From a Different Perspective: The Narrator's Changing Viewpoint in Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*

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When reading a novel written in the first-person narrative form, we generally assume that the narrator begins to tell his story at some point after the action of that story has been completed. Put another way, the entire story exists in the narrator's mind before he begins to put words down on paper. When Herman Melville's narrator begins to tell the story *Moby Dick,* he has already survived the wreck of the Pequod. When Huckleberry Finn begins to narrate Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn,* he has already returned from his trip down the Mississippi. And when Nick Carraway begins to narrate F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* he has already attended Gatsby's funeral.

At a first reading, it appears that Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time* proceeds in the same fashion as the novels mentioned above. In the opening pages of *A Question of Upbring,* the first volume, Powell's narrator, Nicholas Jenkins, describes a group of men working on a road. The men gather around a fire to get warm. The sight of these men recalls to Jenkins's mind "days at school,where so many forces, hitherto unfamiliar, had become in due course uncompromisingly clear."[1] Jenkins then begins to talk about his days at school, where he first met Peter Templer, Charles Stringham, and Kenneth Widmerpool.

Near the end of "Dance," Jenkins visits the Barnabas Henderson Gallery to inspect some paintings done by his deceased friend, Edgar Deacon. At the gallery, Jenkins sees his former mistress, Jean Duport for (presumably) the last time (*Hearing Secret Harmonies,* 253–57) and hears of the death of his longtime acquaintance, Kenneth Widmerpool (*Hearing Secret Harmonies,* 265–71). As Jenkins leaves the gallery, he sees a group of workmen gathering around a fire (*Hearing Secret Harmonies,* 271).

Struck by the pictures of men gathered around a fire that appears at the beginning of the first volume of "Dance" and near the end of the last volume, it is easy for the reader to conclude that the two groups of workmen are the same. Indeed,Henry R. Harrington argues that this is the case.

In Harrington's view, Jenkins walks out of the Barnabas Henderson Gallery bemused by what he has experienced inside—seeing his former mistress and hearing about the death of a man whose life has been inextricably linked with Jenkins's own ever since they were both teenagers. As he thinks about these things, Jenkins sees the group

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of men gathered around their fire. The sight, through a series of associations, leads Jenkins to recall his days as a schoolboy—the days when he first met Jean Duport and Kenneth Widmerpool. And thinking about those days prompts Jenkins to begin telling the story that becomes Powell's "Dance."[2]

Harrington's argument is a plausible one. However, it overlooks a problem that becomes apparent when we juxtapose the opening to *A Buyer's Market* (the second volume of "Dance") and Jenkins's comments in *Hearing Secret Harmonies* about the card he receives announcing the showing of Mr. Deacon's works at the Barnabas Henderson Gallery.

Powell opens *A Buyer's Market* by having Jenkins say, "The last time I saw any examples of Mr. Deacon's work was at a sale, held obscurely in the neighborhood of Euston Road, many years after his death" (*A Buyer's Market,* 1). The meaning of the passage is clear : *at the moment thet Jenkins writes these words* he has not seen any of Mr. Deacon's works since the time of the sale that he mentions.

In *Hearing Secret Harmonies,* Jenkins makes the following comments about the card he receives announcing the showing of Mr. Deacon's works at the Barnabas Henderson Gallery :

> Certainly the notice marked how far tastes had altered since the period—just after the war—when I had watched four Deacons knocked down for a few pounds in a shabby saleroom between Euston Road and Camden Town. At the time, I had supposed those to be the last Deacons I should ever set eyes on. (*Hearing Secret Harmonies,* 246)

When we observe that, in *A Buyer's Market,* Jenkins mentions that a group of four paintings by Mr. Deacon was "knocked down for a few pounds only" (*A Buyer's Market,* 3), it becomes obvious that the auction described in *A Buyer's Market* and the one recalled in *Hearing Secret Harmonies* are the same.

If we follow Harrington in assuming that Jenkins begins to tell his story after all of the action of that story has been completed ,then we must conclude that the passage from *A Buyer's Market* and the one from *Hearing Secret Hermonies* contradict each other. It makes no sense for Jenkins to say that he saw Mr. Deacon's paintings for the last time at the auction in the vicinity of Euston Road if he already knows about the showing of Mr. Deacon's paintings at the Barnabas Henderson Gallery.

