

"THINGS REAL AND IMAGINED":  
THE NARRATOR-READER IN ANTHONY POWELL'S  
A DANCE TO THE MUSIC OF TIME

By

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## Abstract

Anthony Powell's A Dance to the Music of Time is a "fictional memoir" in which the narrator, Nick Jenkins, describes the events and characters he has observed throughout his life. As such, the primary focus of the novel would seem to be those characters and events, but the way in which Nick relates his story has a considerable impact on the narrative, and, therefore, on that primary focus. Powell has not only chosen to employ a first-person narrator, thereby establishing a specific, and individual, narrative voice, or point of view, but he also has that narrator consume much of novel by describing his perceptions of the world he observes, and this brings into focus the nature of that perspective. Hence, this paper examines the nature of Nick's role in the novel, both as character and narrator, and attempts to delineate the effect that that role has on the novel as a whole.

Essentially, Nick can be characterized as a "reader" who, in effect, "interprets" the characters and events he describes, thereby contributing his imagination to their "construction". Whether he reads actual texts or observes human behaviour, Nick engages in an interpretative process which is analogous to that in which a reader interprets a text: interpreting "signs", constructing "causes", translating texts into images and "meaning-bearing" ideas, and subjecting his own "reading" to scrutiny, thereby effectively "rereading" previous "interpretations". As a "reader", Nick is interested in more than mere description: he not only desires to understand the nature of the people with whom

he is involved, but also to appreciate the significance of the events he witnesses, so as to form a kind of pattern which would reveal the central themes of an age. In so doing, he does not merely relate "what happens", thereby "putting up a mirror" to his past; he also describes his experience of that past, so that the narrative does not so much present "reality", as it presents Nick's perception of reality.

Nick's characterization as a "reader" is founded on specific theories regarding the nature of the reading process, especially as they apply to the relationship between reader and text, and, therefore, the products of his "interpretations" are considered in relation to the creation of fiction. In essence, Nick's "reading" results in the construction of the characters and events he observes, so that ultimately he creates "fictions". In other words, because he does not present "reality", nor even a "reconstruction" of reality, but a "reconstruction" of his perception of that reality, Nick, in fact, "creates" his narrative, thereby constructing fiction. Hence, just as a reader creates the fiction of a novel by interpreting its text, so too does Nick produce fiction by "interpreting" the world he is portraying. Thus, in his "search for knowledge", in his efforts to understand the world around him, Nick "creates" that world, so that knowledge would seem to be the product of the observer's, or "reader's", construction - in essence, a fiction.

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## Preface

In his article entitled "Technique as Discovery", Mark Schorer examines "the uses of point of view not only as a mode of dramatic delimitation, but more particularly, of thematic definition."<sup>1</sup> The idea that a study of form, or "technique", might help to identify thematic content in a literary work, is at the basis of this paper. Anthony Powell's twelve-volume "sequence-novel", A Dance to the Music of Time, is a fictional memoir, in which the first-person narrator, Nick Jenkins, describes the characters and events he has observed over a span of some sixty years. While the primary focus of the novel seems to be those characters and events, one must also consider the effect that the narrative "technique" has on that primary focus. In this paper, I examine the nature of the narrative by characterizing Nick as a "reader" who not only observes the world around him, but who "interprets" that world, thereby contributing his creative imagination to its construction. If Nick can be so characterized, one can then consider "reading" as a theme of the novel, especially as it might relate to the creation of fiction itself.

The primary focus of the paper is on the nature of Nick's "interpretations": what he reads (texts, characters), how he reads (misreads, rereads), and why he reads (search for knowledge),

<sup>1</sup> "Technique as Discovery," Hudson Review, 1 (1948), 67-87; rpt. in The Theory of the Novel, ed. Philip Stevick (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 67.

as well as the effect that his dual function as narrator and character has on those interpretations. Due to the novel's length, it is impossible to cover every instance of Nick's "reading"; therefore, I have chosen specific examples which I consider illustrate most fully the various aspects of the interpretative process in which Nick indulges, and which should be sufficient to indicate the general nature of the narrative form. Further, while I have relied, to some extent, on current theories regarding the activity of reading, as advanced by Tzvetan Todorov, Wolfgang Iser, and Roland Barthes, among others, my aim has not been to present a thorough construct of the reader. I have not applied the novel to theory; rather, I have begun with the text, and, in examining it, used theory to elucidate my thesis.

I must acknowledge, however, the help that these critical theories have been in the formulation of this paper. Without some understanding of the reading process itself, I could not have subjected the novel to my particular form of interpretation, or "reading". Hence, I must acknowledge as well my own role as a "reader of the text", which, if I stand by my thesis, means that this paper is my "act of construction", and, therefore, it incorporates both an examination of Powell's novel and my experience of that novel, essentially "things real and imagined".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Powell, A Question of Upbringing (London: Heinemann, 1951), p. 2.

## Chapter I

When Nick Jenkins reads the terms of his uncle's commission into the army, in The Kindly Ones, he continues a process of interpretation, in which Giles' character is defined and delineated.<sup>1</sup> Having previously described some of his encounters with the old man, and explained how he is perceived by the Jenkins family (especially Nick's father), Nick has already begun to establish a particular portrait of Uncle Giles, so that the commission provides an opportunity for further character analysis.<sup>2</sup> Hence, Nick tries to augment his understanding of his uncle's personality by comparing the expectations of the commission with Giles' subsequent performance of duty. By looking closely at the way that Nick reads, however, one can identify some of the basic elements of the reading process itself, especially those which characterize the relationship between reader and text. If one can describe just what Nick does when he reads the commission, one can understand more fully the nature of his role as a reader, and appreciate the impact that he has on the text.

In order to examine the way that Nick reads the commission, one must first distinguish the text itself from Nick's reading

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Powell, The Kindly Ones (London: Heinemann, 1962), pp. 157-9. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>2</sup> We are first introduced to Uncle Giles, and get some idea of his character, when he visits Nick at school in order to talk about "The Trust", in A Question of Upbringing, pp. 15-25.



of it. This is not difficult, considering the form that the narrative takes: portions of the document's text, set off by quotation marks, interspersed by Nick's commentary. The commission is essentially a pro forma document, in that it is a standard form presented to anyone who is commissioned into the army, with Uncle Giles' name and rank inserted into the spaces provided. Nick's reading of it, however, relates the document specifically to Uncle Giles, so that it becomes a personal missive addressed to one individual. Thus, by reading the commission, Nick creates something that goes beyond the text itself; he "realizes", or "converts" the text into what may be termed the "work".<sup>3</sup> In so doing, he does not alter the text itself, for it remains as it is, enclosed in quotation marks; rather, he produces a new entity which, though existing only in his imagination, is the creative result of his interaction with the text.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, by interpreting the text (in this case, imagining that the commission is a personal letter addressed to Uncle Giles), Nick "realizes" that text, thereby creating the "work".

<sup>3</sup> According to Wolfgang Iser, in "Interaction between Text and Reader," in The Reader in the Text, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 106, "the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author's text, and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader."

<sup>4</sup> In "From Work to Text," in Textual Strategies, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 79-80, Roland Barthes describes the reader's activity as "playing the Text as one plays a game", and that the goal is to "re-produce the Text", or to "complete" it, rather than to "interpret" it.

Not only does Nick imagine that the commission is directed personally to Uncle Giles, but he also imagines that the Queen herself has written it. Since the document is written in the name of Victoria, and since it is addressed to Uncle Giles, Nick reads it as if it were a personal letter from Sovereign to subject, and in so doing, he creates a fictional situation. And, though the document is, in fact, merely a standardized form, the "signified facts" of the text (Victoria addressing Uncle Giles) allow for such an imaginative reading.<sup>5</sup> In other words, while the commission may not have been intended to be read in such a fashion, the text, nevertheless, is open to such an interpretation. Thus, despite the fictional aspects of the situation he imagines, Nick does not "misread" the text itself; his interpretation is based on that text, but it also incorporates the creative elements of the reader's imagination. In this way, Nick "realizes", or "converts", the pro forma document (the text) by interpreting it, thereby producing a personal missive from Queen Victoria to Uncle Giles (the "work").

This fictional situation, in which the Queen personally addresses Uncle Giles, is the foundation upon which Nick proceeds to read the commission. He begins by imagining the kind of person who would produce the words of the document, and he does so by characterizing the language of the text. The Queen addresses Uncle Giles as "Trusty and well-beloved", extends

<sup>5</sup> "Signified facts" is a term used by Tzvetan Todorov in "Reading as Construction," in The Reader in the Text, p. 73.

her "Greeting", and remarks of her "especial Trust and Confidence in your Loyalty, Courage and good Conduct". Such words provoke this analysis from Nick:

Trusty and wellbeloved were not the terms in which his own kith and kin had thought of Uncle Giles for a long time now. Indeed, the Queen's good-heartedness in herself greeting him so warmly was as touching as her error of judgement was startling. There was something positively ingenuous in singling out Uncle Giles for the repose of confidence, accepting him so wholly at his own valuation. No doubt the Queen had been badly advised in the first instance. She must have been vexed and disappointed. (p.157)

To Nick, "the great rolling phrases" of the commission suggest that the Queen is "warm" and "friendly - even to the point of intimacy", so that her "good-heartedness" is "touching" (pp. 157-8). Being such a person, she would no doubt have been personally disappointed at Uncle Giles' poor performance as an officer in her forces. This reading of the text does not involve an understanding of the text itself. Nick knows what the words mean, in the sense that he understands the "signified facts" (the Queen expresses confidence in Uncle Giles), but he also derives certain connotations from those "facts", which, in turn, endow the Queen with a particular personality. In effect, Nick imagines Victoria to be "warm" and "friendly" because he sees such a character expressed in the words of the text. It is important to point out, however, that while the Queen may have been "real", in the sense that Victoria was indeed the Queen when Giles was commissioned, the character that Nick here describes exists only in his imagination. In this sense, Nick's Victoria is not the historical "fact", nor is she the "Victoria"

in the text of the commission; rather, she is Nick's fictional creation, constructed by his interpretation, or "realization", of the text. It is Nick's reading of the commission that produces such a portrait, and not the text itself.

This reading of the text also incorporates Nick's understanding of his uncle's personality. Not only was the old man not "Trusty and wellbeloved" by his family, at least by the time Nick reads the commission, but Nick suggests that such a sentiment is, in fact, Giles' own "valuation" of himself. Further, by maintaining that the Queen "must have been vexed and disappointed", Nick is assuming the fact that his uncle failed to fulfill the commission's expectations, which, though possibly true, is not to be found in the text. Hence, Nick "reads into" the commission his own understanding of Giles' life and personality, something which is not derived from the text he is reading. The document, in fact, says little of Uncle Giles, or of the Queen; it is Nick's reading of it that produces the two characterizations. He "creates" Uncle Giles and the Queen, in the sense that the characters he describes do not exist in the text. While the commission includes the names of "Victoria" and "Giles Delahay Jenkins", it does not delineate their personalities; rather, it is Nick who, by characterizing the language of the text, and supplying the expectations of Uncle Giles' subsequent performance of duty, constructs those personalities from the names he reads. Hence, Queen Victoria and Uncle Giles do exist within the fictional context of the novel, and, in this sense, they are not products

of Nick's imagination, but the characters he describes when reading the commission do not exist outside of his imagination, either in the "reality" of the fictional world, or in the text itself.

As Nick continues to peruse the document, he comes upon another "fact" in the text which leads him to augment his description of Uncle Giles' character. The commission states that Giles is to hold the rank of "2nd Lieutenant", with the understanding that he may achieve a higher rank, and since he has always been known to Nick as "Captain Jenkins", he indeed must have received some kind of promotion. This would not seem too improbable, if it were not for Nick's estimation that his uncle had been a failure as an officer. If Giles was indeed so "disappointing" and "vexing" to his Sovereign, why was he made a Captain? In order to answer that question, Nick imagines various possible reasons behind his uncle's promotion:

Perhaps such an opportunity had not arisen so immediately as might have been expected; perhaps Uncle Giles had assumed the higher rank without reference to the Queen. Certainly he was always styled 'Captain' Jenkins, so that there must have been at least a presumption of a once held captaincy of some sort, however 'temporary', 'acting' or 'local' that rank might in practice have been.  
(pp. 157-8)

Because Nick is ignorant of the real circumstances behind the promotion, he is able to imagine various possibilities, each of which might be accurate. Certainly, they are in keeping with the portrait of Uncle Giles that Nick has already drawn, since they assume that the promotion was either put off for some time,

of little importance, or even acquired "unofficially". Yet, by imagining such possibilities, Nick seems to stray from the text he is reading. The "fact" of Uncle Giles' promotion, under whatever circumstances, is not to be found in the commission, even though it is suggested as a future possibility, so that Nick's ruminations, once again, involve extraneous material beyond the text itself. Hence, though Nick's reading of the commission involves an understanding of the textual "facts" (Uncle Giles' rank of "2nd Lieutenant"), it also incorporates his understanding of Giles' character and subsequent experience (being styled "Captain Jenkins").

The kind of reading to which Nick subjects the commission, his comparing of Uncle Giles' performance of duty to the document's expectations, is further illustrated when he considers the final segment of the text. The commission states that the officer must "exercise and well discipline" his men, "keep them in good Order", and "command them to Obey" him, and this leads Nick to summarize his uncle's failings as an officer:

Uncle Giles, it must be agreed, had not risen to the occasion. So far as loyalty to herself [the Queen] was concerned, he had been heard on more than one occasion to refer to her as 'that old Tartar at Osborne', to express without restraint his own leanings towards a republican form of government. His Conduct, in the army or out of it, could not possibly be described as Good. . . . There remained Uncle Giles's Courage. That, so far as was known, remained untarnished, although - again so far as was known - never put to any particularly severe test. (p. 158)

In fact, according to Nick, the only command that Uncle Giles had seen fit to obey, was "the charge to command his subordinates

to obey him". These aspects of Giles' character, his "will to command" and "irritability of disposition", are not derived from the text of the commission; rather, they are Nick's perceptions of his uncle's personality, already a part of his consciousness, which he applies to his reading of the text (p. 159). Without such previous "interpretations", or "readings" of Uncle Giles, Nick's reading of the commission would be very different. That is, if Nick did not know "Giles Delahay Jenkins", if he had not already come to some conclusion regarding his personality, and, therefore, his performance as an officer, he would not be able to make any comparisons between expectations and performance, and he would not read the text as he does. Similarly, if Nick did not know that Giles was called "Captain Jenkins", the term "2nd Lieutenant" would not initiate any questions; there would be no need to imagine the circumstances behind a promotion, if Nick did not suppose any such promotion to have taken place. Hence, Nick brings to his reading a knowledge of elements which are not contained in the text itself. He does not read in a vacuum; rather, he applies his knowledge and understanding of his uncle's character to his reading of the commission, thereby augmenting, as opposed to merely understanding, ~~the~~ the sense of the text.

When Nick has finished reading the commission, however, he does not cease to "read". In fact, he continues the process by subjecting his own "interpretations" to scrutiny, so that, in effect, he "reads" his own reading. Nick questions the validity of the way in which he reads the commission when he

suggests that perhaps "facile irony", indeed, any kind of irony, might "go too far" (p. 159). It is easy for him to compare the eloquent expectations of the document with Uncle Giles' subsequent performance of duty when he has the advantage of hindsight, but Nick wonders how he himself would measure up to such expectations. He knows that he will soon be called upon to join the army, and he is unsure that he will succeed any better than did his uncle, so that perhaps a comparison between expectations and performance is unjust. Here, Nick seems to recognize the way in which his perspective influences his reading: if he had read the commission without knowing how his uncle performed as an officer, his reading would have been much different, perhaps as inconclusive as his "reading" of his own future. Nick's success, or lack thereof, will be decided in the future, just as at one time the terms of Uncle Giles' commission had yet to be "disappointed". Yet, this recognition of the impact that he himself has on his reading of the text does not alter Nick's essential perception of his uncle's character; he does not reassess his portrait of Giles as a less than successful officer. What Nick questions is the methodology which he employs to read the commission. Since the text contains no such references to Giles' actual performance of duty, it is not the ironic document that Nick's interpretation of it would suggest. His reading is erroneous because the text does not connote any such failure on Uncle Giles' part, being simply a list of expectations; rather, it is Nick's reading of it which creates the irony. Hence, Nick "reads" twice over: the commission itself, and his interpretation of that commission.



