucker sees Jenkins as the eternal onlooker:

“If we look to Nicholas to tell us anything at the end of this sequence it is this: keep calm, keep steady, keep individual, that above all. Hear the secret harmonies if you can; listen to the music of time and observe the dancers. That will do. Otherwise we should cultivate our garden.”

Despite the detachment of the narrator, he is ready to poke fun at almost any of the characters in *Dance* if he feels they warrant it. However, it is the political left-wingers who may have most to complain about, as they seem to come out worst. Jenkins reserves much of his thinly-veiled derision for the likes of Quiggin and Erridge and other leftists. Where mysticism and the occult are treated in a jocular way, but also on occasion seen as

rather unsettling, we search in vain for any acknowledgment that the socialists should be regarded with anything other than slightly surprised amusement. Jenkins may be detached, but he appears to be more detached about some things than others. In Powell’s own memoirs and, especially, his critical writings, while having too much good taste presumably to offend, it is nevertheless apparent to the careful reader that Powell’s attitude is not far removed from that of his narrator in *Dance*. Nevertheless Powell is always more interested in character and in literature itself, and is too civilized to allow political differences to affect him unduly. And so we see from the memoirs that he remained a good friend of George Orwell (a possible source for much of the character of Erridge) despite their obvious differences in political outlook.

Literature and writing are things taken very seriously by both Jenkins and Powell. The references to literary works are numerous in *Dance*, so much so that a whole section is devoted to a book index in Hilary Spurling’s handbook to the sequence. Jenkins is extremely well-read and frequently mentions writers, both ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ in his reflections. The matter of taste is paramount (St. John Clarke, for example, is a ‘bad’ writer, according to Jenkins). In his memoirs, Powell also reveals his reading habits and McEwan says:

“The variety of these authors, and the comments, show the place subject-matter has in Powell’s interest: the planning and the writing come first. He is, none the less, a humanist as well as a formalist and stylist, in reading tastes and in his own novels. His belief that human nature remains the same, whether observed by Petronius in the first century or by Dostoevsky in the nineteenth, might be called classical. It is not the sort of classicism which holds that everything has been said already, however, since Powell finds human nature and behaviour infinitely fascinating.”

Since the completion of the memoirs, Powell has also had published two collections of his own reviews and critical pieces, *Miscellaneous Verdicts* and *Under Review*. Stephen Spender, in writing of the second of these books, says that what interested

him most was:

“... the character of Anthony Powell himself, which, even if dimly at times, shines through all. As one reads on, the amiable and attractive host of these rambles comes to resemble some clipped-spoken military gentleman who happens to be exceptionally well read, and who brings to bear on the objects of his perusal many of the attitudes and prejudices of the Officers’ Mess.”

TWO

The narration of *Dance* begins in *A Question of Upbringing* with an interesting ‘framing’ device. Our narrator commences his story with a detailed description of workmen at the corner of a street in winter. They are warming themselves around a burning bucket of coke in late afternoon. As they do so, snow gently begins to fall. The falling snow leads the narrator to think of the ancient world and he is reminded of ‘legionaries in sheepskin warming themselves at a brazier’. These thoughts of the ancient world in turn provoke thoughts of an unnamed painting by Nicolas Poussin ‘in which the Seasons, hand in hand and facing outward, tread in rhythm to the notes of the lyre that the winged and naked greybeard plays’. Clearly, this refers to Poussin’s *A Dance to the Music of Time* from which the sequence takes its name.

The classical associations invoked by the narrator make him think then of his schooldays and there follows description of the school and its surroundings in winter. The writing is leisurely and sedate, the sentences long and complex:

“As winter advanced in that river valley, mist used to rise in late afternoon and spread over the flooded grass; until the house and all the outskirts of the town were enveloped in opaque, chilly vapour, tinted like cigar-smoke. The house looked on to other tenement-like structures, experiments in architectural insignificance- that intruded upon a central concentration of buildings, commanding and antiquated, laid out in a quadrilateral, though irregular, style. Silted-up residues of the years smouldered uninterruptedly - and not without melancholy

- in the maroon brickwork of these medieval closes: beyond the cobbles and archways of which (in a more northerly direction) memory also brooded, no less enigmatic and inconsolable, among water-meadows and avenues of trees: the sombre demands of the past becoming at times almost suffocating in their insistence.” (QU pp.6-7)

The tone is set for Nicholas Jenkins’s long story, beginning in the year 1921 and concluding some fifty years later. It is only after this lengthy introduction that we then begin the story proper as we are first told of Widmerpool, then a schoolboy in the habit of going for a daily run by himself. He appears to Jenkins jogging back to school though the drizzle of a bleak December afternoon.

