

Anthony Powell: The End of the Dance

Bernard McCabe

In 1951, after a twelve-year silence, Anthony Powell, who had produced several Waugh-like novels in the Thirties, published *A Question of Upbringing*, a gently witty and evocative meditation on the past in which Nicholas Jenkins, soon recognisable as a Powell self-portrait, reviews the course of his life from his late teens at Eton, through Oxford, and into the London social and literary scene of his early twenties and this century's thirties. The novel, which was well received by the usual people—V. S. Pritchett, Cyril Connolly, Waugh himself—turned out to be the first instalment of an immense *roman fleuve*, entitled *A Dance to the Music of Time*, comprising twelve novels, the last of which, *Hearing Secret Harmonies* (William Heinemann, London, 1975), has now appeared. The first six, in two trilogies, cover the 1930s; there is a war trilogy; and a final trilogy in a rapidly developing time-span covers the post-war years up to the late Sixties. The series deserves attention, apart from any other reason, as probably the last major flourish in the long, honourable tradition of English social fiction.

The books are mostly about people meeting and trying to deal with one another—as friends, enemies, rivals, sexual partners, spouses. Jenkins develops and observes a network of relationships both tenuous and intense, friendships and loves that ripen and fade and fall. All this is presented in a huge casual anecdotal *recit*, a series of largely comic social encounters in which each character is present as himself or herself and also present as a social force, with the narrator's voice providing the balancing clues about the situation. Powell also pursues various larger themes: there are some meditative profundities about Space and Time for instance, and a lot about Art, best not gone into too attentively—much better the low-key commentaries about love and friendship, always exemplified and enacted. More to the point than Time and Space and Art is the cumulative picture that the first six volumes offer of London *entre les deux guerres*. Jenkins's social range includes coming-out dances in Berkeley Square, tea and buns at Oxford with influential dons, gin with racing-car drivers and motor-salesmen, long weekends with peers in country-houses, short ones in stockbrokers' Tudor suburban dwellings, or at fancy publishers' places in North London; evenings in road houses on the Kingston by-pass, heated parties in literary and artistic Chelsea, or on its tattered Bohemian edges, bars in Fitzroy Square, drinking clubs in Soho, and—a special interest—sessions with votaries of the occult: palmistry,

ouija boards and life in Bayswater on the astral plane. Throughout the series, denizens of these different but interconnected worlds drift in and out of one another's lives under the narrator's benign and witty eye.

'Novelists are like spies', we read, 'you don't suddenly steal an indispensable secret that gives one complete mastery of the situation, but accumulate a lot of relatively humdrum facts, which when collected provide a picture'. Picture is a key word. On the first page of the first volume we are invited to contemplate a scene from life in terms of Poussin's *Dance of the Seasons*. And in a sustained battle against the arbitrariness of circumstance, such 'patterning' devices are pressed on us; texture is thickened with references to and analogies with sculpture, painting, opera, literature. Discovery of formal design in human behaviour affords 'an obscure satisfaction', says Jenkins, and makes the more apparent inconsistencies of life easier to bear. But the point is pushed further. Dance has a meaning in and for itself; the repeated chance conjunctions of life can be made to seem not only necessary, but to have some kind of significant form. (The old-fashioned phrase seems appropriate; there's a dated air about the whole aesthetic of *A Dance to the Music of Time*.)

But don't trust the artist, as Lawrence says; the true life of the books comes not from these elaborate patterning devices but from the narrator's characteristic voice. Powell's novels have two distinctive features. One is the use of dialogue in a Firbank-Waugh tradition, pungent and economical. The other is Jenkins's gentle, insistent, pervasive running commentary on the scene and the actors. English social life, as Jenkins says, is unyielding to simplification and is hard to handle with authenticity in a simple naturalistic way; understatement and irony, for instance, 'in which all classes of this island converse' are difficult to render. Powell's combination of cryptic dialogues and elaborated comment is devised to confront this complexity in a balanced way.

In fact, the pervading theme is decline and decay. Early in the series, a reactionary mood regretting the disintegration of society in its traditional forms announces itself. And there's a lot about breakdowns, divorce, alcoholism, sexual obsession and perversion, suicide, death in every form. Yet the tone is typically *amused*; the voice, the consistent comic vision, serves to distance the narrator, who can 'play' with the material in an authentic way, for Powell has a serious comic voice. Of course, most good English novelists take people seriously by finding them amusing and Powell, who edited and wrote about Aubrey's *Brief Lives* in the nineteen-forties, has a taste for the eccentric and the incongruous, and is fascinated by the oddness of people; he likes to face the problem of taking 'impossible' people seriously. His great impossible invention is Widmerpool. Already at Eton an opposition is set up between the physically and morally clumsy Widmerpool and the graceful, amoral Stringham. And as the series develops, a large social and moral conflict grows between a world of

power and will on one side and a world of grace and imagination on the other. Their conflict does, in fact, issue in death ('That boy will be the death of me', says Stringham prophetically enough, in Vol. I), but from the moment Widmerpool, in his wonderful oddness, comes trotting through the drizzle at school, bulkily built, thick lips and steel-framed glasses, running on his heels, he represents in essentially comic ways a vision and understanding of how power works. The appalling unsnubbable Widmerpool is successful in the world; the appealing Stringham (a figure very much like Waugh's Sebastian Flyte) is doomed. Stringham delights every one. But Widmerpool is the more interesting achievement. We never cease being amused by Jenkins's representation of him. And we are taught to take *him* seriously. In his formidably unattractive and grotesque presence Powell's comic dance is at its best.