Looking closely at the direction that Nick's ruminations take him, one detects a movement from the immediate, rather harsh judgement of Uncle Giles, towards a more considered, temperate, one. His initial comments regarding his uncle's personality and military career are rather humorous, but his use of "frivolous" irony does produce a portrait of a somewhat ridiculous incompetent. Nick manages to poke fun at Giles' vanity, arrogance, and egotism, question his "good" conduct and devotion to duty, and denigrate any promotion he may have received. Even Giles' penchant for command, the one stricture he seems to have obeyed, is characterized in a negative light. Essentially, Nick is having a little fun at the expense of his uncle; indeed, one might question the extent to which he is serious about such a reading, yet, Nick seems to recognize that even such "frivolity" has a direct impact on his presentation of Uncle Giles' character, and, therefore, he softens his tone as he reconsiders his approach to the text. His doubts about the validity of his ironic stance, and his concern regarding his own future conduct, suggest an awareness of a common bond between uncle and nephew that tempers previous judgements.<sup>6</sup> Since the terms of the commission are essentially

<sup>6</sup> Nick's recognition of a common bond with his uncle is similar to his previous admission of a "kinship" with the novelist, St. John Clarke, whom he tends to denigrate as a writer. In Casanova's Chinese Restaurant (London: Heinemann, 1960), p. 82, Nick describes Clarke's novels as "trivial, unreal, vulgar, badly put together, idiotously [sic] phrased and 'in-sincere'", but he also remarks, "was not St John Clarke still a person more like myself than anyone sitting round the table [Nick's inlaws]? That was a sobering thought. He, too, for longer years, had existed in the imagination, even though this imagination led him (in my eyes) to a world ludicrously contrived, socially misleading, professionally nauseous."

"ideal", and, therefore, unattainable, Uncle Giles' failure to fulfill them is not only understandable, but inevitable under the circumstances (p. 159). This does not alter the portrait of his uncle, but it does alter Nick's appreciation of that portrait. In a sense, by equating his future career in the army with Giles' past experience, Nick changes his perspective of the old man, so that now he is viewed with some sympathy. Hence, by reconsidering the way in which he reads the commission, Nick re-evaluates the nature of his own perspective, which, in turn, leads him to "re-interpret" Uncle Giles' character.

A close examination of Nick's reading of his uncle's commission into the army reveals not only the specific, and individual, actions that Nick performs when reading the document, but also the fundamental process that characterizes a reader's interaction with a text. In reading the commission, Nick does not simply "consume" the text, in the sense that he registers in his mind what it "says", or "means"; he does not simply understand its "signified facts" (the requirements necessary for a career as a British officer); he is not a passive onlooker. Nick is an active "processor" of the text: analyzing, interpreting, contributing his knowledge and perspective to the text, so that he produces something beyond that text. That is, while the text itself does not change when it is interpreted, it nonetheless becomes the basis of a constructive apparatus (the "work"), which is accomplished by the reader. In this sense, Nick translates the commission into his portraits of Queen Victoria and Uncle Giles, thereby converting the text into the "work". And, since these two characters, as described by Nick,

do not exist outside of his imagination (either in the text, or in "reality"), they are, in fact, his "creations", or the product of his interpretation of the commission. The Queen and Uncle Giles are "constructs", in the psychological sense of the word, because they are here described, not as they are (they are "real" within the fictional context of the novel), but as Nick perceives them to be; they are also "constructions", in Todorov's sense, because they are constructed by the reader (Nick) as he interprets the text.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Nick "realizes" the text (the commission) by contributing his knowledge, perceptions, and perspective to his reading of it, thereby creating the "work" (the portraits of Victoria and Uncle Giles).

While Nick's reading of his uncle's commission is a part of his construction of Giles' character, Nick's reading of other texts involves the construction of images which represent the words on the page. Nick discovers the commission when, after the old man's death, he takes inventory of Giles' personal effects. Along with the commission, Nick finds a book, entitled The Perfumed Garden of the Sheik Nefzaoui or The Arab Art of Love, which arouses his curiosity (p. 160). Though he merely glances at the title, Nick concentrates on the source of this English translation (a French version of the original sixteenth-century Arabic manuscript), and proceeds to "interpret" the inscription referring to the French translator: a "Staff Officer in the French Army in Algeria". The word "interpret" is

<sup>7</sup> "Reading as Construction," p. 78.

appropriate, because Nick does more than just understand what the inscription says. The "signified facts" of the text are easily processed: the translator is French, in the army, and stationed in Algeria, but this is not the full extent of Nick's reading. Understanding these "facts", he proceeds to construct a rather elaborate image of the translator, so that this unknown "Staff Officer" assumes a specific character, inhabiting a particular environment. Essentially, Nick's activities involve the expansion of those "signified facts". The inscription stipulates certain facts, but only in a general way, and this allows Nick to supply more particular details: who is the man, why is he there, and what is he doing? More importantly, these details, though to some extent limited by the text, are the products of Nick's imagination, so that his reading of the inscription is a creative act.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the inscription leads Nick to imagine the translator at work on the Sheik's manuscript:

I pictured this French Staff Officer sitting at his desk. The sun was streaming into the room through green latticed windows of Moorish design, an oil sketch by Fromentin or J. F. Lewis. Dressed in a light-blue frogged coatee and scarlet peg-topped trousers buttoning under the boot, he wore a pointed moustache and imperial. Beside him on the table stood his shako, high and narrowing to the plume, the white puggaree falling across the scabbard of his discarded sabre. (p. 160)

The image is like a painting, a pictorial rendering of the inscription, but as his description illustrates, the image

<sup>8</sup> Todorov, pp. 68-9.

contains details not found in the text itself. The man's clothing, the sun-filled room, and the paintings on the wall are not facts that Nick understands simply by reading the inscription; indeed, it does not refer to them at all; rather, they are figments of Nick's imagination which he brings to his reading of the text. Yet, at the same time, these details are not inconsistent with the textual "facts"; indeed, they are effectively determined by the text: the military uniform of the period, the contemporary paintings, and the Arab setting. Hence, Nick's reading of the text indicates the creative role that he plays in the "realization" of that text, in that he translates the words of the inscription into a fictional image. That image, however, is controlled by the text; Nick may create the particular details of the "scene", but those details are based on the text's "signified facts".

Nick's construction of this image, however, goes beyond merely "painting a picture". Not only does he imagine the translator physically, wearing certain clothes and seated at a desk, but he also supplies the man's personality and past experience. It is not enough that the Frenchman translated the Sheik's manuscript; Nick wants to know why, and so he imagines the circumstances that led to the act of translation. In a sense, Nick expands his portrait by "interpreting" the image that he himself has created:

He was absolutely detached, a man who had tasted the sensual pleasures of the Second Empire and Third Republic to their dregs, indeed, come to North Africa to escape such insistent banalities. Now, he was examining their qualities and defects in absolute

calm. Here, with the parched wind blowing in from the desert, he had found a kindred spirit in the Sheik Nefzaoui, to whose sixteenth-century Arabic he was determined to do justice in the language of Racine and Voltaire. (p. 160)

Nick has come a long way from merely understanding the text of the inscription. Here, he psychoanalyzes his translator: he has fled the "sensual pleasures" of Parisian society, and come to North Africa to contemplate that life in "absolute calm" by studying and translating the Sheik's treatise. Thus, the act of translation becomes not just a "fact" (as in the text), but an event motivated by the officer's character and past experience, in essence, the effect of a specific cause.<sup>9</sup> One might contend that Nick, being a writer, is merely indulging in the practice of his art, attempting a kind of character study that might form part of a novel, but here Nick is "reading", not "writing", and, in this sense, his activities are a constructive expansion of the inscription. What initially was a brief delineation of certain "facts", has, through the agency of Nick's imaginative interpretation, become a fictional scene. In this way, Nick translates text into image, thereby producing the "work", which, in this case, is the translator's character.

Having conjured up this image, Nick acknowledges that it is only one of many possible images that could be derived from the text. And, in so doing, he implicitly recognizes the creative aspects of his own reading. Nick undercuts the image's reality, or admits its fictionality, when he remarks, "Perhaps

<sup>9</sup> Todorov's "causal construction", pp. 74-5.

that picture was totally wide of the mark: the reality quite another one" (pp. 160-1). He then offers other possible "images": perhaps the translator was a family man, stealing precious minutes between family obligations to devote to his "beloved translation"; perhaps he was "Rimbaud's father", who had indeed been stationed in North Africa, and had translated Arabic manuscripts (p. 161). Nick imagines these possibilities in turn, as he explores other interpretations, though none are conceived as elaborately as the first image. Perhaps, to echo Nick's "causal construction", he has expended much of his creative energy on the first image, so that the following possibilities lack the same thoroughness; perhaps the first image appeals more to his romantic imagination. In any case, by advancing more than one image of the translator, Nick demonstrates that the text is open to a variety of interpretations. Limited only by the "signified facts", he can create his images with some freedom, so that each of his conceived translators can be constructed from the same text without being "erroneous". Nick is aware that his images are "fictions", in the sense that they are not to be found in the inscription, yet, while none of them may be "true", they are nonetheless allowed for by the text.<sup>10</sup>

Having exhausted his interest in the book's inscription Nick proceeds to scan the chapter titles, and read parts of the "sincere and scholarly" treatise, but he does so only "idly".

<sup>10</sup> According to Barthes, in "From Work to Text," p. 76, the text "achieves plurality of meaning, an irreducible plurality".

In fact, he says little of the book's contents, except to acknowledge the Sheik's "good" advice (p. 161). Here, there is no construction of images, nor even an analysis of the treatise, only a recognition of its rather oppressive nature. Nick admits his lack of interest in the book itself when he says that "Disinclination to continue reading I recognised as a basic unwillingness to face facts", but while he sees this as the result of his "inferiority", in light of the translator's "sociological" concerns, one could relate his lack of interest to the nature of the text itself. The inscription that inspires Nick's creative energies is essentially "referential discourse", because it refers to a preceding event (the translation) which can be "reconstructed" by the reader (Nick) in his imagination. On the other hand, judging by the chapter titles quoted, the treatise itself is essentially "non-referential discourse", being a collection of maxims about love and the relationship between men and women, because it does not refer to a preceding event as such.<sup>11</sup> As a sociological study, the treatise is concerned with the examination of human conduct, and the elucidation of general truths, so that the reader is left either to agree with its findings, or disagree, but not to reconstruct an event. Further, even if the Sheik's "study" is, in reality, simply a piece of pornography couched in sociological terms, it nonetheless demands little imaginative construction, or interpretation, on the reader's part. Thus, while the inscription

<sup>11</sup> Todorov, pp. 68-9.



allows Nick to create an image (or three) of the translator, the treatise evokes no such construction and, therefore, it can only be understood, or "consumed", but not interpreted creatively.

Nick's reading of the book's inscription does not have, in itself, an effect on his perception of Uncle Giles, but since the book is one of Giles' possessions, Nick tries to relate it to his uncle's character. Why did Giles first obtain the book, and why did he choose to keep it? Hence, while Nick ~~ceases~~ to "interpret" the text, he does try to construct the reasons behind his uncle's attraction to it. He suggests that "perhaps" the book reminded Uncle Giles of the women he had known in his life, or "possibly" it was used as some kind of "handbook" to guide him through the treacherous paths of love (p. 162). Whether or not these suppositions are correct, Nick's espousal of them indicates that he is once again refining his perception of Uncle Giles' character, in this case, by characterizing the kind of books he read. This method of delineating personality is not unlike Nick's approach to the translator's character, where he interprets the man's preference for the Sheik's study as a rejection of the Parisian "canons of sensuality".<sup>12</sup> Having already defined Uncle Giles as "a bit of a radical", Nick sees his possession of the book as an affirmation of that aspect of his personality: "In any case,

<sup>12</sup> This is analogous to Todorov's concept of "symbolized facts", which are interpreted, rather than understood ("signified facts"), p. 73.

there was no reason to suppose Uncle Giles to have become more stait-laced [sic] as he grew older" (p. 162). When Nick concludes his consideration of The Arab Art of Love he says, "I put the volume aside to reconsider", and this suggests that he has yet to finish his deliberations on the book, or on Uncle Giles. He can "reconsider" his initial reading, and, therefore, his "interpretations" are not definitive; rather, they are open to re-evaluation, or "rereading", and thus, a different interpretation.

Nick's reading of the inscription from The Arab Art of Love illustrates the kind of interpretation that involves the translation of text into image. That is, Nick understands what the inscription says, so that his "picture" of the translator is a creative augmentation of the text. Another example of his reading, however, illustrates a different kind of interpretative process which does not involve the construction of images, but the discovery of "meaning". In the final volume of the sequence, Nick tries to decipher the epigraph found in Russell Gwinnett's biography of the novelist X. Trapnel, entitled Death's-Head Swordsman, which reads, "My study's ornament, thou shell of death, / Once the bright face of my betrothed lady".<sup>13</sup> Upon reading the epigraph, Nick proclaims it to be "ambiguous", and he tries to clarify that ambiguity by considering the various possible meanings behind the words of

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Powell, Hearing Secret Harmonies (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 70. All further references to this work appear in the text.

the text. In this case, that "meaning" lies not so much in the words themselves, as in their relationship to Gwinnett's biography. Why did he choose such an epigraph? What is the significance of the quotation for him, and for the book's subject? What does it mean? The way in which Nick tries to uncover this "meaning" illustrates not only his desire to unravel a mystery, to understand that which is obscure, but also the effect of his interpretations on the text he is reading.

Nick's difficulty in understanding the epigraph's significance is not due to ignorance so much as to a profusion of possible references: "The longer the lines were considered, the more profuse in private meaning they seemed to become" (p. 71). He understands that the epigraph is a quotation from Tourneur's The Revenger's Tragedy (a "signified fact" of the text), and he knows that in the play, "My study's ornament" refers to a skull carried by the speaker, so that Nick is able to surmise the connection to Gwinnett's "study", being the skull that topped Trapnel's walking stick, but the rest of the quotation is more difficult to appreciate. Hence, Nick remarks:

The lines could be regarded as, say, dedication to the memory of Gwinnett's earlier girlfriend (at whose death he had been involved in some sort of scandal); alternatively, as allusion to Pamela Widmerpool herself. If the latter, were the words conceived as spoken by Trapnel, by Gwinnett, by both - or, indeed, by all Pamela's lovers? (p. 71)

The close connection between author and subject (Gwinnett and Trapnel), primarily through the person of Pamela Widmerpool,

is the main cause of such ambiguity, and since Nick is familiar with those relationships, he finds the significance of the epigraph obscure. As a reader, he brings his own knowledge of people and events to his interpretation of the text, knowledge that another reader may not have, and, therefore, the ambiguity derives not so much from the text itself, as from Nick's reading of it. Hence, even the source of the quotation does not clear up Nick's confusion: "Did revenge play some part in writing the book? If so, Gwinnett's revenge on whom? Trapnel? Pamela? Widmerpool?" Such musings on Nick's part indicate that his difficulties derive from a plethora of possible readings, which, in turn, are the product of his own peculiar knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the relationships of the people involved. In this sense, Nick knows too much to be able to produce a single interpretation of the text, so that he can only suggest possibilities.

Having failed to come to any conclusion about the epigraph's significance, Nick leaves the matter for a time, but he soon finds other opportunities to re-examine the text. Later, in a discussion with Nick and Emily Brightman, Gwinnett speaks of his desire to do research for another book, to be entitled The Gothic Symbolism of Mortality in the Texture of Jacobean Stagecraft (p. 99). He explains his interest in the subject by suggesting that Trapnel had much in common with the Jacobean playwrights, and, therefore, that the new work would be an extension of the biography. Nick responds to this remark, regarding Gwinnett's perception of Trapnel, by relating it to

the ambiguous epigraph: "This offered yet another reason for the epigraph introducing Death's-Head Swordsman". Similarly, when Gwinnett receives the Magnus Donners Prize for the biography, he quotes another passage from Tourneur's play as an explanation of his choice of title and epigraph (it "'emphasises that Death, as well as Life, can have its beauty'"), but this does not satisfy Nick:

The audience, myself included, supposing he was going to elaborate the meaning of the quotation, draw some analogy, waited to clap. Whatever significance he attached to the lines, they remained unexpounded. (p. 106)

Thus, while Gwinnett explains his reasons for including the epigraph in his biography, Nick maintains that for him, the lines remain "unexpounded". Whatever the original significance of the quotation for the "writer" (Gwinnett having chosen, if not actually written, the words), as a reader, Nick must construct his own interpretation of the text.