Alternatively, we can develop a hypothesis that departs from Harrington's. Instead of assuming that Jenkins begins to tell his story after all of the action of the story has been completed, we can hypothesize that Jenkins tells his story in at least two segments—finishing at least one segment before he has witnessed the events described in the final segment. It we adopt such a hypothesis, we can resolve the apparent contradiction between the passage from *A Buyer's Market* and the one from *Hearing Secret Harmonies.* If Jenking narrates *A Buyer's Market* before he witnesses the events described in *Hearing Secret Harmonies,* then it *is* true that, at the time he narrates *A Buyer's Market,* he has not seen any of Mr. Deacon's paintings since the auction in

the vicinity of Euston Road.

Viewing Jenkins as beginning to tell his story before he knows how that story will end does more than simply resolving the apparent contradiction between the passages from *A Buyer's Market* and *Hearing Secret Harmonies.* It also focuses our attention on Jenkings in his role as *narrator of the story.* Viewed in this fashion, "Dance" is still Jenkins's account of those events that take place from the time that Jenkins sees Widmerpool running through the mists (*A Question of Upbringing,* 4) to the time that he hears the news of Widmerpool's death (*Hearing Secret Harmonies,* 265–71). But it also becomes much more. It becomes the story of how Jenkins, as narrator, moves from the moment where the sight of men gathering around a fire leads him to think of "human beings, facing outward like the Seasons, moving hand in hand in intricate measure" (*A Question of Upbringing,* 2) to the moment when, tending his own bonfire, he concludes that "Even the formal measure of the Seasons seemed suspended in the wintry silence" (*Hearing Secret Harmonies,* 272). "Dance" is still, as Kerry Mcsweeney suggests[3], related to William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* as a panoramic view of the foibles of a considerable segment of human society. But it also becomes, like Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier* and Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandrian Quartet,* the story of one man's (in this case, Nicholas Jenkins's) attempt to make sense out of a world toward which his perspective must continually shift as new information continually becomes available to him.

A number of critics have noticed a contrast between the tightly-knit structure of the first three volumes of "Dance" and the increasingly looser structures of the subsequent volumes. Bernard Bergonzi, writing after the first nine volumes had been published, questioned the appropriateness of the dance image for the work as a whole, noting that, as the work progresses, the "dance is less elaborate and assured, and the surviving dancers are becoming visibly older and infirmer."[4] Robert Towers, writing after the final volumes of "Dance" had been published, echoed Bergonzi's views, adding that "harmony has everywhere been replaced by strident discord.[5] And Kerry McSweeney, noticing both the description of Poussin's Painting of the Seasons dancing to the music of Time that appears at the beginning of "Dance" and the quotation from Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* that appears in the next to the last paragraph of the final volume, suggests the following:

> The crucial positioning of the antithetical emblems... suggests that the basic organizing principle of *A Dance to the Music of Time* is the alternation of "now comical then tragical matters" (to use Burton's words), the counterpoint between a comedy of manners presentation of a large chunk of Vanity Fair and a more somber version of human life seen under the aspect of transience and mortality, against the force of which no transcendence through love, memory, moral rectitude or supernatural belief is possible.[6]

McSweeney is right to emphasize the importance of both emblems: the Poussin painting and the quotation from Burton. However, I think he is inaccurate in suggesting

that the novel *alternates* between the two. Rather, Jenkins's description of Poussin's painting and Jenkins's thoughts about "human beings, facing outward like the Seasons, moving hand in hand in intricate measure" reflect Jenkins's perceptions about the human condition *at the time that he begins to tell his story.* The quotation from Burton reflects Jenkins's perceptions about the human condition *at the time that he finishes telling his story.* Looked at in this way, "Dance" becomes the story of how Jenkins moves from the point where he sees life as having the order associated with a dance to the point where he sees life as having the chaotic, random nature associated with the quotation from Burton:

> 'I hear new news every day, and those ordinary rumours of war, plagues, fires, inundations, thefts, murders, massacres, meteors, comets, spectrums, prodigies, apparitions... which these tempestuous times afford... Today we hear of new Lords and officers created, to-morrow of some great men deposed, and then again of fresh honours conferred; one is let loose, another imprisoned, one purchaseth, another breaketh; he thrives, his neighbor turns bankrupt; now plenty, then again dearth and famine; one runs, another rides, wrangles, laughs, weeps, &c.' (*Hearing Secret Harmonies,* 271–72)

Earlier I suggested that Jenkins tells his story in at least two segments, narrating at least the first two volumes (*A* Question of Upbringing and *A Buyer's Market*) *before* he has witnessed the events described in the final volume (*Hearing* Secret Harmonies). We can go further and suggest the following chronology for Jenkins's writing of those memoirs that become *Dance:*

(1). Jenkins sees the men working on the road and thinks about Poussin's painting of the Seasons dancing to the music of Time. Jenkins thoughts prompt him to tell the story that constitutes the first three volumes of "Dance" (*A* Question of Upbringing, A Buyer's Market, and *The Acceptance World*) *and possibly the fourth (At Lady Molly's).*

(2). Jenkins hears a woman singing near a bombed-out pub that Jenkins and his now deceased friend, Hugh Moreland, had frequented in the past (Casanova's Chinese Restaurant, 1–2). Hearing the woman sing leads Jenkins to think about his friendship with Moreland and thinking about that friendship leads Jenkins to write *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* plus an indeterminate number of the subsequent volumes of "Dance."

The incident discussed immediately above takes place at some point after the events described in the eleventh volume of "Dance," *Temporary Kings,* in which Jenkins sees Hugh Moreland for the last time (*Temporary* Kings, 276). However, it almost certainly takes place *before* the events described in the final volume (*Hearing* Secret Harmonies takes place in the period from 1968 through 1971; Jenkins would hear a woman singing near a bombed-out pub at some point before the post-war reconstruction of London, i.e., no later than the early 1960's).

(3). Jenkins writes that part of his memoirs that begins at or before the beginning of *Hearing Secret Harmonies* and ends before the beginning of the final section of that

volume (*Hearing* Secret Harmonies, 243−72). At this point he has lived through everything except for the incidents described in that final section of the final volume.

(4). Jenkins lights a bonfire with kindling that includes a newspaper giving an account of the exhibition of Mr. Deacon's paintings at the Barnabas Henderson Gallery (*Hearing* Secret Harmonies, 243−44). The sight of the article prompts him to think about what took place at the gallery and to put his thoughts down on paper.

At stage I above, Jenkins certainly has not lived through the events described in *Hearing Secret Harmonies* and probably has not lived through the events described in *Temporary Kings*. He certainly has no intention of carrying his narrative forward beyond the fourth volume, *At Lady Molly's*, and quite possibly has no intention of carrying it forward past the third volume, *The Acceptance World*. The events he describes do bear a resemblance to a ritual dance in which "partners disappear only to reappear again,once more giving pattern to the spectacle" (*A* Question of Upbringing, 2). All four of the principal male characters—Jenkins, Widmerpool, Charles Stringham, and Peter Templer—go to school together as boys (*A* Question of Upbringing, 2−51), and all four are together again as adults at the Old Boys's dinner given for their schoolmaster, Lebas (*The* Accptance World, 175−209). Gypsy Jones, the woman who introduces Jenkins to the world of sex (*A* Buyer's Market, 254−60), apparently performs the same service for Widmerpool (*A* Buyer's Market, 168−69). Jenkins's one serious love affair before he gets married is with Peter Templer's married sistsr, Jean, who is separated from her husband, Bob Duport (*The* Acceptance World, 54−214). And Kenneth Widmerpool is the one who swings a business deal enabling Bob Duport to return to England and become reunited with Jean—ending Jenkins' affair with her (*The* Acceptance World, 175). Given the events that transpire in the first three volumes, it is entirely appropriate that Jenkins can describe them in terms of "ritual" and "dance." Thus, his description of the seduction scene with Gypsy Jones:

> At least such protests as she put forward were of so formal and artificial an order that they increased, rather than diminished,the impression that a long-established rite was being enacted. (*A* Buyer's Market, 256)

And Jenkins's description of the chance meeting with Peter Templer and Jean Duport that sets the stage for Jankins's affair with the latter:

> Afterward, that dinner in the Grill seemed to partake of the nature of a ritualistic feast, a rite from which the four of us [Jenkins, Jean Duport, Peter Templer's wife, Mona] emerged to take up new positions in the formal dance with which human life is concerned. (*The* Acceptance Worid,63)

I have already suggested that Jenkins writes *Casanova's Chinese Restuarant* and the subsequent volumes of "Dance" *after* he has lived through the events described in *Temporary Kings*. The world of *Temporary Kings* is far removed from the order and serenity suggested by Poussin's Painting of the Seasons dancing to the music of Time. If it resembles a dance at all, it resembles a *danse macabre:* a dance of death. The French newspapers insinuate—without stating outright—that Widmerpool' s wife

is in bed with a French writer when the writer dies (*Temporary* Kings. 44—45). Later, Pamela Widmerpool herself claims that she was in bed with Ferrand-Seneschal when he died—adding that her husband had gotten sexual gratification out of secretly watching the scene (*Temporary* Kings, 261). Later still, Pamela Widmerpool commits suicide. Jenkins and Hugh Moreland surmise that she deliberately takes an overdose of sleeping pills, then has sex with her former lover, Russll Gwinnett, while she is dying (*Temporary* Kings, 269—70).

Not surprisingly,Jenkins, after living through the events described in *Temporary Kings,* avoids using the dance image when writing the fifth through twelfth volumes of "Dance": *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* through *Hearing Secret Harmonies.* By the point, early in the final volume, where he discusses Ariosto's account in *Orlando Furioso* of Astolpho's journey to the Moon, he comes close to overtly rejecting Poussin's painting as an emblem for the human condition:

> Among other adventures on the Moon, during this expedition, Astolpho sees Time at work. Ariosto's Time—as you might say, Time the Man—was, anthropomorphically speaking, not necessarily everybody's Time. Although equally hoary and naked, he was not Poussin's Time, for example, in the picture where the Seasons dance, while Time plucks his lyre to provide the music. Poussin's Time (a painter's Time) is shown in a sufficiently unhurried frame of mind to be sitting down while he strums his instrument. The smile might be thought a trifle sinister, nevertheless the mood is genial, composed.
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> Ariosto's Time (a writer's Time) is far less relaxed, indeed appallingly restless. (*Hearing* Secret Harmonies, 33)

As Jenkins is himself a writer, the parenthetical remarks about "a painter's Time" and "a writer's Time" suggest that Jenkins sees Ariosto's version of Time as being more accurate than Poussin's. This marks a radical change from the view of Jenkins at the beginning of the story, when he saw Poussin's painting as a valid emblem for the human condition. The change is complete when,at the end of "Dance," Jenkins says that "Even the formal measure of the Seasons seemed suspended in the wintry silence" (*Hearing* Secret Harmonies, 272).

The description above of Jenkins's changing perceptions from the moment when he sees the workmen gathered around the fire and thinks of Poussin's painting of the Seasons dancing to the music of Time to the moment when he tends his fire and thinks of the passage from Burton may suggest that "Dance" is a depressing work. Indeed, it would seem to support McSweeney's comment (cited earlier) about "Dance"presenting a "somber version of human life seen under the aspect of transience and mortality, against the force of which no transcendance through love, memory, moral rectitude or supernatural belief is possible." This would be true if we looked only at what Jenkins *witnesses* over the period of time in wtich the events depicted in his memoirs take place. However, we see a different picture if we look at what Jenkins himself *does* during this period.