Jenkins is clearly not a narrator to be hurried. The rules of his narration are evident in these opening paragraphs and he will allow his mind to wander freely wherever it takes him. Impressions may lead him to unexpected by-ways, and associations have already led him, in these early stages, through some changes reminiscent of Proust. There is, however, a very definite and well-crafted structure to his narrative as subsequent reading will reveal. McEwan puts it thus:

“It is clear that Jenkins’s account of his life will have design, but no plot of the kind Pip relates, for example, in *Great Expectations*. It is also clear that a major part of the design will belong to the narrator’s commentary, a feature of older fiction largely excluded from the prewar novels and here boldly reinstated and enlarged. Anecdotes are mingled with ‘scenes’ of luncheons, parties, outings, as in *Afternoon Men*, but here they are surrounded and interspersed by Jenkins’s brooding reflections, by his ample quotations, and by imagery done with a stately assurance. One contrast with older fiction is obvious: where Victorian narrators, even in the first person, tended to be omniscient, Jenkins is often puzzled, both about exactly what happened and about how to interpret. But he is completely in charge of his own story, digressing, interrupting himself, changing the subject, with no fussy Victorian apologies to the reader.”

The final volume of *Dance*, published some twenty-four years later, is '*Hearing Secret Harmonies*', and in the last chapter of this final volume Jenkins frames his saga in a way which recalls the opening scenes.

Chapter Seven begins in the autumn of 1971 with colder weather imminent. Jenkins lights a bonfire in his garden and in doing so discovers that the newspaper he is using to start the fire contains an article on the Bosworth Deacon centenary show at a new London art gallery. His thoughts turn to Mr. Deacon - now enjoying a measure of posthumous success as an artist - and to the narrator's recent visit to the exhibition. The details of this visit - including the re-appearance at the gallery of his old lover Jean - are related. At the gallery, run by Barnabus Henderson, Jenkins first learns of the death of Widmerpool. Again this is not seen directly by the narrator but is heard of through the drunken ramblings of Bithel. Widmerpool, first encountered in the sequence running on a cold late afternoon fifty years previously, has died on a run with Scorpio Murtlock's cult. He was naked and defying 'harmony' by attempting to run faster than the rest. The manner of his end provides a clear symmetry with our first view of him. Similarly, as Jenkins leaves the gallery, and as Widmerpool's death draws this long story to a close, the very first page of *A Question of Upbringing* is echoed:

"We said goodbye; Henderson was right about the temperature dropping. It was getting dark outside, and much colder. A snowflake fell. At first that seemed a chance descent. Now others followed in a leisurely way. The men taking up the road in front of the gallery were preparing to knock off work. Some of them were gathering round their fire-bucket." (HSH p.251)

But the framing of the sequence does not end there. Jenkins concludes back at his own bonfire. Here the smell of the smoke mingling with odours from the nearby quarry makes him think of 'the workmen's bucket of glowing coke, burning outside their shelter'. This also reminds the reader of the workmen 'gathered round the bucket of coke that burned in front of the shelter' in the first page of the first volume. After a lengthy quote from a torrential passage in Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Jenkins ends with the sound from the

quarry becoming 'infinitely remote' and finally ceasing, more classical allusions, and the Seasons 'suspended in the wintry silence'. The silence following the 'long drawn wail of a hooter' shares something with the painter de Chirico's vision of smoke arising from distant trains in the abandoned classical landscapes of late afternoon. For a writer sometimes said to be lacking warmth, this ending is both an effective and affecting passage. To bring off such effects, and to sustain our interest throughout such a mammoth sequence, is a considerable achievement. Powell has admitted that in planning the novel sequence he left some ends open while others were more rigidly decided upon at an early stage during the almost quarter century of writing. Bayley adds:

"If *A Dance to the Music of Time* shows one thing, it is how completely in charge of his design and apparatus is the author; beside him, most modern novelists seem either unable to get their material in hand, or too labourious in their would-be mastery of it."