The epigraph, therefore, remains ambiguous to Nick, even if it is not so for Gwinnett, and this suggests that, in this instance at least, it is the reader, and not the text itself, who is responsible for that ambiguity. If Nick had not known of the complicated relationships between Gwinnett, Trapnel, and the Widmerpools, as might be the case with other readers, perhaps he would not have found the epigraph so obscure; perhaps any ambiguity would have been cleared up by Gwinnett's explanation. Yet, even that possibility would not necessarily result in a single interpretation of the text. Gwinnett knows

as much about the complicated relationships in which he was involved as does Nick, and yet, they interpret the significance of the quotation in different ways, so that there is no guarantee that two readers with the same knowledge, or lack thereof, will come to the same conclusion regarding a text. In this sense, equal knowledge does not necessarily result in a similar perspective on the text. Hence, even though Nick attributes his dissatisfaction with Gwinnett's "reading" to the audience in general, essentially, it is his reading that remains tentative; if the text itself is ambiguous, as an epigraph of Gwinnett's biography, Nick's efforts to resolve that ambiguity contribute to his confusion. Thus, the text is obscure primarily because Nick's reading of it makes it so.

Nick's description of the Thanksgiving Service at St. Paul's, commemorating the end of the Second World War, is another illustration of his interpretative technique.<sup>14</sup> The circumstances in which he reads are somewhat different from those surrounding his reading of the commission, the inscription, and the epigraph, as he is faced with numerous "texts" in sequence, but Nick's response to the selected hymns and biblical passages of the service is equally constructive and imaginative, as he both translates texts into images, and tries to discover "meaning". Essentially, Nick indulges in a series of interpretative activities: he tries, and fails, to

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Powell, The Military Philosophers (London: Heinemann, 1968), pp. 221-7. All further references to this work appear in the text.

understand authorial intention; he constructs his own "meaning" by relating the various texts to his wartime experience; he pursues a chain of associations, in which one text recalls another, thereby leading to a short digression on the subject of poetry. By the end of the service, Nick's penchant for textual interpretation has led him a long way from the original texts themselves, and this clearly illustrates the very nature of his narrative technique. He is not only re-presenting a past "reality" (the service), but also his experience of that reality.

Initially, Nick ponders the phrase "the habitation of dragons", from the text of Isaiah 35, but he does so, not in relation to the text itself, but in connection with his wartime experience. The phrase recalls for him the V.1. bombs that assailed England late in the war, and this, in turn, solidifies his construction of an image: "Looking back on the V.1's flying through the night, one thought of dragons as, physically speaking, less remote than formerly" (p. 222). What once was difficult, if not impossible, to conjure up in an image, is now almost palpable in Nick's imagination, by virtue of another, separate, image. In this way, Nick's interpretation of the text ("the habitation of dragons") is not directly translated into an image of dragons; rather, he recalls a "real" image (the V.1's), which then provides a basis for the construction of his own image. Hence, because of his experience with the "twentieth-century dragons", Nick is better able to imagine what Isaiah's dragons might have been like:

Probably they lived in caves and came down from time to time to the banks of a river or lake to drink. The ground 'where each lay' would, of course, be scorched by fiery breaths, their tails too, no doubt, giving out fire that made the water hiss and steam, the sedge become charred. (pp. 222-3)

This image, created by Nick's imagination, is the same kind of fictional "picture" that he constructed of the translator, yet, the process is somewhat different. The translator's image (controlled by the text of the inscription) is based on Nick's knowledge of contemporary fashion (the man's uniform), geographical surroundings (Arabian desert), and his interpretation of character (the kind of personality that would be interested in the Sheik's treatise). The image of the dragons, while composed of details commonly associated with the creatures (tails, fire), and, therefore, based on a kind of "knowledge", is nonetheless triggered by another image (the V.1's) which allows Nick to construct his fictional one. Thus, Nick's interpretation of the text, having been determined by his vision of the bombs, is dependent on an experience he has undergone prior to his reading, rather than on knowledge alone. The image of the dragons thus constructed may not appear to be so influenced, but the act of construction itself, according to Nick, would not have been possible if it were not for the recollection of the "real" image.

The primary focus of Nick's reading, however, is the remainder of the biblical passage which refers to the "wayfaring men" who will be able to walk on the "way of holiness". Here, Nick does not translate text into image; rather, he tries to



decipher its meaning. And, it is precisely because the passage is ambiguous that Nick is intent on interpreting it:

Not all the later promises of the prophecy were easily comprehensible. An intense, mysterious beauty pervaded the obscurity of the text, its assurances all the more magical for being enigmatic. (p. 223)

Just as Nick does not comprehend the significance of Gwinnett's epigraph, here he does not understand the intended meaning of Isaiah's prophecy. Who does the author mean by the phrase "wayfaring men": are they "fools", or are they meant to be contrasted with fools; are they simply being warned against foolishness, so that the "way" will be open to them? Each of these possibilities is consistent with the way in which the prophecy is worded, so that Nick is not sure what the text "means". Hence, the text, in its obscurity, creates the "mysterious" and "magical" quality of the prophecy, and this appeals to Nick, in that it allows for a variety of "readings". And yet, as with Gwinnett's epigraph, the obscurity is not so much produced by the text, as it is by Nick's reading of it; it is Nick who cannot comprehend Isaiah's "definition" of the phrase "wayfaring men", and, therefore, it is he, and not the text, who "creates" the "magic" of the prophecy. Having failed to discover a single interpretation of the phrase, Nick chooses to leave the question open, recognizing that each "reading" is valid, and, therefore, none is necessarily "correct". He reaches only one conclusion about the prophecy, and even that is only "fairly" evident: "One thing was fairly clear, the fools,

whoever they were, must keep off the highway" (p. 223).

Having failed to determine what Isaiah meant by the phrase "wayfaring men", Nick proceeds to apply it to his own experience with individual characters:

Taking the war period, limiting the field to the army, one had met quite a few wayfaring men. Biggs himself was essentially not of that category: Bithel, perhaps: Odo Stevens, certainly. Borrit? (p. 223)

Nick knows what the phrase means to him, if not to Isaiah, and, therefore, he classifies those among his acquaintances in the army who seem to fit the designation. Whatever Isaiah may have meant by the phrase, Nick supplies his own "meaning". The meaning of the prophecy, however, is left inconclusive, as Nick does not proceed to apply his "wayfaring men" to the fate prescribed by Isaiah. In other words, he does not relate the men to Isaiah's "fools", nor to the "way of holiness", and this is primarily due to the circumstances in which he reads. The passage from Isaiah, being only one of a series of "readings" and hymns which make up the service, is followed by another "text", to which Nick shifts his interpretative focus, so that, in effect, he does not have the time to indulge in further speculations. Further, when he considers the character of Borrit as a possible "wayfaring" man, Nick is reminded of the story about the honeymooning couple in Spain that Borrit had told him, so that Nick loses interest in the prophecy. Yet, no matter how long, or to what extent, Nick reads the prophecy, he is able to construct his own "meaning" because the text does not do it for him. And, because the text is thus indeterminate, it allows

for numerous possible interpretations.

When Nick recalls Borrit's story about the couple in Spain, it affects his subsequent response to the hymn "Jerusalem".<sup>15</sup> Once again, he is unsure of the meaning of the text: "Was all that about sex too? If so, why were we singing it at the Victory Service? Blake was as impenetrable as Isaiah; in his way, more so" (pp. 223-4). Although Nick does not attempt to penetrate that obscurity, as he did Isaiah's prophecy, the suggestion that the hymn might be about sex leads him into a chain of literary associations, in which he recalls numerous other texts that focus on the theme of love. Blake's "Arrows of desire" brings to mind Cowley, who, in turn, evokes Pope's poetic epitaph; Cowley's conception of "Love's free-for-all in dreams" recalls Poe's treatment of a similar theme; Poe's text summons up memories of Jean Duport.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, this chain of associations carries Nick a long way from "Jerusalem", and certainly from the service as a whole, but the phrase "Arrows of desire" is the connecting link in the chain. In a sense, Nick's interpretation of that phrase is finally solidified in the form of Jean's image, albeit, by a rather circuitous route. Hence, Blake's text (or, at least, one phrase of it) is

<sup>15</sup> The hymn "Jerusalem" is derived from Blake's poem Milton, and should not be confused with his long, prophetic poem entitled Jerusalem.

<sup>16</sup> While Jean might seem somewhat out of place in such a list of texts, Nick says that he often used to think of Poe's verse when he was with her, so that, in a sense, his experience with her is associated with a text.

translated into an image, but unlike the image of the translator, it is constructed by an intricate association of other texts.<sup>17</sup> It is important to note, however, that these associations are not inherent in the texts themselves, in that they are not allusions planted by the authors for the reader to recognize; rather, it is Nick's interpretation of the texts that produces such associations.<sup>18</sup>

If Nick's "reading" of the hymn "Jerusalem" seems to have little connection with the theme of the Thanksgiving Service, it is nonetheless consistent with the text ("Arrows of desire"), so that while his interpretation may be inappropriate, given the situation, it is in no way "incorrect". This distinction may be better illustrated by examining an earlier passage in The Military Philosophers, when Nick describes his visit with the military attaches to Field-Marshal Montgomery's Tactical Headquarters in the Netherlands, near the end of the war (p. 181). As Montgomery explains the troop movements, with the aid of a huge map, Nick's eye falls on a few place-names which remind him of historical battles, and he soon finds himself distracted by other thoughts:

<sup>17</sup> As Barthes says, "Every text, being itself the inter-text of another text, belongs to the intertextual", p. 77.

<sup>18</sup> Even though Pope's verse explicitly refers to Cowley, Nick recalls a Cowley text which he feels refutes, rather than confirms, Pope's sentiments, so that, presumably, Pope is not alluding to that particular text. And, even if that text is indeed an example of Pope's contention, and, therefore, it is alluded to in his verse, Nick "reads" it in a way not intended by the author, so that, if he has not exactly missed the allusion, Nick has nonetheless "rejected" it.

As the eye travelled northward, it fell on Zutphen, where Sir Philip Sidney had stopped a bullet in that charge against the Albanian cavalry. . . . One felt him [Sidney] essentially the kind of soldier Vigny had in mind when writing of the man who, like a monk, submitted himself to the military way of life, because he thought it right, rather than because it appealed to him. (pp. 181-2)

Perhaps Nick feels some affinity for Sidney's supposed view of military life, being himself a soldier by circumstance, rather than ambition, but, in any case, his contemplation of Sidney seems far removed from the contemplation of troop movements, something for which the map is intended, at least by Montgomery. For Nick, however, the name "Zutphen" recalls the poet's experience of war, which, in turn, leads to the consideration of the kind of soldier he might have been. Though the place-name itself does not allude to Sidney, so that it is Nick's recognition of it that sparks his ruminations, his "reading" is not essentially erroneous. The references to Sidney, as well as Rochester, d'Artagnan, and Marlborough, may have nothing to do with the context of Montgomery's briefing, but they are related to the circumstances of war ("forgotten conflicts") in which Nick finds himself at that moment (pp. 182-3). It is as if he were engaged in the same battle as these historical figures, retracing their steps over the same battlegrounds, fighting an eternal war. Further, just as Nick's interpretation of "Jerusalem" leads him to ponder the relationship between sex and the Victory Service, here too, his "musings" lead to "the connexion between sex and war" (p. 183).

Returning to the Thanksgiving Service, Nick focusses his

interpretative attention to the "text" of the national anthem. In a sense, he "reviews" the lyrics by subjecting them to the perspective of a twentieth-century critic:

Repetitive, jerky, subjective in feeling, not much ornamented by imagination nor subtlety of thought and phraseology, the words possessed at the same time a kind of depth, an unpretentious expression of sentiments suited somehow to the moment. (p. 226)

This material, especially the second verse, is nothing like the obscure visions of Blake and Isaiah. It speaks directly, uncloaked by "the verbiage of high-thinking", and, therefore, it does not allow Nick to speculate on its possible "meaning". He is curious, however, about the anthem's unabashed patriotism, which seems to him entirely appropriate for the times, despite a lack of "imagination" and "subtlety of thought and phraseology", "ornaments" so prized in the twentieth century. Nick supposes that the era of the composition must have been "outwardly less squeamish" than his own, an era when "hypocrisy had established less of a stranglehold on the public mind" (p. 227). This "reading" of the past, however, is immediately undercut by a further consideration: "Such a mental picture of the past was no doubt largely unhistorical, indeed totally illusory". Thus, while the anthem may be understood without analysis as a simple celebration of patriotism, Nick nonetheless finds an outlet for his interpretative energies by constructing a picture of a past era, at the same time recognizing that that "picture" may be erroneous. Ultimately, he comes to the conclusion that perhaps the past, like the present, was equally open to some kind of

"thralldom", though perhaps of a different nature.<sup>19</sup>

The way in which Nick "reads" these "texts" demonstrates the kind of interpretative process to which a reader subjects a text. He is an active and creative force in the "realization" of the texts, in that it is his "reading" that translates the words into images and "meaning-bearing" ideas, which approximate the "work". Further, it is his perspective (including his past "reading", wartime experience, and knowledge of the events and characters he has observed) that determines his particular, unique, interpretations. Nick's ruminations during the service also illustrate the very nature of his narrative technique in the novel. He does not simply describe the event as it happened, in effect, put a "mirror" up to reality; rather, he describes his experience of that reality. Thus, he does not describe the church, nor the people gathered there, and list the various selections from the service. He describes, on the contrary, his experience of the service, and, therefore, he includes his thoughts throughout the event (both the interesting and uninteresting parts: "The Archbishop unenthralingly preached"), so that his perception of the service is unlike that of anyone else present (p. 223). Hence, while Cowley, Pope, Poe, and Jean Duport have nothing to do with the service, they are nonetheless a part of it in Nick's view, and, therefore, for us, as readers of his narrative, equally a part of the experience.

<sup>19</sup> Nick's process of interpretation mirrors, to some extent, Todorov's concept of reading: "Ignorance, imagination, illusion, and truth: here are at least three stages through which the search for knowledge passes before leading a character to a definitive construction", p. 79.

## Chapter II

While Nick constructs the characters of Queen Victoria, Uncle Giles, and the translator by reading the texts of the commission and the inscription, that interpretative process is essentially analogous to the way in which he "interprets" physical phenomena. That is, when Nick observes certain events and characters, he tends to subject them to the same kind of "reading" techniques which he applies to his perusal of actual texts. This can be demonstrated by examining his description of the novelist, X. Trapnel, in Books Do Furnish a Room.<sup>1</sup> Essentially, Nick attempts to "interpret" Trapnel's personality by analyzing his physical traits, clothing, and manner, so as to understand his character, but in the process he, in fact, constructs that character himself.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, Nick employs the same kind of interpretative approach that he applies to the commission and the inscription: interpreting "signs", suggesting causes, invoking his knowledge derived from other "texts", as well as scrutinizing his own "reading". Within the fictional context of the novel, Nick engages in the process of "getting to know" the novelist, or "constructing reality", and this can be seen as analogous to the way in which a reader

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Powell, Books Do Furnish a Room (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 105. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>2</sup> According to Norman Holland, in his "Transactive Criticism," Criticism, 18 (1976), 335, "perception is a constructive act".



comes to know the characters of a novel.<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, however, the way that Nick "reads" Trapnel suggests the impact that an observer, or "reader", has on the object observed.

Upon first meeting Trapnel, Nick treats his appearance to a rather lengthy examination, noting specific features of physical form and style of dress: "tall, dark, with a beard"; "a voice both deep and harsh"; a "spare, almost emaciated body"; wearing a "pale ochre-coloured tropical suit" and heavy coat, and carrying a walking stick (pp. 105-6). These physical phenomena are, in a sense, "signified facts", in that Nick can see, recognize, and describe them as features, or objects. He knows what a beard, coat, and cane are, so that he "understands" what he sees, just as he understands the language of his uncle's commission, and the translation of the Sheik's manuscript. In this way, the "facts" of Trapnel's appearance are analogous to the words on a page: physical, visible, and understandable entities which form a "language" that "speaks" to the observer, or "reader". Hence, like a reader who is familiar with the language of a text, and who therefore can interpret its "meaning", Nick understands the "language" of Trapnel's physical appearance, and thus, can proceed to analyze it.