Jenkins's (or Powell's) voice is tolerant, lightly didactic, tinged with authority; it basks in its own ingenuity, offers a deft and adept way of dealing with the intricacies of English social life. Powell was at Eton and he belongs in many ways to the world that Martin Green has recently examined in his brilliant study of the dandy, decadent, cultural style in England.¹ Powell's voice comes out of this world. In a sense we never leave Eton ('arrested development' as Cyril Connolly claims)—perhaps it's the voice of an accomplished Eton Master that we hear! Hence some of the pitfalls in the method; Jenkins can sound self-assured and patronising in some fundamental way as he confronts his gallery of eccentrics and, as schoolmasters sometimes do, can seem to be too confidently waiting for delighted laughter at his sallies. Then the comically labyrinthine prose seems merely verbose and self-conscious.

These hard words echo some uncertainties about the later stages of *A Dance*. I bought the first volume in 1951 and have bought another every two years since then. Pleasant to have such certain pleasures in store. Yet in mid-series, I began to feel that, clever and funny as it all was, considerable manipulation was going on. I seem to remember V. S. Pritchett grumbling about 'gossip-column' fiction after Volume VI. Evelyn Waugh, a great admirer, wanted Powell to stop after Volume V and start something new. There have been peevish calls for biographical and genealogical tables, and some resentment at the large investment of attention required (with uncertain profits) to keep this immense invented world and its relationships straight. At times the whole thing does seem adventitious; the facts seem arbitrary and the voice self-absorbed, inconsequential, like some chatty old dowager at tea-time.

The final trilogy especially encourages this ungenerous response. From the start of the series, analogies with Proust inevitably suggest themselves—something Powell has recognised and, in confident modesty invites and rejects (notably in *The Military Philosophers*,

¹Martin Green, *Children of the Sun: A Narrative of 'Decadence' in England After 1918*. Basic Books, Inc., New York, 1976.

Volume IX). Although the past is always present in these novels, Powell does not make Proust's enormous triumphant effort to establish its meaning *as* past; he lives determinedly in the comic present. On the last page of the last volume (1975)—when it is clear that no answer to any overwhelming question will be offered—he very skilfully takes us back to the reminiscent Poussin moment in Volume I (1951), and the whole series, by a Joycean retrospective arrangement is given a temporal unity. But for the reader who, like myself, began in 1951, the effect is very odd. Volumes I-VI cover the Thirties, Powell's Etonian period, his 'real' world as Martin Green might suggest. The war trilogy covers the early Forties acceptably enough (although Powell, like other ex-public school writers, overrates the general interest of military goings-on—being in the army *is* rather like being back at school), but in the last trilogy, post 1951 and on to 1970, time seems to overtake and pester the narrator, with various unfortunate effects: a fatigued, almost desperate development of new characters, and a compulsive need to account for the old ones. *Hearing Secret Harmonies* reads like a necrology; a dozen figures are disposed of in the first hundred pages alone: Baby Wentworth, Jimmy Stripling, Gypsy Jones bite the dust one after the other. The book is full of death; the style is as gay as ever but its a lugubrious gaiety now. And amidst all the death and destruction the voice has lost its poise. It is as though Powell cannot find his footing in the modern world. Two examples: the occult, which in Dr Trelawney and Mrs Erdleigh, magnificent comic figures, had always been accurately caught with 'The Essence of the All is the Godhead of the True' as their watchword, hinting at short-cuts to the Infinite and worlds of thought and feeling both ludicrous and mildly menacing, becomes with young Scorpio Murtlock in this last novel, melodramatically vicious, an unamusing locus of modern evil. Worse still, the great Widmerpool, once the object of Powell's most balanced and delightful judgements, is here simply destroyed, in a factitious, vengeful atmosphere worked up with Tourreut and other Jacobean horror-shows. Widmerpool goes to his doom down the primrose path of Socialism, then Marcuse-inspired extremism, then Alternative Life-Stylism and, ultimately, the worst kind of occultism's Nameless Rites. Intelligence slackens; oddly and sadly, through the accomplished phrases we have in the past admired and enjoyed we now hear intimations of an old buffer trumpeting against the times.