If the range of techniques, or devices, in the telling of *Dance* is impressive, one of the most typical is the idea of 'slow motion'. Hall, among others, has noted this technique and says that Powell excels at these slow motion scenes. McEwan also remarks on Powell's use of the leisurely and mannered voice of Jenkins. The narrator will describe a person or event in long complex sentences, often using and developing lengthy similes. We are given the impression of something frozen in time and examined in detail, as, for example, when Jenkins describes his first meeting with Ted Jeavons in *At Lady Molly's*:

"Like one of those mammoths - or, in Jeavons's case, somewhat less gigantic form of primeval life - caught in a glacier and physically preserved into an age when his very kind was known only from fossilised bones, or drawings on the walls of subterranean caves, he somehow managed to look just as he must have looked in 1917: hardly a day older. Perhaps a better simile to indicate the effect of remoteness he gave, standing there with a vacant-expression and both hands in his pockets, would be that of some rare insect enclosed in amber." (LM p.25)

But it is in the scenes of action - often very comic action - where the slow motion device is perhaps used to its fullest effect. This is displayed right from the beginning of *Dance* and we see a good example of it in the second chapter of *A Question of Upbringing* when Jenkins observes the trick which Jimmy Stripling attempts to play on Sunny Farebrother in substituting a green chamber pot for the top hat in Farebrother's leather hat box. As Jenkins, and possibly other guests at the Templers' house, secretly watch, Farebrother unexpectedly emerges from his room just at the moment Stripling is advancing with the chamber pot. Caught in the act, as it were, Stripling has little alternative but to continue his march along the passage, passing Farebrother with the pot raised by his hands high in front of him 'as if it were a sacrificial urn':

"Sunny Farebrother watched him go but did not speak a word. If he were surprised, he did not show it beyond raising his eyebrows a little, in any case a fairly frequent facial movement of his. Stripling, on the other hand, had contorted his features in such a manner that he looked not so much angry, or thwarted, as in acute physical pain. When he strode past me, I could see the sweat shining on his forehead, and at the roots of his rather curly hair." (QU p.98)

Farebrother, after gazing at Stripling with a hurt or worried look, then returns to his room and quietly closes the door. The whole incident of the attempted practical joke must have taken only a few seconds of 'real' time but is described here in considerable detail. The treatment of such a trivial incident in this analytic way tends to heighten the comedy - Stripling's face, Farebrother's puzzled air, the simile of the chamber pot being a sacrificial urn in some strange ceremony.

Probably the best-known example of slow motion action comedy in the whole sequence occurs in the second volume, *A Buyer's Market*, when Widmerpool, at the Huntercombe's ball, has sugar poured over his head by the object of his affections, Barbara Goring. This incident helps to cure Jenkins of his own infatuation for Barbara, while Widmerpool himself determines never to see her again.

The entire incident of the sugar takes up about six pages of Chapter One. Widmerpool, fearing that Barbara will be lost to him for the rest of the evening if he lets her go to the supper-room, grabs her by the wrist. Barbara, misunderstanding the strength of Widmerpool's feelings, asks him half-jokingly, "Why are you so sour tonight? You need some sweetening." She then picks up a large sugar castor and playfully holds it over his head. The top falls accidentally from the castor and Widmerpool is showered with the sugar. The accident is described by Jenkins:

"Barbara now tipped the castor so that it was poised vertically over Widmerpool's head, holding it there like the sword of Damocles above the tyrant. However, unlike the merely minatory quiescence of that normally inactive weapon, a state of dispensation was not in this case maintained, and suddenly, without the slightest warning, the massive silver apex of the castor dropped from its base, as if severed by the slash of some invisible machinery, and crashed heavily to the floor; the sugar pouring out on to Widmerpool's head in a dense and overwhelming cascade." (BM p.77)

Widmerpool, now covered with sugar, had 'the appearance of having turned white with shock':

"... underneath the glittering encrustations that enveloped his head and shoulders. He had writhed sideways to avoid the downpour, and a cataract of sugar had entered the space between neck and collar; yet another jet streaming between eyes and spectacles." (BM p.78)

Hall, writing of Powell's slow motion technique, remarks in an aside:

"When I first read Powell, I thought a successful novel could not be written in sentences like these, but presently the style seemed so accurate a projector for the slow motion re-run of the past that I no longer noticed it at all."