Nick's description of Trapnel is more than just a listing of physical traits; as with his image of the translator, Nick

<sup>3</sup> Todorov says that the "construction of reality" is Jean Piaget's term for construction based on sensory perceptions (sight, sound, and smell), rather than on textual information. Though the individual details of construction may be different, the two processes, as a whole, are nonetheless analogous, p. 81.

tries to interpret the character behind that appearance. Trapnel's physical characteristics, as well as his garments, are not merely details to be understood and noted for their own sake; rather, they are seen by Nick as expressions of a certain character, indicative of the man's personality. They are "symbolized facts", and, therefore, they can be interpreted. Hence, Trapnel's beard (uncommon at the time), "tropical suit", RAF greatcoat", and walking stick (with its knob "crudely carved in the shape of a skull") suggest to Nick the character of "an exhibitionist", who is determined to stand out in a crowd.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Nick interprets Trapnel's appearance as a symbolic repudiation of contemporary society:

The general effect, chiefly caused by the stick, was of the Eighteen-Nineties, the decadence; putting things at their least eclectic, a contemptuous rejection of currently popular male modes . . . (p. 106)

Indeed, Trapnel's "personal superstructure" is so singular and "exaggerated", that Nick is surprised when he chooses to drink a "temperate" pint of bitter (pp. 105-7). Thus, Nick views the components of Trapnel's appearance as surface "facts" which represent physically certain underlying character traits, and, therefore, he interprets those "facts" in order to construct Trapnel's personality.

Nick's examination of Trapnel extends beyond the overall

<sup>4</sup> When Nick is outfitted in his army uniform for the first time, he comments, "clothes, if not the whole man, are all large part of him", in The Soldier's Art (London: Heinemann, 1966), p. 3.

impression of eccentricity. He picks out individual aspects of the novelist's appearance and manner, which he considers to be physical manifestations of personality traits, or past experience. Nick sees Trapnel's possession of the RAF coat as an indication of certain aspirations: "The pride Trapnel obviously took in the coat was certainly not untainted by an implied, though unjustified, aspiration to ex-officer status" (p. 106). Not only does Nick see evidence of "pride" in Trapnel's sporting of such a garment, indeed, it is "obvious", but he also assumes that that pride "implies" that Trapnel wishes to be considered an "ex-officer", an aspiration that Nick deems "unjustified".<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Nick "reads into" the novelist's "gruffness of manner" a psychological defence mechanism:

The fact that his demeanour stopped just short of being aggressive was no doubt in the main a form of self-protection, because a look of uncertainty, almost of fear, intermittently showed in his eyes, which were dark brown to black. They gave the clue to Trapnel having been through a hard time at some stage of his life, even when one was still unaware how dangerously - anyway how uncomfortably - he was inclined to live. (pp. 107-8)

Thus, in Nick's view, Trapnel's hard-edged personality (an interpretation in itself) is a facade to cover deeper insecurities, even "fear", and this is evident by "reading" his eyes. Even Trapnel's beard "hints" of wartime experience in

<sup>5</sup> Nick learns "much later" that the RAF coat was a gift from Lindsay Bagshaw, but much of this "reading" of Trapnel is from the mature narrator's point of view.

submarines, rather than a taste for exotic fashion (p. 105). In each of these cases, Nick perceives expressions of Trapnel's character in his physical, and sartorial, makeup; they are "implied", "hinted at", or "given a clue to", and yet, it is Nick who supplies these "interpretations".<sup>6</sup> In fact, Trapnel's appearance, as described by Nick, is not expressive of his character, but of Nick's perception of that character.

Nick's "reading" of Trapnel is not solely based on the physical "signs" thus exhibited. Just as his construction of Uncle Giles, when reading the commission, is influenced by previous "interpretations" of the old man, Nick's view of Trapnel is affected by certain expectations. Lindsay "Books-do-furnish-a-room" Bagshaw has related some of Trapnel's history to Nick, so he is prepared for an "odd-man-out", but Nick has also read Trapnel's novel, and this has produced his own assumptions:

Even without Bagshaw's note of caution, I had come prepared for Trapnel to turn out a bore. Pleasure in a book carries little or no guarantee where the author is concerned, and Camel Ride to the Tomb, whatever its qualities as a novel, had all the marks of having been written by a man who found difficulty in getting on with the rest of the world. (p. 104)

Nick already expects Trapnel to be something of a non-conformist, someone who does not "get on" with the world in general, and, therefore, his examination of the novelist's appearance seems

<sup>6</sup> In Temporary Kings (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 20, Nick gives a similar, though briefer, "reading" of Russell Gwinnett, in which he maintains that the man's thin bones and sallow skin "suggested" his American nationality.

to be a confirmation of the earlier postulation. More importantly, these expectations have resulted from the reading of a real text: Trapnel's novel. Nick has already, to some extent, constructed Trapnel's character by interpreting what he has written (not unlike his evaluation of Queen Victoria, on the basis of the commission she "wrote"), thereby initiating the process of interpretation that continues with the aid of other "texts" when Nick meets Trapnel. This can be seen as a reversal of the process whereby Nick constructs his uncle's character when he reads the commission. Nick expands, or augments, his portrait of Uncle Giles by relating the text of the document to what he has already experienced of Giles in person (or through anecdote); whereas, his construction of Trapnel develops in the opposite direction: having previously defined something of the novelist's personality from the text of his novel, Nick now augments that view by "reading" Trapnel in person. The interpretative process, however, is essentially the same. In both cases, Nick reads the text and "interprets" physical phenomena in order to understand character.

Having noted the "signified facts" of Trapnel's physical appearance, and interpreted the "symbolized facts", Nick proceeds to question his description in the same way in which he questions his interpretations of the commission and the inscription. He wonders if he has presented a "true" picture of his subject:

Perhaps this description, factually accurate - as so often when facts are accurately reported - is at the same time morally unfair. 'Facts' - as Trapnel himself,

talking about writing, was later to point out - are after all only on the surface, inevitably selective, prejudiced by subjective presentation. What is below, hidden, much more likely to be important, is easily omitted. (p. 107)

The "facts" of Trapnel's physical appearance, being merely superficial phenomena, are not necessarily a true indication of his character, and, therefore, may paint an "unfair" picture of the man.<sup>7</sup> In Nick's view, the description of Trapnel, though factually "accurate", nonetheless suggests an aspect of absurdity that is rather deceptive: "In spite of much that was all but ludicrous, a kind of inner dignity still somehow clung to him." While Nick does not question his own interpretation of those "facts", indeed, his analysis is an attempt to reach "below", to what is "hidden", he nonetheless recognizes the possibility of an erroneous "reading". In this sense, if the "facts" of Trapnel's appearance are "accurate", they are only superficial, and may be "prejudiced by subjective presentation", so that an "unfair" portrait could be drawn.

Although Nick does not question his analysis of what is "below" the superficial phenomena of Trapnel's "superstructure", his interpretation of the novelist's character is affected by "subjective" elements. Just as his ironic presentation of the

<sup>7</sup> In other volumes of Dance, Nick considers the difficulty of conveying "the inner truth of the things observed" in an entirely objective, or factual, account. In The Acceptance World (London: Heinemann, 1955), p. 33, he suggests that despite the superficial inaccuracy that prejudice might produce, in describing someone like Mark Members, it might also capture "his final essence"; and in The Kindly Ones, p. 15, he remarks that "overstatement and understatement" often express the truth "better than a flat assertion of bare fact".

"facts" of Uncle Giles' military career (or, more accurately, his suitability for that career) illustrates the role that the reader's perspective plays in the "realization" of the text, Nick's description of Trapnel's personality suggests the impact that the observer has on the object observed. While Nick tries to undercut the "ludicrous" aspects of Trapnel's appearance they derive, in fact, not from Trapnel, but from Nick's perception of him. In other words, Trapnel's appearance in itself is not "absurd"; rather, it is Nick who applies that term, and thus, that perspective, to what he sees. By trying to probe beneath the surface, in order to illuminate the "real" Trapnel, Nick accentuates the "subjectivity" of his description; he does not present the "fact" of Trapnel, but his perception of that "fact". Hence, just as the character of Uncle Giles is the product of his nephew's interpretation of the commission, among other "readings", so too is Trapnel's character the product of Nick's constructive imagination. Trapnel's physical appearance is not, in this sense, an expression of his character; rather, Nick's perception of that appearance, and, therefore, his construction of Trapnel's character, is an expression of his own perspective on that appearance.<sup>8</sup> In this way, Nick's "reading" of Trapnel demonstrates the extent to which he is responsible for the

<sup>8</sup> In Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 36-7, Jacques Derrida writes, "Even for him who finds something discursive in another person's gestures, the indicative manifestations of the other are not thereby transformed into expressions. It is he, the interpreter, who expresses himself about them."

aspects that make up the novelist's character. While Trapnel exists within the fictional context of the novel, and thus, has a specific character, in this scene at least, he is revealed to us through the mediation of Nick's perceptions, and, therefore, is the product of his "reader's" construction.

When Nick conjures up the image of the translator working on the Sheik's manuscript, he translates the text of the inscription into a fictional scene. He recognizes that this image, though restricted by the limitations of the text's "signified facts", is his creation, and, therefore, it is not necessarily a representation of reality. This construction of images, however, is not confined to Nick's reading of texts, for it also occurs when he observes particular scenes or characters. That is, even when he is presented with a "real" image (a person in a certain situation), as opposed to a text (like the inscription), Nick will often conjure up another image, which is his interpretative response to the "real" one. And, while the image thus constructed is a "fiction", in that it is Nick's imaginative creation, it is also a fiction in the sense that it derives from a "false" reading of the subject. Here, the interpretative process is unlike that in which Nick indulges when "reading" X. Trapnel's appearance, for instead of systematically analyzing the superficial features of his subject, in order to construct character, Nick almost unconsciously translates what he sees into his own images, which are only later perceived as character analyses. By examining these episodes of image construction, one can estimate the effect



that a perceiver has on the perceived, and, therefore, the significance of Nick's role as a vehicle of perspective.

In A Buyer's Market, when Nick and the Walpole-Wilson party are being conducted through the dungeons of Stourwater by Sir Magnus Donners, Nick becomes separated from the others, and comes upon Widmerpool peering through a grilled window.<sup>9</sup> The surprise of such an encounter, as well as the dark and enclosed surroundings, prompts Nick to fantasize for a moment about his friend's unexpected appearance. Widmerpool's presence, as strange as it is in reality, becomes even more so in Nick's imagination:

It was a vision of Widmerpool, imprisoned, to all outward appearances, in an underground cell, from which only a small grating gave access to the outer world . . . I felt a chill at my heart in the fate that must be his, thus immured, while I racked my brain, for the same brief instant of almost unbearable anxiety, to conjecture what crime, or dereliction of duty, he must have committed to suffer such treatment at the hands of his tyrant. (p. 204)

At first, Nick encounters only a voice ("isolated from human agency"), but even when he recognizes that it belongs to Widmerpool, the actual sight of the man, peering through the barred window, does not immediately explain his presence; indeed, it produces what Nick terms a "nameless apprehension". Nick registers in his mind the physical "facts" of Widmerpool's appearance (his face behind the bars, somewhat shadowed by the

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Powell, A Buyer's Market (London: Heinemann, 1952), p. 203. All further references to this work appear in the text.

darkness of the dungeon), but he interprets those "facts" by imagining that Widmerpool is imprisoned in a cell for some kind of crime. Nick translates what he sees (the "real" image of Widmerpool) into a vision that exists only in his imagination, even though it is based on "fact". Here, Nick's "reading" involves the construction of image from image, as opposed to image from text, which is essentially the translation of reality into fiction.

What Nick terms his "subconscious fantasies of the mind", are triggered by the unexpected sight of Widmerpool, but they are conditioned, or partly determined, by Nick's recollection of something beyond the "real" image itself:

Perhaps Sir Magnus's allusion to the appropriate treatment of 'girls who don't behave' . . . had, for some unaccountable reason, resulted in the conjuration of this spectre, as the image seemed to be, that took form at that moment before my eyes. (pp. 204-5)

Having heard Sir Magnus speak of imprisoning untractable women in his dungeon, Nick associates such treatment with Widmerpool's presence, which, at this point, is otherwise unexplainable. Nick's image of Widmerpool incarcerated in a cell is thus dependent on other factors than just what he sees at that moment. It is important to note, however, that this recognition of the possible causes behind Nick's image does not occur at the time of the encounter; rather, it is the mature narrator's insight. When Nick sees Widmerpool, he conjures up his image almost unconsciously; it is an immediate impression, of brief duration, which is discarded in an instant. It is only on

looking back, that Nick endeavours to offer an explanation for his "spectre". Hence, it is on reconsideration of the encounter with Widmerpool that Nick describes the "outrageous" and "incredible" assumptions that the waking mind can make, in order that he may explain his imaginative fantasy. By "rereading" the incident, and examining his response to it, Nick distinguishes between the object observed (Widmerpool) and his perception of that object (his "spectre"), thereby focussing on the element of perspective.

Whereas Nick recognizes the part that his creative imagination plays in the construction of the translator's image, thereby acknowledging its "unreality", his realization that Widmerpool is not incarcerated in the dungeons leads him to declare the absurdity of his imaginings. As soon as he reverts to "rational thought", he comes to understand that Widmerpool is speaking to him from the outside of the castle, and thus, is not even remotely confined to the cell of Nick's imagination (p. 205). Nick has "misread" the presence of his friend, yet, as he suggests, that "misreading" is not altogether a "false" interpretation. He deems his image of Widmerpool to be an "absurd aberration", but includes it in his narrative "because it had some relation to what followed", and, indeed, the notion that Widmerpool is a kind of prisoner soon appears less outrageous. He may not be in prison, in the physical sense of the word, but Widmerpool's confession that he has paid the expenses for Gypsy Jones' abortion suggests that he has committed, at least in his own mind, a "crime" for which he is

being punished (pp. 207-9). In this sense, the cell constructed in Nick's imagination, while factually inaccurate, may be an appropriate "re-presentation" of the mental anguish that Widmerpool is suffering. Hence, while Nick's "reading" of Widmerpool's presence is erroneous, in that he is actually on the outside of the castle, peering through a window, such an interpretation may, in fact, be ultimately "correct", because that image may characterize the man's inner conflict. A physical description of Widmerpool may be a factually accurate picture of what is before Nick's eyes, but Nick's "subconscious fantasies", albeit "false", capture the essence of Widmerpool's situation, something of which Nick is unaware at this point. In this way, Nick's "misreading" nonetheless results in a valid interpretation; he misinterprets the "facts", but in so doing, constructs an appropriate, though fictional, image.

Nick experiences another such "aberration" in The Kindly Ones, when he is once again in the company of Sir Magnus at Stourwater (p. 115). Upon meeting Betty Templer, Peter's second wife, Nick's immediate impression of her evokes another fanciful image. She appears to be so "dazed" and "terrified" that Nick imagines she has just emerged from the dungeons:

Could it be that Betty Templer, with her husband's connivance - an explanation of Templer's uneasy air - had been imprisoned in the course of some partly high-spirited, partly sadistic, romps to gratify their host's strange whims? Of course, I did not seriously suppose such a thing, but for a split second the grotesque notion presented itself.

Just as Widmerpool is "imprisoned" in Nick's imagination, if

only for a moment, so too is Betty Templer. Unlike Nick's "reading" of Widmerpool, however, in this instance there is no construction of a second, fictional, image; at least Nick does not describe one, but such an image is nonetheless suggested by his musings. By constructing a possible reason, which is as fictional as Widmerpool's incarceration, for Betty's agitation, Nick evokes the impression, if not the detailed image, of such "rompings". And, once again, the association with Sir Magnus' reference to "girls who don't behave", and the previous tour through the dungeons of Stourwater, influence Nick's "reading" of Betty's condition. Even though Nick immediately recognizes the absurdity of his speculations, thereby acknowledging his "misreading" of the woman, his error lies, not in perceiving the "signified facts" (her uneasiness and fear), but in interpreting the reason for those "facts".