What Jenkins witnesses is certainly depressing enough. Of his three acquaintances from schooldays—Charles Stringham, Peter Templer, and Kenneth Widmerpool—Stringham dies in a Japanese prisoner of war camp (*Temporary* Kings, 209). Peter Templer, always successful with women in his youth, in later life is deserted by one wife (*The* Acceptance World, 139), sees another go insane (*Temporary* Kings, 21), is accused by his mistress of being sexually inadequate (*Temporary* Kings, 23), and—in an effort to prove his manhood—gets killed in a wartime undercover operation (*Temporary* Kings, 187—88). And Kenneth Widmerpool, who climbs all the way up the ladder to a seat in Parliament (*Books* Do Furnish a Room, 13), throws everything away to join a Charles Manson-style cult and dies of a heart attack while leading the cult in a midnight run through the woods (*Hearing* Secret Harmonies, 265—71).

In contrast, Jenkins's own progress—both in his career and in his private life—is slow but steady. His career begins inauspiciusly enough, with a low-level job in a small firm publishing art books (*A* Buyer's Market, 46). However, by the time he reaches middle-age, he establishes a solid enough reputation as an author in his own right to be invited to an international writers' conference in Venice (*Temporary* Kings, 5—6). In his personal life—particularly in his relations with the opposite sex—Jenkins starts well behind his more precocious classmates, but ends up being far more successful than any of them. At a time when Peter Templer and Charles Stringham have already embarked on full-blown sexual adventures,Jenkins—in his late teens at this point—has done no more than hold hands with a girl at the French *mansion* he visits during his vacation (*A* Question of Upbringing, 150—51). But when he finally does meet the woman he marries (*At* Lady Molly's, 136), the relationship proves permanent (indeed, it is worth noting that, of the four men who meet at Jenkins's school, he is the only one who succeeds in fathering any children).

At the conclusion of "Dance," Jenking is tending a bonfire on his country estate and reflecting on the newspaper clipping regarding the exhibition of Mr. Deacon's paintings that he has attended (*Hearing* Secret Harmonies, 243—44, 271—72). Despite the random, chaotic, and sometimes brutal nature of the world around him, Jenkins does not despair (the man who despair's sees no point in *any* positive action). Instead, Jenkins quietly looks after his estate, building a bonfire to get rid of accumulated debris. James Tucker's comments on this point are perceptive:

> And Nicholas ? At the end he is working peacably in his garden... without too much worry... 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. Here 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.[7]

Tucker's comments are important chiefly because of the reference to cultivating our gardens. The allusion to Voltaire's *Candide* is unmistakeable. In the end, Powell's protagonist, like Voltaire's, finds happiness not by chasing after a mystic insight into the world's nature (in Jenkins's case, trying to fit the world into a scheme resembling

a dance), but by quietly taking care of his own business.

Notes

1) Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time* was originally published by Heinemann in London from 1951 through 1975, and subsequently reprinted by Little, Brown, and Company in Boston and Toronto. It is the Little, Brown edition that I use throughout.

In order of publication, the twelve volumes of *A Dance to the Music of Time* are as follows: *A Question of Upbringing* (1951), *A Buyer's Market* (1952), *The Acceptance World* (1955), *At Lady Molly's* (1957), *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* (1960), *The Kindly Ones* (1962), *The Valley of Bones* (1964), *The Soldier's Art* (1966), *The Military Philosophers* (1968), *Books Do Furnish a Room* (1971), *Temporary Kings* (1973), and *Hearing Secret Harmonies* (1975).

To avoid confusion, I will give *A Dance to the Music of Time* the short title "Dance" in quotation marks and will give each individual volume its full title, underlined.

2) Henry R. Harrington, "Anthony Powell, Nicholas Poussin, and the Structure of Time," *Contemporary Literature,* 24 (1983), 433.

3) Kerry MuSweeney, "The End of *A Dance to the Music of Time,*" *South Atlantic Quarterly,* 76 (1977), 53.

4) Bernard Bergonzi, "Anthony Powell: 9/12," *Critical Quarterly,* 11 (1969), 85–86.

5) Robert Towers, rev. of *Hearing Secret Harmonies* by Anthony Powell, *New York Times Book Review,* 11 April 1976, p. 1.

6) McSweeney, 53.

7) James Allen Tucker, *The Novels of Anthony Powell* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), p. 192.