Widmerpool, displaying something of a taste for humiliation, is similarly attacked by student demonstrators, in *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, and is splattered with red paint while being installed as

chancellor of a new university. This incident, while not as lengthily described as the sugar one, is also relayed through a similar device. On this occasion, Jenkins is telling us information that he received by watching the item on a television news programme, thus adding to the distancing effect. We are also reminded that Widmerpool's humiliations began in the very first volume when he is accidentally struck in the face with a ripe banana thrown by the captain of the school cricket team. On that occasion a 'slavish' look came over Widmerpool. Much later, when relating the events surrounding his death, Bithel says of Widmerpool that he had 'never known such a man for penances'.

Widmerpool's greatest act of penance is not, however, one given to him by Scorpio Murtlock, but occurs quite voluntarily when he tries to apologize to his former victim at school, now Sir Bertram Akworth, during the ceremony for the wedding of Akworth's granddaughter. Again events, which must have taken only a few seconds to enact, are slowed down and described to the reader in some detail, with reflections from the narrator as to what Widmerpool might have been up to. Jenkins, not being an all-seeing, all-knowing narrator, remarks of Widmerpool's grovelling on the ground in front of Akworth:

"I should myself have been completely at a loss to know what Widmerpool was at, if he had not expressed only a short time before his intention of making some sort of apology about what had happened at school. Even so, when Widmerpool went down on all fours in utter self-abasement, I supposed at first that he was searching for something he had dropped on the floor. That was almost certainly the explanation that offered itself to those standing round about who witnessed the scene at close quarters." (HSH p.212)

In effect, all that happens in this scene, lasting almost four pages, is that Widmerpool calls out to Akworth and prostrates himself in front of him, the bride and bridegroom then re-appear and after a brief commotion of a few seconds, the group disperses. Widmerpool has disappeared, unable to do penance.

The narrator treats another brief incident in a similar way when describing the arrest of Bithel for

kissing an 'Other Rank' during *The Valley of Bones*, the seventh volume, set in wartime. The drunken Bithel's brief action is described by Jenkins:

"Bithel rose to his feet. Afterwards, I was never certain what happened. I was sitting on the same side as Bithel and, as he turned away, his back was towards me. He lurched suddenly forward. This may have been a stumble, since some of the floorboards were loose at that place. The amount he had drunk did not necessarily have anything to do with Bithel's sudden loss of balance.

Alternatively, his action could have been deliberate, intended as a physical appeal to Emmot's better feelings. Bithel's wheedling tone of voice a minute before certainly gave colour to that interpretation. If so, I am sure Bithel intended no more than to rest his hand on Emmot's shoulder in a facetious gesture, perhaps grip his arm. Such actions might have been thought undignified, bad for discipline, no worse. However, for one reason or another, Bithel lunged his body forward, and, either to save himself from falling, or to give emphasis to his request for a last drink, threw his arms round Emmot's neck. There, for a split second, he hung. There could be no doubt about the awkward impression this posture conveyed. It looked exactly as if Bithel were kissing Emmot - in farewell, rather than in passion. Perhaps he was. Whether or not that were so, Emmot dropped the tray, breaking a couple of glasses, at the same time letting out a discordant sound. Gwatkin jumped to his feet. His face was white. He was trembling with rage. 'Mr. Bithel', he said, 'consider yourself under arrest.'" (VB p.213)

In this scene, the long, complex, sometimes overburdened sentences of some other examples are less evident. Jenkins continually reminds us, however, that his version of events may not be perfect and he is merely gathering and presenting the evidence to draw out possible conclusions on what might be the 'truth'. 'Afterwards', he says, 'I was never certain what happened'. After Bithel's sudden lurch forward the action stops and Jenkins intrudes once more to speculate. Was Bithel's motion a stumble or was it deliberate? Jenkins does

not know, but then if it had been a deliberate move on Bithel's part the narrator feels even then not absolutely certain whether he intended to rest his hand on Emmot or to grab his arm. Both possibilities are admitted. The action then recommences as Bithel now lunges forward, but is immediately stopped once more while Jenkins considers whether the lunge was to save himself from falling, or, alternatively, to request a last drink more emphatically. At last we reach the crucial moment as Bithel 'kisses' Emmot - an action taking only a split second of time. Even here Jenkins stops again to offer the comment that 'it looked' as if Bithel were kissing Emmot. We are never sure. Jenkins commits himself only so far as to add, 'perhaps he was'.