Notwithstanding the fantastic nature of Nick's "grotesque notion", the idea that Betty Templer has been subjected to "some partly high-spirited, partly sadistic, rompings", is not so wide of the mark. Like Widmerpool, she might be seen as "imprisoned", in the sense that her marriage to Peter appears to be a rather "punishing" experience for her. This becomes evident, at least to Nick, as he continues to examine the woman's manner, without recourse to obvious fantasy, in an attempt to discover the real source of her "terror". He wonders why Peter married her (did he want a less than bright, adoring "devotee", who would not run off with another man, as did his first wife, Mona?); he speculates on the kind of life such a

marriage had probably brought about for the essentially shy and nervous wife (Peter's enjoyment of social occasions, and his tendency to stray); and he comes to the conclusion that Betty is on the brink of insanity: "That, at least, was my own reading of the situation" (p. 121). Later, when the party decides to pose as the Seven Deadly Sins for Sir Magnus' camera (incidentally, Nick's idea), Betty's reluctance to join them provokes exasperation in her husband and their host, while her tearful exit from the room, after watching Peter's portrayal of "Lust" with Anne Umfraville, elicits only mild concern (pp. 125-33). Such "rompings" may not be "sadistic", but it seems evident that both Peter and Sir Magnus have indeed subjected Betty, at the very least, to unconscious cruelty. While she may not have undergone the punishment reserved for "girls who don't behave", as in Nick's imagination, she nonetheless does experience a form of mental suffering during the party. Hence, Nick's "reading" of Betty's fear may initially be incorrect (she has not, as far as we know, been chained up in the dungeons of Stourwater), but the "inner truth" of her situation at that moment could well be represented, metaphorically speaking, in such a vision.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> In A Buyer's Market, p. 138, Nick's "reading" of Sir Magnus Donners and Mrs. ["Baby"] Wentworth contains the same kind of image construction as his "reading" of Widmerpool and Betty Templer. Seeing them enter a room, looking none too pleased with each other, Nick is reminded of the kind of pictures, then in vogue, that treated biblical subjects in modern dress, and imagines the pair as Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden: "this impression being so vivid that I almost expected them to be followed through the door by a well-tailored angel, pointing in their direction a flaming sword." Here, the "real" image of the couple produces the anticipation of a "fictional" one, which, subsequently, is "unrealized".

While these episodes indicate Nick's tendency to allow his imagination comparatively free rein, and thus, illustrate an interesting aspect of his character, they also suggest the impact that an observer has on the object observed. Nick describes what he sees, whether Widmerpool looking in a window or Betty Templer looking frightened and confused, but he also describes his response to what he sees. He presents his reader with his "reading" of the scene before him: in one instance, in the form of an image, which, though based on the "facts" of what he sees, is essentially his own creation; in the other instance, by imagining possible causes for what he sees, which, in themselves, suggest an equally fictitious image. Further, though in both cases Nick "misreads" what he sees, that "misreading" nonetheless results in a fairly just interpretation of the "inner truth" that exists beneath the surface phenomena. In both cases, Nick's "reading" may seem almost unconscious, a spontaneous reaction which is neither voluntary nor calculated, but it does contain the same elements of construction which mark his more deliberate reading of texts. It also illustrates how an observer can construct what he sees. In this sense, while Betty Templer and Widmerpool may be described objectively as exhibiting certain physical attributes, within a given environment, Nick's perception of them goes beyond such a description, and includes those elements of his own creation. Hence, when Nick encounters Widmerpool and Betty, he sees something other than what is there, at least on the surface; he sees a man imprisoned and a woman subjected to some kind of torment.

The most typical kind of "reading" in which Nick indulges occurs when he tries to determine the reasons for a character's actions. Having, to some extent, come to know that person, Nick is faced with a situation in which his or her actions are not immediately self-explanatory, and, therefore, he goes to some length to examine those actions, in light of what he does know. One example of such "reading" can be found in The Soldier's Art, where Nick tries to understand why his sister-in-law, Priscilla Lovell, should leave the Café Royal so suddenly (p. 142).<sup>11</sup> While the action itself seems simple enough, Nick "reads into" it numerous possible explanations which heighten its importance in his mind, and illustrates his tendency to allow for a "plurality of meaning" in the interpretative process. Nick's response to Priscilla's departure, his ruminations concerning the reasons for her actions, is essentially another act of construction, which, like his reading of the epigraph and the texts of the Thanksgiving Service, involves the discovery of "meaning". It is also an attempt to interpret her personality, and, therefore, a part of his construction of character. The fact that he never comes to a final conclusion regarding her behaviour only enhances

<sup>11</sup> All further references to this work appear in the text. Other examples of this kind of "reading" can be found in A Buyer's Market, pp. 111-12, where Nick ponders on the reason behind Sillery's presence at Milly Andriadis' party, and in The Acceptance World, where he wonders why Stringham is getting married (pp. 197-8), why Widmerpool makes his speech at the Old Boy Dinner, and why Le Bas greets that speech as he does, by succumbing to a stroke (pp. 194-6). Most of these episodes are much briefer than Nick's consideration of Priscilla's departure, but his goal is the same: to discover the "meaning" behind such actions.



the notion that Priscilla, in this scene, is partly the product of Nick's creative imagination, in that her character is described as it is perceived from his perspective.

The events leading up to Priscilla's departure from the Café Royal are fraught with some anxiety for Nick, who has come to the restaurant to meet her husband, Chips Lovell, but who is soon faced with numerous other encounters: with Hugh Moreland and Audrey Maclintick, as well as Priscilla and her lover, Odo Stevens (pp. 106-43). Nick is aware of the tangled relationships between these characters, each of whom has been, or is currently, involved with someone in the group, and this knowledge affects his "interpretation" of the scene. Priscilla, once in love with Moreland, now married to Lovell, and at present involved with Stevens, is the recurring link in the chain, and, because of her relationship with Nick, he finds his encounter with all four characters in a single evening rather trying, even though Lovell has left before the others arrive. Lovell has just told Nick about his wife's relationship with Stevens (p. 108), so that when the couple enter the restaurant, Nick "reads" Priscilla's demeanour with such knowledge in mind:

She was perfectly self-possessed. If aware of rumours afloat about herself and Stevens - of which she could hardly be ignorant, had she bothered to give a moment's thought to the matter - Priscilla was perfectly prepared to brazen these out. (p. 128)

Thus, in Nick's mind at least, Priscilla seems not too uncomfortable at the prospect of an evening in the company of her lover, an "old love" (Moreland), and her brother-in-law, but, as the

scene develops, Nick notices that Priscilla's ease is not complete, especially after he tells her that Lovell is in town (pp. 131-2). In spite of such surprises, that might in themselves be reason for an early departure, Priscilla does not leave until after her suggestion that a blitz might be "on" provokes a general discussion about the safety of civilians and soldiers during the war (pp. 137-8). She begs off by complaining of a headache, but after she leaves (without Stevens), Nick finds that the "real" reason for her departure is not so easily fathomed. Hence, he suggests numerous factors which might explain her actions, and which would be consistent with both her personality (as he sees it) and the events of the evening.

At first, Nick examines the possibility that Priscilla went off in search of her husband, but he considers this "more dramatic than probable", although this, in itself, does not deny its possibility (p. 142). It is much more likely that Odo Stevens' remark about her fear of an air raid being unwarranted had struck an already tense chord in her nerves, but the reasons for that tension seem multiple to Nick:

Possibly this nervous state stemmed from some minor row; possibly Priscilla's poorish form earlier in the evening suggested that she was beginning to tire of Stevens, or feared he might be tiring of her. On the other hand, the headache, the thought of her lover's departure, could equally have upset her; while the presence of the rest of the party at the table, the news that her husband was in London, all helped to discompose her. Reasons for her behaviour were as hard to estimate as that for giving herself to Stevens in the first instance. (p. 143)

Priscilla could have left for one, a few, or all of these reasons,

indeed, for none of them, but Nick does not attempt to narrow the field. He recognizes that he can only conjecture as to the "real" causes of Priscilla's behaviour, and that he might never know the "truth", so that each possibility remains valid. Given what he perceives of Priscilla's personality, and his "reading" of the evening's events (as well as her response to them), Nick allows for a number of different "interpretations" of her departure, thereby, metaphorically speaking, acknowledging the "plurality of the text". Most importantly, Priscilla's actions express to Nick some kind of "meaning", so that her departure signifies more than her explanation (the headache) would suggest. Hence, Nick understands the "fact" of the event (her departure), but he also "interprets" that "fact", so that it acquires a significance, at least in his own mind.

As with his "reading" of X. Trapnel, Widmerpool, and Betty Templer, Nick's consideration of Priscilla's departure from the Café Royal demonstrates the extent to which her character is constructed by her "reader". If Nick were to describe the "signified facts" of the evening, his narrative would consist of the numerous arrivals and departures of the characters involved, the conversations that take place, and the individual actions of each person. Nick, however, describes more than mere "facts". His account of the evening includes his "reading" of all the persons present, most especially of Priscilla's demeanour and her response to the company. Thus, Nick attributes to her an awareness of his uncertainty about inviting her and Stevens to join his table: "Obviously the thoughts going through my head were as

clear as day to her" (p. 131); he suggests that Stevens' behaviour towards Audrey Maclintick is "perhaps displeasing to Priscilla", who was "no doubt unwilling to admit to herself that, for Stevens, one woman was, at least up to a point, as good as another" (p. 136); and he interprets her complaint of a headache as the result of some sort of petulance:

I imagined that, having decided a mistake had been made in allowing him [Stevens] to join our table, she had now settled on a display of bad temper as the best means of getting him away. (p. 139)

In each case, Nick ascribes some kind of meaning to Priscilla's words and actions, so that they become expressions of her character. In so doing, he does not so much reveal that character, as he constructs it himself. In this sense, while Priscilla may leave the restaurant for a number of reasons, Nick's account reveals only those reasons that he himself imagines to be possible, which, once again, are the product of his "reading". These reasons may be based on "fact" (her relationship with Stevens, her knowledge of her husband's return to London, and her agitation), but they are Nick's constructions, or "interpretations", and, therefore, his creations.

While Nick primarily subjects the texts he reads, and the people he observes, to his own particular form of interpretation, at times he invokes other perspectives, or points of view, which might contrast with, or enhance, his own. That is, instead of offering simply his own response to a person or event, Nick will sometimes present what he thinks another character's response would be if he or she were present to witness what he himself

observes.<sup>12</sup> A prime example of this appropriation of another perspective can be found in A Buyer's Market, when Nick describes the scene at Milly Andriadis' party, as it were, through Uncle Giles' eyes (pp. 96-101). In so doing, he demonstrates not only the impact that an observer has on the object observed, but also the different interpretations that can be derived from one event, by virtue of an altered perspective. By using Uncle Giles' eyes, Nick examines the party from a viewpoint not his own, so that his account of the event is not only different from what he perceived at the time, but also different from what he, as narrator, now perceives from the vantage of hindsight. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that Nick's perspective still pervades the narrative, in spite of the reference to Uncle Giles. In this sense, while Nick may appropriate his uncle's viewpoint, that perspective is not, in reality, provided by Giles himself; rather, it is Nick's perception of what Uncle Giles would have perceived if he had been present at the party, and, therefore, the product of Nick's construction.

Nick's description of the party is an illustration of what Todorov calls "second-level construction", wherein one character constructs what he imagines would be another character's

<sup>12</sup> These episodes should not be confused with what may be termed "second-hand narratives", wherein Nick is told of an incident, or a character's experiences, which he is not present to witness, such as Malcolm Crowding's account of X. Trapnel's "apotheosis" in the Hero of Acre Pub (Temporary Kings, pp. 29-35), or Gibson Delavacquerie's story about Russell Gwinnett's involvement with Scorpio Murtlock's cult (Hearing Secret Harmonies, pp. 162-70). "Second-hand narratives" are not related to us from Nick's perspective, even though he comments on them.

construction of a fact.<sup>13</sup> Hence, Nick views the party from his own perspective ("first-level construction"), but he also incorporates what he conceives would be his uncle's perception of the same event, if he were present to observe it. Nick adopts such an approach because he thinks that perhaps Uncle Giles would have seen "latent imperfections" which he, owing to the "momentary enthusiasms" of a new experience, might have overlooked. Uncle Giles' standards regarding human behaviour may be beyond "earthly" fulfillment (not unlike the "ideal" expectations of the commission), but Nick nonetheless considers the advantages in applying those standards:

To look at things through Uncle Giles's eyes would never have occurred to me; but - simply as an exceptional expedient for attempting to preserve a sense of proportion, a state of mind, for that matter, neither always acceptable nor immediately advantageous - there may have been something to be said for borrowing, once in a way, something from Uncle Giles's method of approach. (p. 96)

Nick recognizes that his own perspective on the party may be somewhat limited, the subjectivity inherent in individual interpretation being a barrier to "a sense of proportion", and, therefore, he "borrows" his uncle's point of view in order to present a wider picture of the party. Uncle Giles' observations would be equally subjective, and not always "acceptable" in Nick's view, but they would provide a kind of balance for the young man's perspective, thereby producing, if not an objective account, then perhaps a more interesting one.

<sup>13</sup> In "Reading as Construction," p. 79.

Nick's use of Uncle Giles as another "reader of the text", if one can equate the party scene with a text, which is "read" by the observer, necessitates a distinction between Nick as the young man at the party, and as the mature narrator of the novel. Even though he says that he had indeed thought of his uncle at the time, it is only on looking back, as narrator, that Nick subjects the party to Uncle Giles' scrutiny (p. 100). He admits that he would never have considered imposing his uncle's view on the party at that time, so that Nick is not only reconstructing the scene through the vehicle of his memory, but he is also examining his own impressions as a young man. Unlike his younger self, Nick now recognizes that the "text" of the party is, and was, open to various perspectives, and that by re-viewing it through his uncle's eyes, he can present a different view of the same event. This is not to suggest that Nick now perceives the party in a substantially different way (aside from the changes brought by time), for his impressions of it remain; rather, by "borrowing" a different perspective, he can "see" the party in a different way, and, therefore, he can present more than one account of the party. Hence, the narrative provides three perspectives on the same event: that of young Nick, the mature narrator, and the narrator's conception of Uncle Giles' perspective. Yet, because these perspectives are the product of the same consciousness (Nick's), they are essentially the perceptions of one man. The altering of perspectives is thus, the result of time (young Nick and the narrator) and imagination (Nick's construction of his uncle's viewpoint).

Nick prefaces his account of how Uncle Giles would have reacted to Milly's party by first establishing the old man's opinions regarding the kind of people present at the Huntercombes' dance, to which Nick had proceeded before the party. This introduction to Uncle Giles' views is an extension of Nick's previous descriptions of him, and, therefore, can be seen as another "building block" in the construction of Giles' character. It also provides a background to the forthcoming presentation of Uncle Giles' perspective, in that it forms a general foundation for the more particular attitudes that Nick ascribes to his uncle in his account of the party. And, as Nick admits, Giles, indeed, anyone else, would probably perceive no difference between the two social events, certainly not in the kind of people to be found there:

He [Uncle Giles] would, for example, have dismissed the Huntercombes' dance as one of those formal occasions that he himself, as it were by definition, found wholly unsympathetic. Uncle Giles disapproved on principle of anyone who could afford to live in Belgrave Square . . . especially when they were, in addition, bearers of what he called 'handles to their names' . . . . It was to any form of long-established affluence that he took the gravest exception, particularly if the ownership of land was combined with any suggestion of public service . . . (p. 97)

Thus, Uncle Giles' observations of Milly's party would be founded on his general principles regarding wealth, and those who have it, principles acquired through a lifetime of such observations, so that, in a sense, his "reading" of the party, or "text", would depend on previous "interpretations". Uncle Giles, in Nick's view, would not approach the scene in a detached and



objective frame of mind; rather; he would bring his beliefs about people in general to bear on this particular "text". In a similar way, Nick too is bringing his past "knowledge" of Uncle Giles to bear on the construction of the old man's perspective, so that Giles' views are the product of Nick's "reading" of his uncle's "reading".

Nick does describe the party from his own perspective, such as the interior of the house, and the physical appearance of a few guests, and this allows for a comparison of the two points of view. For instance, Uncle Giles would have noted, and despised, the atmosphere of "frivolity" that pervades the scene, whereas Nick himself senses that such "frivolity" is "infused with an undercurrent of extreme coolness, a chilly consciousness of conflicting egoisms", which he finds rather "intimidating" (pp. 98-9). In this case, Uncle Giles' sense of the party atmosphere seems to be the result of an immediate and superficial "reading", especially in light of Nick's more penetrating analysis, and this suggests that, in Nick's view, Uncle Giles would be a less than sensitive observer. On the other hand, as a "reader", Nick goes beyond the "surface of the text", whether or not he "interprets" correctly, and identifies the individual threads that combine to form the appearance of "frivolity". Hence, his initial perception of an overall formality, or "stiffness", is modified by his recognition of an occasional "exoticism", which undercuts superficial appearances (p. 99). For Nick, observing the scene involves a movement from the general to the particular: it moves from the general sense

of "frivolity", through an appreciation of the more specific details ("conflicting egoisms"), to the recognition of individual parts, or "patches of singularity" (pp. 99-100). In this sense, Nick is a more acute "reader" than Uncle Giles, who, in his nephew's construction, would never advance beyond the initial, and superficial, interpretation.

Nick's description of the old man with the eye-glass, and the black man to whom he is talking, is another illustration of the role that physical appearance can play in the construction of character. Unlike the account of X. Trapnel, however, here it is Uncle Giles who interprets appearance as an expression of character, while Nick essentially reserves judgement. Nick assumes that both gentlemen have come to Milly's party from some "official assemblage", because one is wearing "miniatures" and a "white enamel and gold" cross, while the other sports an "elaborately waisted" coat, with "exaggeratedly pointed lapels" (p. 100). According to Nick's notions of sartorial propriety, neither man would have worn such attire just to attend Milly's party. On the other hand, Uncle Giles would have balked at the black man's presence because "he would certainly not have approved of guests of African descent being invited to a party to which he himself had been bidden." Equally offensive to Uncle Giles would have been the white gentleman, by virtue of the medals he is wearing. According to Nick, his uncle considered the display of medals to be vulgar, and probably dishonest ("'Won 'em in Piccadilly, I shouldn't wonder'"), and, therefore, he would have dismissed the man with contempt. Thus, while Nick "reads" the

physical appearances of the two men in order to enhance his description of them, without any reference to their personalities (except by implication), Uncle Giles (or Nick's construction of him) employs it as a way to define, and judge, character, but in a very narrow and restrictive fashion.

Uncle Giles' supposed interpretative approach to the party is further evident when Nick describes the battle over a bottle of champagne, waged between a bearded man and a woman wearing a tiara. In Nick's opinion, this would be further material for his uncle's critical eye:

Here, therefore, were assembled in a single group - as it were of baroque sculpture come all at once to life - three classes of object all equally abhorrent to Uncle Giles; that is to say, champagne, beards, and tiaras; each in its different way representing sides of life for which he could find no good to say . . .  
(p. 101)

To Giles, beards indicate a Bohemian irresponsibility, while tiaras and champagne represent a "guilty opulence", neither of which he is predisposed to accept. Beards, champagne, and tiaras are, like the old man's medals, physical objects which, in his view, symbolize the kind of life and attitudes which oppose his own "radical" beliefs. This kind of symbolic interpretation is not unlike that which Nick applies to his observation of X. Trapnel, wherein his style of dress was deemed to be that of the nineteenth century, and thus, a symbolic repudiation of contemporary life. Unlike Nick's "reading", however, which is employed as an aid for the construction character, Uncle Giles' kind of interpretative observation is used not only to define character,

but to judge that character morally as well. In this sense, unlike Nick, Uncle Giles would have taken one look at the "baroque sculpture", estimated its physical and superficial components, and, in rejecting its "meaning", ceased to "read" altogether. That, in any case, is how Nick imagines his uncle would react to the scene, if he were there to witness it.

Nick's "borrowing" of Uncle Giles' approach to "reading" forms an introduction, in itself, to the party scenes that follow, at considerable length, in which there is no further reference to the old man's perspective (pp. 101-51). The mature narrator's reconstruction of the event reverts to the "first level", so that from this point on we perceive the party through Nick's eyes (both those of the young man at the party and the narrator), though he will later meet his uncle after leaving the party (p. 154). Before he continues his narrative, however, Nick invokes the metaphor of the tapestry in order to summarize his overall impression of the scene:

Although these relatively exotic embellishments to the scene occurred within a framework on the whole commonplace enough, the shifting groups of the party created, as a spectacle, illusion of moving within the actual confines of a picture or tapestry, into the depths of which the personality of each new arrival had to be automatically amalgamated . . .  
(p. 101)

Here, Nick recognizes that, though he is only looking at a group of people, some more interesting than others, and that, therefore, the experience is "commonplace enough", his perception of the scene in some way transforms it into an "illusion", so that it becomes a moving "picture or tapestry". And, while this descrip-

tion might at first appear to be no more than an attempt to present more accurately the scene before him (Nick says that the movement of the groups "created" the illusion), it is nonetheless Nick's perception of the scene, and not the scene itself, so that he, in fact, "creates" the illusion by observing that scene. In a sense, Nick's vision "frames" the party, or "confines" it, so that the picture or "tapestry" is formed. Returning to the metaphor of the reader, he translates the "image" of the party into a "text", whose metaphor is the "tapestry" (from the Latin "textere", meaning "to weave").<sup>14</sup> It is thus Nick, the observer or "reader", who takes the individual "threads", or details of the scene, and, through the vehicle of his perception, "weaves" them together to form the illusory tapestry, or "text", thereby reversing the interpretative process in which he translates Uncle Giles' commission and the inscription from The Arab Art of Love into fictional images, or scenes.

While Nick describes some of the scene at Milly's party from his uncle's perspective, that perspective is nonetheless a product of construction. That is, we do not get the old man's response to the party, nor do we get what he would have perceived, if he had been present at the time; rather, we are presented with what Nick imagines his uncle would perceive, if he had been on the spot. Thus, Uncle Giles cannot be termed "a kind of second-

<sup>14</sup> In "From Work to Text," p. 78, Barthes uses the metaphor of the "network" to describe the text, which also suggests the image of individual components (my "threads") arranged, or "constructed", to form the "net" (my "tapestry").

string narrator" in this scene, because, in fact, he does not "narrate" anything.<sup>15</sup> Unlike Malcolm Crowding's story about X. Trapnel, or Delavacquerie's account of Russell Gwinnett, the Andriadis party is not recounted by Uncle Giles, but by Nick. In this sense, Nick does not "borrow" his uncle's perspective; he constructs it from his own imagination, based on his knowledge of the man and his character. The old man may indeed have reacted in such a manner, but since it is Nick's narrative, any "readings" presented are his own. Hence, the description of the party becomes another instance of Nick's construction of character. By imagining how his uncle would "read the text", Nick, in fact, gives his own "reading" of his uncle, thereby contributing to the creation of his character.

<sup>15</sup> James Tucker, in The Novels of Anthony Powell (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 11-12, uses the term to describe Uncle Giles' role in this particular scene: "Nicholas will actually surrender his point of view, his judgement, to Giles for awhile", yet, at the same time, he recognizes that it is Nick "who gives us what he takes to be Giles's way of judging matters". I suggest that Nick "surrenders" nothing, because while we may get Uncle Giles' supposed view, it is the product of Nick's construction, and, therefore, of his point of view. In this sense, Nick's "reading" of Giles' "reading" is still Nick's "reading".

## Chapter III

Looking closely at these episodes of Nick's "reading", it is evident that he has a significant impact on the characters and events he observes, and the texts he interprets. As a character in the novel, he seems to play a secondary role, having little effect on the people he meets, or the events he witnesses, which, in turn, have little effect on him. As a "narrator-reader", however, he has considerable impact on the narrative itself. It is not merely that as "teller of the tale", he selects those characters and events he wishes to relate, thereby controlling the content of the narrative, but also that the way in which he "tells" his tale affects our reception of it. Because Powell includes so much of his narrator's experience of those characters and events, primarily by presenting Nick's perceptions of them, that perspective becomes an important part of the novel as a whole. One might suggest that in order to be realistic, a first-person narrator can only relate what he perceives, but then one must ask why Powell chose to use such a narrator. Whatever the reason, one must take into account that narrative voice, and consider how it affects the narrative itself. Hence, one must recognize the two basic elements of the narrative structure: "histoire", which is the story itself, and "discours", which is the way that story is told.<sup>1</sup> While the "histoire" may help to determine the nature of the "discours", from the author's

<sup>1</sup> In Linguistics and The Novel (London: Methuen and Co., 1977), p. 79, Roger Fowler cites these terms as derivations of the Russian distinction between "form" and "content"

point of view, the "discours" has a great deal of impact on the "histoire", from the reader's point of view. Further, since the author must necessarily be a reader of his own narrative (Nick, as well as Powell), the importance of examining a novel's "discours" cannot be overemphasized. In this sense, the way in which Nick relates his story, and, therefore, the way in which Powell constructs his novel, has a profound effect on our understanding of the narrative.<sup>2</sup> Hence, in order for us, as readers, to "realize" the text of Powell's novel, we must understand how the "discours" affects the novel's "histoire".

It is by examining the episodes of Nick's constructive "reading", or in many cases, "misreading", that one can see the extent to which his perspective influences our reception of the narrative. If, as I have suggested, Nick contributes his interpretations to the texts he reads, and his perceptions to the characters and events he observes, then what we get is not just a factual account of what happens, but Nick's perception of what happens. In other words, because of the "form" of the narrative, we can view the novel from two angles: what actually occurs, and how Nick perceives what occurs, whether at the time or in retrospect. Yet, because the former is so intricately connected to the latter, our reading of the novel is greatly influenced by Nick's "reading". In this way, Nick's perspective on characters and

<sup>2</sup> Nick himself remarks on the effect that a narrator has on his narrative, and, consequently, on his reader, or "listener", in At Lady Molly's (London: Heinemann, 1957), pp. 212-13, when he describes his response to Chips Lovell's stories about his relatives: "When someone repeatedly tells you stories about their relations, pictures begin at last to form in the mind, tinged always in colours used by the narrator".



events helps to determine our perception of them, so that the novel is as concerned, if not more so, with Nick's experience as it is with that of the other characters, even though they seem to command its primary focus. Because so much of the novel is mediated through the narrator's consciousness, that vehicle takes on its own significance, being a part of the "text" that we read.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while Nick's "interpretations" must be distinguished from the "texts" he "reads", they are nonetheless included in the text that we read, and, therefore, they are "signified facts" upon which we construct our "realization" of Powell's novel.

Though such instances of "reading" do not make up the entire novel, as Powell presents long scenes in which we have direct access to characters and events (where Nick says little), even those scenes are constantly "interrupted" by Nick's ruminations, which affect our reading of them.<sup>4</sup> For instance, after Nick

<sup>3</sup> James Tucker writes, "Perspective on what happens is as important to him [Powell] as what happens" (p. 97); Francis Wyndham, in "Novels," Encounter, 19 (Sept. 1962), 75, says that "the incidents, which alter, are comparatively unimportant, while the failure to foretell and to interpret them is constant and essential to the novelist's theme"; and James Hall, in The Tragic Comedians (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 133, contends that the novel "develops its characters - even its eccentrics - more as Nick's response to them than as independent entities."

<sup>4</sup> According to W. R. Martin, in "Style as Achievement in Anthony Powell's Music of Time," English Studies in Africa, 14 (Mar. 1971), 82, "every incident is saturated by the narrator's reflection on it. The quality and processes of the mature narrator's mind subdue all the action. The method in the sequence is not primarily dramatic but reflective". Dan McLeod, in "Anthony Powell: Some Notes on the Art of the Sequence Novel," Studies in the Novel, 3 (1971), 53-61, notices that Nick refrains from such "editorial intrusions" primarily when he is "active" in a scene, or more prominent as a character, such as in The Soldier's Art.

constructs what he thinks Uncle Giles would have thought of Milly Andriadis' party, in A Buyer's Market, the scene unfolds in patches of conversation with Stringham, Mr. Deacon, and Sillery, among others, and though Nick plays a secondary role in such talk, he constantly reflects on those who do, by considering the nature of their personalities and their relationships with each other (pp. 101-51).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, after Nick describes X. Trapnel's in Books Do Furnish a Room, he relates his conversation with the novelist and Bagshaw, in which Trapnel recounts something of his past life, and in which Nick plays little part (pp. 109-10). He does, however, continue to examine Trapnel's character, questioning his story about the source of his novel's title (Camel Ride to the Tomb), and contemplating his family background. Hence, while we have direct access to other characters in scenes, where we can "hear" their conversation, or "witness" their actions, and, therefore, construct for ourselves their personalities, Nick's "interpretations" are constantly presented as well, so that they help to determine our own. Hence, whether or not he "reads" correctly, Nick's ruminations consume so much of the novel as to effectively form the basis of the text, thereby controlling, to a certain extent, our reading of it.

In order to consider fully the nature of the novel's "discours", one must take into account the duality of the narrative voice. The distinction between Nick as the mature

<sup>5</sup> Here, Nick reflects on the nature of Stringham's life, especially his relationship with Milly Andriadis (pp. 102-6), Sillery's presence at the party (p. 111), and Mr. Deacon's character (p. 117), among other things.

narrator of the novel, and Nick as a character in the novel, has already been noted in my examination of the way in which he "borrows" Uncle Giles' perspective to describe the scene of Milly Andriadis' party, but this application of a "double perspective" must be considered further if Nick's characterization as a "reader" is to be understood fully.<sup>6</sup> Hence, it is not Nick, the young man at the party, who so "borrows" his uncle's "eyes"; rather, it is Nick, the narrator, who chooses to adopt such an approach. Similarly, it is the narrator who supplies the possible reasons for young Nick's "aberrations" of Widmerpool and Betty Templer; it is the narrator who muses on the possible causes behind Priscilla Lovell's exit from the Café Royal. In each case, the young Nick who is engaged in perusing texts (the commission, the inscription, the epigraph, and the selections from the Thanksgiving Service), or observing characters and events (Trapnel, Widmerpool, Betty Templer, Priscilla Lovell, and Milly Andriadis' party), does indeed "interpret" the materials before him, whether by constructing images or deciphering "meaning", but the mature narrator is also a "reader". As the controlling consciousness of the novel, he, in effect, "rereads" all of the

<sup>6</sup> In "The Heresy of Naturalism," in Handbook to Anthony Powell's Music of Time (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. xviii, Hilary Spurling writes, "Indeed, Jenkins himself may be seen . . . as a convenient device for the adjustment of perspective. . . . It means that the reader sees much of the action in the early volumes as it were in double focus, through the eyes of the narrator and simultaneously through the eyes of his naive younger self." For a more thorough study of this duality, see Donald Gutierrez, "The Doubleness of Anthony Powell: Point of View in A Dance to the Music of Time," University of Dayton Review, 14 (1980), 15-27.

texts, characters, and events that he once viewed "first hand", thereby subjecting them to a "second reading".

Since the narrator is looking back on the characters and events he has observed over a great many years, he is able to re-examine that which he once observed as a young man, and to this extent, he "rereads" those "texts", as well as his own previous "interpretations" of them. Here, however, Nick "reads" from a different perspective, altered by age, time and knowledge, and this often results in a different kind of "interpretation". In this sense, the narrator "reads" the same "texts", but for a second time, and since his perspective has changed, the way in which he "reads" also changes. With the advantage of hindsight, Nick is able to relate individual "texts" (what he once observed on the spot) to what has since occurred, or what he has since come to know, and, therefore, he sees them in relation to the past as a whole. Hence, while young Nick would never have thought that his view of Milly's party might be inadequate, on looking back, the narrator thinks that such an approach would provide "a sense of proportion" to his own perspective as a young man. Similarly, while it is young Nick who conjures up the image of Widmerpool incarcerated in a cell, it is the narrator who relates that image to Widmerpool's subsequent admission that he paid for Gypsy Jones' abortion, a fact of which Nick is unaware when he constructs the image. In this way, young Nick provides the "first reading", registering all the "signified facts" and "interpreting" them on the basis of what he knows at the time. The narrator, however, already knows the individual aspects of each "text", and thus,

his "reading" takes into account the scene as a whole, as viewed in retrospect.<sup>7</sup>

This characteristic of the "rereader's" perspective is evident when one considers the nature of the narrative as a whole. As narrator, Nick tries to form a unified, and comprehensible, whole out of the mass of diverse, and often seemingly unconnected, detail that make up the substance of his past, so that some kind of "pattern" emerges. While this effort may be deemed the province of any author, it is also the aim of the reader, who, on second reading, tries to relate the individual characters and events, not only to each other, but to the "work" as a whole, ~~so as to identify recurring themes in the narrative.~~<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In "The Reading of Fictional Texts," in The Reader in the Text, pp. 94-5, Karlheinz Stierle says that the first reading of a text is controlled by its "linear structure", which gradually unfolds for the reader, while the second reading is determined by a "retrospective view" of the complete text, which produces "conceptual perception": "The second reading thus leads from the quasi-pragmatic reception producing illusion [first reading] to a reception of fiction as such, since it is only then that the fabricated character of fiction is subjected to the reader's critical judgement."