In many of these scenes, which have been called slow motion, the narrator tells an anecdote of some frequently amusing or surprising event in the lives of others, and slows or temporarily halts the unfolding of the action to add speculation or reflection. This frozen action recollected and recorded in the stately prose of Jenkins juxtaposes the action against sober analysis and the effect is often, though not always, comic. Like Sunny Farebrother earlier, Jenkins, as more than one commentator has mentioned, seems to be looking at life with slightly raised eyebrows.

Other scenes in *Dance* where action is treated in this way are frequent. In *The Kindly Ones*, the neurotic maid, Billson, makes a sensational naked appearance in the drawing room to hand in her notice. The visiting General Conyers takes masterful command of the situation, draping a shawl around her and leading her to her room. Jenkins's mother thought it was 'the end of the world'. However, the whole scene, both terrifying and amusing, takes up five pages of the book - the 'real' event perhaps a minute or so; interspersed as it is with recollections and reflections from the narrator. Powell has continued to use this method in later work. For example, in the 1986 novel *The Fisher King* one short chapter is given up to an incident in which the main character, the disabled photographer Saul Henchman, slips and has to be saved from falling off his stool at the bar.

For Anthony Powell the novelist - and for Nicholas Jenkins his narrator - life is, as Hall says:

"... a series of small shocks to be met with slightly raised eyebrows and the instantaneous question of how it all fits."

THREE

It has been demonstrated that Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time* is very much a work in which the narrator is a creation of the author and Jenkins's life is largely based on that of Anthony Powell himself. This, however, does not mean that Powell has simply written an autobiographical novel with himself as narrator and other characters taken from his memoirs and pushed into the *Dance*. Good literature is not like this and the 'creative fantasy' of Powell is of a much higher order. In the BBC television documentary mentioned at the beginning of this article, Powell recalls an occasion when he spoke at a literary conference on the topic of novel writing. Speaking ironically, he told his audience that it is, of course, well-known that novelists have no imagination at all - they simply take some of their family and friends, mix them up a bit and put them into their novels. Powell was horrified to discover the next day that these comments had been reported by the media as his views on the novel! The reader must also be careful not to confuse Powell's life with his art simply because of the parallels in *Dance*. Rather, what *Dance* does show is that Powell has written about what he knows best. Also, that his life, and to some extent, his personality, resemble those of his narrator.

That Anthony Powell is somewhat reluctant to speak in detail of his personal life is rather fortunate, in a way, as this is a useful characteristic for his narrator - his story is of other people. In *Dance* we learn nothing of Jenkins's marriage outside the bare facts. His reasons for this have been explained and are perhaps necessary for the very special kind of fiction that this is, though, on the other hand, the reader cannot help feeling cheated that we learn so little.

Jenkins's method is gossip, anecdote, snatches of dialogue, reflection, and occasionally, scenes described through the eyes of other characters. The large set pieces - funerals, weddings, parties - are especially suited to Jenkins's style and we have seen how he has developed his own way of

analysing characters and action scene by slowing things down and musing on them while they are still in progress. He can use short sentences well and his ear for dialogue can capture succinctly the essence of his characters' personalities. However, the language use, as we have seen here, is frequently complex, involving elaborate similes and metaphors. References to classical art and literature are particularly rife and the reader is expected to be almost as well-read as Jenkins (and Powell) himself. We can also see that although Jenkins is a fallible narrator; he is also a narrator we can trust to tell the truth as he sees it.

In such a short space here it is possible only to elucidate a very few examples of some of the methods used in the books. The whole sequence is framed in a symmetrical way, and repetition and the re-occurrence of events in new forms add force to Anthony Powell's conjecture that life is a dance in which the partners, sometimes uncertain of the steps, meet, part, and re-appear in ever-changing patterns. It is a dance that since its completion in 1975 has steadily gained more devotees. Anthony Powell's work seems to get better with each re-reading and it may be that *A Dance to the Music of Time* will take its place as one of the great British literary achievements of the twentieth century.

Note

Abbreviations are as follows:

QU	<i>A Question of Upbringing</i>
BM	<i>A Buyer's Market</i>
LM	<i>At Lady Molly's</i>
CCR	<i>Casanova's Chinese Restaurant</i>
VB	<i>The Valley of Bones</i>
HSH	<i>Hearing Secret Harmonies</i>

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