<sup>8</sup> In "The Autobiographical Novel and The Autobiography," Essays in Criticism, 9 (1959), 148, Roy Pascal writes that the author "must also give a special pattern to his whole story, organise it round a dominant motif, so that with the particular identity of occurrences there emerges another, more general identity." Similarly, Northrop Frye, in "The Four Forms of Fiction," in The Theory of the Novel, p. 35, says, "Most autobiographies are inspired by a creative, and therefore fictional, impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer's life that go to build up an integrated pattern." According to Robert K. Morris, in The Novels of Anthony Powell (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968), p. 109, "This concern of relating cause and effect, of describing the figure in the carpet, of prodding or pressing the past in shape is that of the narrator-hero, Nicholas Jenkins."

In fact, that wish to form a pattern can be seen as a result of the writer's "reading" of his own text. That is, by recognizing the need for such a pattern to be drawn in the first place, the author is effectively subjecting his material to a second reading. Nick acknowledges this desire for patterns when he describes the way he once looked at life and the world around him. In The Kindly Ones, when the narrator recalls his experiences as a young boy before World War I, he describes his wish to see Billson and Bracey (two of the family servants) married as "some idea of arranging the world, as then known to me, in a neat pattern" (p. 18). And again, in A Buyer's Market, Nick ponders the seemingly "separate compartments" which he used to imagine existed, and which contained the essentially disparate elements of life, such as work and play, love and hate, pleasure and pain. He now deems this concept to be an "illusion" because he has come to view such elements as parts of a whole:

As time goes on, of course, these supposedly different worlds, in fact, draw closer, if not to each other, then to some pattern common to all; so that, at last, diversity between them, if in truth existent, seems to be almost imperceptible except in a few crude and exterior ways: unthinkable, as formerly appeared, any single consummation of cause and effect. (p. 159)

What Nick once considered to be individual, and often unconnected, elements of life when he was young, are now seen in relation to each other - different, yet joined in some kind of pattern. That "pattern common to all" is revealed as Nick "rereads" the past, viewing it from the vantage of hindsight, so that he can

appreciate the "shape" that holds together the various events and characters he has observed.<sup>9</sup>

Much of the narrator's "rereading" can also be seen as an attempt to correct his own previous "misreading". That is, as a young man, Nick often "interprets" erroneously, whether through ignorance or lack of insight, and, therefore, as narrator, he recognizes those errors and tries to "correct" them. At times, Nick indicates his "misreading" by inserting his mature awareness of facts not known at the time, or by suggesting the inadequacy of his youthful perspective, as he recounts a particular incident. This is especially noticeable in the early volumes of the sequence, when Nick encounters Widmerpool, whom he looks on rather disparagingly, and whom he continues to view from an essentially "schoolboyish perspective", even after they have both left that world behind. Hence, when Barbara Goring pours sugar over Widmerpool's head at the Huntercombes' dance, in A Buyer's Market, Nick says to Tompsitt that Widmerpool is "the kind of man people pour sugar on" (p. 74). Despite the fact that Widmerpool has embarked on a career in business, Nick still regards him in immature terms, but as narrator, he recognizes the inadequacy of such a perspective:

<sup>9</sup> This is not unlike his vision of Milly Andriadis' party, in which he perceives the individual guests moving before him as a kind of "tapestry", an overall pattern into which each new element is "amalgamated". In the final pages of Hearing Secret Harmonies, the passage from Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, which expresses the continual rampaging of human events, can be seen as an appropriate "summary" of Nick's narrative; indeed, it reflects a "pattern common to all" of human history, which may suggest a recurring theme of fiction itself: the nature of human existence (pp. 271-2).

Tomsitt looked disapproving and rather contemptuous. I thought at the time that his glance had reference to Widmerpool. I can now see that it was directed, almost certainly, towards my own remark, which he must have regarded, in some respects justly, as an answer inadequate to his question. Looking back on this exchange, I have no doubt that Tomsitt had already recognized as existing in Widmerpool some potential to which I was myself still almost totally blind . . . (p. 74)

Tomsitt accepts Widmerpool as a person of some interest, so that Nick's response is insufficient; even if he may not "like" him, Tomsitt does not dismiss Widmerpool, as does young Nick. As narrator, however, Nick knows that he had yet to perceive that "potential" in Widmerpool which he now assumes Tomsitt perceived at the time, and which he has since come to accept himself, so that he questions his own youthful perspective.<sup>10</sup> Hence, Nick recognizes the inadequacy of his previous "readings", and, therefore, he is able to point them out, even as he presents them.<sup>11</sup>

Often such instances of "misreading" are not immediately apparent, as the narrator will not point them out until that part of the narrative where he himself became aware of them. The opportunity for Nick to discover his "misreading" gradually

<sup>10</sup> In A Question of Upbringing, p. 134, Widmerpool himself tells Nick, "It doesn't do to read too much . . . . You get to look at life with a false perspective".

<sup>11</sup> Nick is continually forced to point out such "misreadings" in regard to Widmerpool. In A Question of Upbringing, p. 152, Nick says, "I still saw him [Widmerpool] only in the crude, and inadequate, terms with which I had accepted him at school"; in A Buyer's Market, p. 59, he admits, "At that time I still had very little idea of Widmerpool's true character: neither its qualities nor defects."



is allowed for by the serial form of the novel, which, by unfolding the events and characters Nick observes over a great length of time, plots the continual reappearance of the same characters. Hence, Nick is able to reaffirm past "readings", expand them, or "correct" them, as each character re-enters his life. This repetition of characters, often turning up in unexpected situations, or involved in new relationships, but just as often repeating past behaviour, continually forces Nick to refine his construction of their personalities, sometimes with the help of new information, since garnered, but often by applying a new perspective, brought about by a growth in his awareness of human character and behaviour. Thus, this repetition does not simply result in a reiteration of past construction, even though the same characters reappear. Those characters may continue to do the same things, and exhibit the same personalities, but Nick's perspective on them changes, ~~so that what~~ he often perceives is not a "sameness", but a "difference". This can be seen in the case of Nick's attitude towards Widmerpool. When Widmerpool first takes "coherent form" in Nick's mind, he is running along an empty road, looking "comfortless and inelegant", as he trains for races he will never win (A Question of Upbringing, pp. 3-4). Throughout the novel, Nick continues to perceive that comic awkwardness and power of will in Widmerpool, but he also comes to appreciate more positive aspects of his personality, such as perseverance and a knack for business and politics, matters in which Nick himself has little interest. Hence, by the end of the novel, when Nick hears that

Widmerpool has died while running another "race" (and exclaiming, "'I'm leading, I'm leading now'"), the recurring image is nonetheless different.<sup>12</sup> It is not just the circumstances surrounding this repetitive act that have altered, but Nick's perception of it, because now his understanding of Widmerpool's character is based on a lifetime of "readings"; the "schoolboyish-perspective", in this sense, has "matured" to the point where Nick can appreciate the complexity of the man's character, and sympathize with his all too human aspirations to "win his final race".<sup>13</sup>

By characterizing the role of the narrator as a kind of "rereader", one can appreciate the very nature of his narrative. Nick's account of his association with the many characters and events he has observed over the years can be termed a "memoir", and, in this sense, it is essentially a "reproduction" of the past. Without going into too much detail about the creative aspects of memory itself, the autobiography, or memoir, is what J. Hillis Miller defines as the "subjective reconstruction of a life", in which the narrator "recreates" the life he has

<sup>12</sup> Hearing Secret Harmonies, pp. 265-9.

<sup>13</sup> As Dan McLeod says, "While Powell allows his narrator-as-character to change his views of character, the characters themselves do not change at all" (p. 53). In S/Z, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 16, Barthes maintains, "Those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere". Without a change in perspective, a reader will always look for the same things in most texts, and probably find them. A second reading allows for, if not forces, such a change, so that the reader will perceive at least different aspects of the same story.

experienced.<sup>14</sup> As such, he does not re-experience that life as it occurred, nor even as it appeared to occur to him; rather, he "re-presents" that experience as best he can by reflecting on the initial experience itself. Hence, just as Nick's image of the translator is a "re-presentation" of the text of the inscription (enhanced by the contributions of his creative imagination), through his memory, he "re-produces" the "presence" of his past, as he perceives it to have been.<sup>15</sup> Yet, while the act of remembering is a creative reconstruction of the past in itself, since what is remembered is no longer "present", that memory includes within it both what happened and Nick's perception of what happened. This is clearly stated by the narrator early in A Question of Upbringing, when he says that the snow falling and the men working in the road stimulate in him "the memory of things real and imagined" (p. 2). In this sense, his memory contains both the "real" (what happened) and the "imagined" (Nick's perception of that reality). The "imagined", therefore, is not those creative aspects of the narrator's "re-presentation" of past events, which is encompassed within memory itself, but young Nick's perceptions, or "interpretations", at the time. Thus, the narrative contains both the "real" and the "imagined",

<sup>14</sup> The Form of Victorian Fiction (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 18. Miller refers specifically to Thackeray's Henry Esmond, which is an autobiographical novel, and which, incidentally, Nick reads during the war in The Valley of Bones (London: Heinemann, 1964), pp. 168-80.

<sup>15</sup> In Speech and Phenomena, Derrida describes the image and memory as the "reproduction of a presence, even if the product is a purely fictitious object", p. 55.

which, in turn, are processed by the reconstructive act of remembrance.

If the narrator's role as a "rereader" is characterized by a desire to reconstruct the past, both "real and imagined", into some kind of pattern which reveals the perceived themes of an era, Nick's role as a "reader" is essentially characterized by his desire to "know". He is curious about the world around him, especially in regard to human character and behaviour, and, therefore, he is constantly trying to define personalities and characterize human actions and attitudes; in effect, to understand why people behave as they do. He is, in this sense, essentially a "seeker of knowledge", not so much of himself, but of those around him. He is not interested in describing his own actions, feelings, or motivations; indeed, we are told little of his pursuits, except that which we learn through his association with other characters, or by way of an aside.<sup>16</sup> Hence, we are given the "bare facts" of his life - his work, his relationship with Jean Duport, his marriage to Isobel Tolland, and the social functions he attends - but only in so far as they relate to his primary "occupation" as an observer. In this sense, Nick may travel to Venice for a literary conference, and describe some of his activities there, but the primary focus of the trip is not Nick, but the other characters he meets, such as Gwinnett, the

<sup>16</sup> Powell himself has remarked, "I really tell people a minimum of what my narrator feels . . . because I have no talent for that particular sort of self-revelation", in Michael Barber's "Anthony Powell: The Art of Fiction," Paris Review, 20 (Spring 1978), 67. Nick reveals himself through his consciousness not through his emotions.

Widmerpools, and Louis Glober (Temporary Kings, pp. 1-179). Even his intimate relationship with Jean (he does not discuss his marriage) is related more as the perception of a relationship, rather than his relationship, as he tends to analyze it intellectually, and almost totally ignores it as an emotional experience.<sup>17</sup> Nick is more interested in others than he is in himself, and much of his time and imagination is spent in trying to understand those characters, by "interpreting" their interests, ambitions, philosophies, and relationships with each other, in effect, coming to "know" them.

One explanation for Nick's focus on other characters, within the fictional context of the novel, is that he is a novelist, and, therefore, concerned with the study of human lives. And yet, we never learn much about this aspect of his life, as he seems as reticent about it as he is about the rest of his activities. We know that he publishes a number of novels over the course of his life, but he never describes his efforts to write them, nor do we have any opportunity to know their contents, much less their titles. We accept that he has written them (other characters often refer to them), but Nick obviously considers them of little interest, at least to his narrative. The only book to which we are given even limited access is his work on Robert Burton, entitled Borage and Hellebore, and even this is mentioned only as the reason for Nick's return to

<sup>17</sup> See for instance Nick's description of their first embrace in the back seat of Templer's car in The Acceptance World, pp. 64-5.

university, and, thus a point of departure for his subsequent description of his meeting with Sillery, Short, and Ada Leintwardine.<sup>18</sup> Nick's career as a novelist, and, consequently, his role as a writer, seems little more than a detail, included by Powell in order to give his narrator something to do in between the parties, visits to country houses, and travels abroad (one assumes the autobiographical connection to Powell's profession). Hence, Nick's role as a "reader" seems to be much more prominent than his role as a writer, as the bulk of the narrative is taken up with his "interpretative" observations. In this way, by engaging in the process of "reading", Nick attempts to come to some understanding about human character and behaviour.

Hence, when Nick reads his uncle's commission, it is not just in order to describe the personal possessions that Giles left behind, but to discover what those possessions have to "tell" him about his uncle's character.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, by ex-

<sup>18</sup> Books Do Furnish a Room, pp. 1-26. Nick's reference to Burton also forms a backdrop to his sense of the post-war world, in which the individual resolve to return to work is undercut by a desire to do nothing. Nick's return to university "at forty" also brings back with it what he terms "the crushing melancholy of the undergraduate condition".

<sup>19</sup> It might be interesting to characterize Nick as a "voyeur" who lives his life vicariously through the actions of others. In Casanova's Chinese Restaurant, p. 155, Nick responds to the news that his sister-in-law, Priscilla, is involved with Hugh Moreland, by commenting, "That odd feeling of excitement began to stir within me always provoked by news of other people's adventures in love; accompanied as ever by a sense of sadness, of regret, almost jealousy, inward emotions that express, like nothing else in life, life's irrational dissatisfactions." Here, the first suggestion of a "feeling" is quickly succeeded by the contemplation of feelings, thereby shifting the focus from Nick's emotions to his intellect.

amining the figure of X. Trapnel, Nick does not simply describe him physically, so as to appreciate his "personal superstructure"; rather, he tries to come to some understanding regarding the novelist's personality. Further, though his deliberations on the hymns and biblical passages of the Thanksgiving Service do not so much indicate a desire to know human character, they nonetheless illustrate his quest for "the meaning of the text", and, therefore, a search for some kind of knowledge. Nick's reading of the inscription from The Arab Art of Love is, perhaps, the clearest indication of his wish to "know", for it is here sought essentially for its own sake. That is, his translation of the text into the image of the translator has nothing to do with his consideration of Uncle Giles' character, nor with that of any other character he meets, and, therefore, it stands as an action seemingly unmotivated by any other impetus but the act of construction itself. Yet, at the same time, Nick is still involved in the quest for knowledge, since he is trying to discover the reasons behind the manuscript's translation; he is trying to understand human behaviour, even if that behaviour is merely "signified" by the brief text of the inscription.

While Nick may be termed a "seeker of knowledge", his efforts to "interpret" those "seemingly meaningless gyrations" are often met with less than complete success.<sup>20</sup> The fact that he proposes a variety of possible explanations for human behaviour (Priscilla's departure from the Café Royal), and allows

<sup>20</sup> A Question of Upbringing, p. 2.

for numerous readings of texts (the images of the translator, the significance of Gwinnett's epigraph), suggests that knowledge is at best uncertain.<sup>21</sup> Further, while Nick's recognition of the "plurality of the text" is only "suggested" by such "readings", he does acknowledge, at times, his inability to know people. When he is surprised by the actions of others, which is often, his attempts to understand those actions sometimes leave him doubtful about the extent to which his perceptions of people accurately reflect their personalities. Hence, in The Kindly Ones, when Nick learns that General Conyers is to marry Miss Weedon, Stringham's former "watchdog", he recognizes that his knowledge of all three characters is essentially limited to "unimportant" matters, even though he had thought himself to be close to both Conyers and Stringham, and to have had a good understanding of Miss Weedon's character. (p. 217). Similarly, in At Lady Molly's, Nick finds another prospective marriage to be unfathomable, when he wonders why Mildred Haycock should want to marry Widmerpool:

Such an inability to assess physical attraction or community of interest is, of course, common enough. Where the opposite sex is concerned, especially in relation to marriage, the workings of the imagination, or knowledge of the individuals themselves, are overwhelmed by the subjective approach. . . . I record these speculations . . . to emphasise the difficulty in understanding, even remotely, why people behave as they do. (p. 67)

<sup>21</sup> In "Anthony Powell and the Illusion of Possibility," Contemporary Literature, 17 (1976), 234, Thomas Wilcox says, "His [Powell's] only abiding conviction is that many things are possible where human beings are concerned and that 'categorical knowledge' or absolute certainty is therefore impossible."



While Nick seems to relate this inability to know another person to matters concerning love and marriage, the "subjective approach" which undermines such knowledge is equally evident in his other "readings", whether the "subject" is Uncle Giles, Trapnel, or Priscilla Lovell. In this sense, Nick can "interpret" another person, thereby constructing his or her character, but this does not necessarily mean that he knows them; what he knows is his perception of that character, not the character itself, and, therefore, his knowledge is uncertain. In essence, Nick knows his own imaginative construction.<sup>22</sup>

In one instance, Nick explicitly admits the extent to which the "subjective approach" determines his understanding of another person's character, thereby acknowledging his construction of a "fiction". Essentially, he comes to this conclusion because he finds that he has been ignorant of certain facts, which has led him to "misread" that person, so that the character he has perceived exists only in his imagination. At the same time, since the narrator does not alert us to this instance of "misreading" until that point in the novel when he himself discovers

<sup>22</sup> In Remembrance of Things Past, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Random House, 1981), Vol. I, p. 20, Proust writes, "Even the simple act which we describe as 'seeing someone we know' is to some extent an intellectual process. We pack the physical outline of the person we see with all the notions we have already formed about him, and in the total picture of him which we compose in our minds those notions have certainly the principal place. In the end they come to fill out so completely the curve of his cheeks, to follow so exactly the line of his nose, they blend so harmoniously in the sound of his voice as if it were no more than a transparent envelope, that each time we see the face or hear the voice it is these notions which we recognise and to which we listen."

it, we participate with young Nick in his construction of that "fiction". That is, because our construction of the novel's characters is based on Nick's "reading" of them, his "mis-reading" influences, to some extent, our understanding of those characters. In this sense, because we see so much of the novel through Nick's "eyes", when we are not otherwise directed by the narrator, we tend to accept Nick's evaluations as our own. Hence, when Nick is forced to acknowledge the extent to which he has constructed another person's character, he focusses our attention on the creative contributions that a reader makes to a text, thereby alluding to the creation of fiction itself.

In The Acceptance World, Nick finds it difficult to describe Jean Duport without invoking the subjectivity of his own perceptions (p. 134). As with Trapnel, mere physical description seems insufficient, but to go "beneath the surface of the text" to discover her essential personality, would be to reflect his own perspective on that personality, rather than Jean herself. Hence, he remarks,

But description of a woman's outward appearance can hardly do more than echo the terms of a fashion paper. Their nature can be caught only in a refractive beam, as with light passing through water: the rays of character focussed through the person with whom they are intimately associated. Perhaps, therefore, I alone was responsible for what she seemed to me. To another man - Duport, for example - she no doubt appeared - indeed, actually was - a different woman.

According to Nick, Jean's nature can only be "caught" as it is processed through his perceptions, and, therefore, he is "responsible" for how she appears to him. To someone else, those

"rays of character", being "focussed through" a different perspective, would necessarily produce the appearance of a "different woman". In this sense, Nick constructs Jean's character on the basis of how she appears to him, while someone else, like Duport, doing the same, would construct what appears to be a different character. Further, not only would Jean "appear" to be a different woman to the two men, but she would "be" different, so that appearances and reality would seem to be indistinguishable in such a case. Thus, according to Nick, Jean is essentially two women: the one as perceived by himself, and the one as perceived by Duport, since her character does not so much "exist" in itself, at least from their perspective, as it is the product of her observers' construction. Using the analogy of the text, Nick and Duport would "read" the same "text", but they would construct different "works".

Nick's understanding of the observer's role in the construction of character is further demonstrated when he is faced with Jean's confession that she has had an affair with her ex-brother-in-law, Jimmy Stripling. Even though this occurred before her involvement with Nick, such a "fact" forces him to re-examine his perceptions of both Jean and Stripling, and to acknowledge the extent to which his imagination contributed to his understanding of the woman he once loved:

When you are in love with someone, their life, past, present and future, becomes in a curious way part of your life; and yet, at the same time, since two separate human entities in fact remain, you merely carry your own prejudices into another person's imagined existence; not even into their 'real' existence, because only they themselves can estimate

what their 'real' existence has been. (p. 143)

Hence, the feeling of having lived "one life" with another person is merely the result of a personal "prejudice", since each person's existence is a separate entity. Nick is not Jean, and, therefore, he can only "imagine" what her life might be like, on the basis of what he knows, or thinks he knows, of her. In this sense, the "reality" of Jean's life is beyond the reach of Nick's perceptions, so that he must "imagine" that life, thereby creating a "fiction". Nick advances such a theory, ostensibly because he finds that he did not know the "facts" of Jean's life (her affair with Stripling), and, therefore, he "misread" her, but even with such information, he could still only "imagine" even that aspect of her "existence". In this sense, even if he had known of the affair, his perception of Jean might, indeed, would, have been different, but it would still be his perception of reality, rather than reality itself, so that "his" Jean would still be the product of his construction.

Nick's suggestion that he and Duport probably perceive a "different" Jean is an ironic foreshadowing of Duport's subsequent revelation that she has also had an affair with Jimmy Brent (The Kindly Ones, p. 178). On the basis of such knowledge (Duport is also aware of the "Stripling connection"), Duport certainly has his own, unique, perception of his wife's character, one very much at odds with that of Nick, so that the two men do indeed perceive a "different" Jean, at least before Nick learns the "facts". When he is so enlightened, Nick is forced to "reread" his relationship with Jean, now perceiving

her from an altered perspective: "There was nothing like facing facts. They blew into the face hard, like a stiff, exhilarating, decidedly gritty breeze" (p. 179).<sup>23</sup> Even though by this time, Nick has married Isobel Tolland, he nonetheless blames Duport for altering his past, since for him that past now has a different "meaning": "I suddenly found what I had regarded as immutable - the not entirely unsublime past - roughly reshaped by the rude hands of Duport" (p. 180). Of course, the past has not changed; what has changed is Nick's perception of that past, so that the "reality" of his relationship with Jean has not altered, but only how he "imagined" that relationship to have been. In this sense, the past is indeed "immutable", but the way in which Nick has "regarded" it is not, and, therefore, Duport does not "reshape" history; rather, it is Nick himself who must "reshape" his perspective on that history. Hence, just as the woman Nick has known is not Jean, but his construction of her, the past that Nick has "regarded as immutable" is not "reality", but his construction of that reality.

These "facts" about Jean's relationships with the two Jimmies are not revealed by the narrator, or even suggested, until that point in the narrative where Nick himself is told.

<sup>23</sup> These "facts", incidentally, also force Nick to see himself in a new, and somewhat unflattering, light. It is not only that he has been a "fool", but that being one of a trio of lovers, he must have been in some way akin to the others, at least in Jean's perspective: "If her lovers were horrifying, I too had been of their order. That had to be admitted" (p. 180). This is the same kind of "self-identification" that Nick perceives with Uncle Giles and St. John Clarke, which tends to undercut his otherwise rather negative portraits of them.

Hence, unlike his initial perceptions of Widmerpool, we do not know from the beginning that Nick's perception of Jean is in any way naive or lacking in insight; rather, we are as surprised as he is when Jean confesses the truth, and when Duport reveals even more. Consequently, we are forced to "reshape" our own perspective on Nick's relationship with Jean, so that, like him, we have to "reconstruct" Jean's character, as well as re-evaluate Nick himself. Thus, Nick's perception of Jean, both before and after he learns the "facts", is the foundation upon which we perceive her, so that Nick's Jean is essentially our own. Of course, we may see her more impersonally, or objectively, than does Nick, for we occasionally have direct access to scenes in which we "hear" what she says, and "see" what she does, but we are nonetheless as influenced by Nick's "reading" of her as we are by those scenes, especially because we are given no evidence in them which might invalidate, or undercut, that "reading". In this sense, Nick's perception of Jean, his construction of her character, is one of the "signified facts" of Powell's text, and, therefore, like the rest of Nick's "interpretations", it forms the basis upon which we construct our "realization" of that text. Hence, as readers, we read Nick's "reading", or interpret his "interpretations", thereby creating the "work" that is Powell's Dance.

If Nick can indeed be characterized as a "reader", which seems evident, then reading itself can be considered as a theme

of Powell's novel.<sup>24</sup> Whether Nick reads actual texts (the commission, the inscription, Gwinnett's epigraph, and the hymns and biblical passages of the Thanksgiving Service), or observes characters and events (Trapnel, Widmerpool, Betty Templer, Priscilla Lovell, and Milly Andriadis' party), he engages in a process of interpretation which goes beyond mere description, so that what we get is not simply a narrative about a certain group of people, doing certain things, in a given time and place. On the contrary, we are presented with one character's experience of those people and events, something that is necessarily the product of an individual perspective.<sup>25</sup> As a first-person narrator, Nick can only relate what he perceives about the world around him, but Powell seems to focus on the nature of those perceptions when he constructs a narrator who

<sup>24</sup> According to Richard Miller, in his introduction to *S/Z*, Barthes maintains "that all telling modifies what is being told, so that what linguists call the message is a parameter of its performance. Indeed, his [Barthes'] conviction of reading is that what is told is always the telling" (p. xi). In "Fiction as Interpretation / Interpretation as Fiction," in *The Reader in the Text*, pp. 168-70, Naomi Schor distinguishes between the "interpreter", or the "interpreting critic", and the "interpretant", who is the "interpreting character": "via the interpretant the author is trying to tell the interpreter something about interpretation". Some critics do not "interpret" Nick's role as that of an "interpretant", like Richard Jones, who, in "Anthony Powell's *Music*: Swansong of the Metropolitan Romance," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 52 (1976), 358, deems Nick's "true vocation" to be a "chronicler of a specialized group of people".

<sup>25</sup> Powell himself says, in his introduction to Hilary Spurling's *Handbook*, "The narrator, Nicholas Jenkins, is merely a vehicle for expressing how people and happenings struck him during a period of some sixty years; matters on which the opinion of his listeners may differ." He uses the term "listeners" because he views the novel as a story "told over the dinner-table, rather than as recorded history" (p. vii).

spends so much of his (and our) time contemplating that world. This is not to suggest, however, that Nick therefore becomes the central character in the novel, who "exposes" himself through his "reading".<sup>26</sup> By focussing on his narrator's interpretative tendencies, Powell does not so much highlight Nick's character, as he does the nature of interpretation itself. In this sense, by presenting us with a novel in which the narrator may be characterized as a "reader", Powell suggests that the narrative is concerned, to some extent, with the products of interpretation.

As a "reader", Nick uses the interpretative process in order to reach some understanding of the people and events he observes, and this suggests that Powell relates the act of interpretation to a particular concept of knowledge. In his efforts to get to know the people he meets, to understand the nature of their personalities, Nick tries to "reach below the surface of the text", whether it be a person's physical appearance or his actions, so that he may find the "hidden essence" of human character. Yet, in so doing, he brings his own subjective perspective to bear on the person he is "reading", so that any "knowledge" he obtains is not "fact", but his perception of that "fact". Hence, knowledge, at best, is coloured by the observer's "interpretations";

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Jones says that Jenkins "confounds" his "true vocation" . . . with the vocation of a Proust" (p. 358). If this is so, then it is Powell, and not Nick, who so "confounds" Nick's role in the novel, but I suggest that Jones himself "confounds" that role by ignoring the effect that Nick's "interpretations" have on the narrative. Nick is not so much an "historian", as he is a vehicle of perspective.



it is the product of the "reader's" construction, rather than an objective gathering of "facts". Further, because one can only "imagine" the nature of another's existence, one can never "know" the reality of that existence, and, therefore, Nick can try to perceive someone else's experiences, but he cannot experience them himself, so that, ultimately, he can only relate his construction of that experience.<sup>27</sup> Because he recognizes the subjective limitations of his own perspective, as narrator, Nick acknowledges that much of his "reading" is only tentative; he can speculate on the nature of someone's character, delineate possible "meanings of the text", and create images that may "re-present" reality, but since these "interpretations" are the products of his construction, they are only "possibilities", and, therefore, respect the "plurality of the text". Hence, for Nick (and one suspects, Powell), such "readings", and the knowledge he derives from them, are not definitive; there is always another aspect to be considered, another perspective to be applied (such as that of Uncle Giles), so that one's perceptions may change, thereby resulting in a new "interpretation". Thus, the search for knowledge is an ongoing pursuit, never entirely satisfied, sometimes confounded by error or lack of insight, which forces the observer, or "reader", to re-evaluate that

<sup>27</sup> In Speech and Phenomena, pp. 38-9, Derrida contends, "When I listen to another, his lived experience is not present to me 'in person', in the original. . . . the subjective side of his experience, his consciousness, in particular the acts by which he gives sense to his signs, are not immediately and primordially present to me as they are for him and mine are for me."

which he has come to accept, and thus, acknowledge its uncertainty.<sup>28</sup>

Hence, through his creation of Nick, both as character and narrator, Powell illustrates the impact that an observer, or "reader", has on the object observed. Whether he reads actual texts or observes characters and events, it is Nick who, through his interpretations and observations, produces the "meaning" of the "text" and "creates" the nature of the object before him. In this sense, even though Nick bases his "reading" on the "textual facts", whether they be the information concerning the translation of the Sheik's manuscript, as worded in the inscription from The Arab Art of Love, or the physical characteristics of X. Trapnel, it is his acts of construction which produce the image of the translator and the character of the novelist; as a "reader", Nick "realizes" the "text", thereby translating it into the "work". Hence, Nick is not only the "author" of the memoir, but also the "creator" of the characters and events he relates, by virtue of his "interpretation" of them. Just as a reader creates the "work" by interpreting the text, so too does Nick "create the dance" that is his world by "reading" that world.<sup>29</sup>

To the extent that Nick does indeed "create" the characters and events he observes, through his "reading" of them, he is

<sup>28</sup> Donald Gutierrez writes, "Powell's use of a participant-and-witness narrator suggests the process of becoming as a basic moral value" (p. 18).

<sup>29</sup> According to Gutierrez, "Jenkins, in a sense, is this world [the world he describes]; he is its poet or 'maker'" (p. 24), while Thomas Wilcox is more adamant: "The novel is Jenkins, and Jenkins is the novel" (p. 227).

essentially involved in the creation of fiction itself. In this sense, the image of the translator, the characters of Uncle Giles and Queen Victoria, and the "meaning" of Gwinnett's epigraph and the texts of the Thanksgiving Service are all "little fictions" which Nick has constructed.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the characters of Trapnel, Widmerpool, Betty Templer, and Priscilla Lovell, not to mention all of the other people whom Nick "reads", are presented to us as "interpreted" through the agency of Nick's perceptions, and, as the products of that particular form of construction, are equally "fictitious" characters. Hence, while Uncle Giles and Trapnel, for instance, do exist within the fictional context of the novel, and, therefore, have particular personalities, their characters are essentially delineated for us by Nick, so that what we get is not so much Uncle Giles and Trapnel, but Nick's construction of them, and, in this sense, we get "fictions". This is not to suggest that Nick's perceptions of such characters are "false", but only that they are imaginative creations, and, therefore, not "fact". Nick's creation of such "fictions" reflect the nature of the novel as a whole: Dance is not a "slice of life", nor is it a "mirror" of that life; rather, it is a "re-presentation" of that "mirror image", or an account of one person's "experience of reality".<sup>31</sup> In this sense, Nick's

<sup>30</sup> Max Byrd, "'Reading' in Great Expectations," PMLA, 91 (1976), 260.

<sup>31</sup> J. Hillis Miller, "Three Problems of Fictional Form: First-Person Narration in David Copperfield and Huckleberry Finn," in Experience in the Novel, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 27.

account is "realistic" to him, because it concerns his experience of that "reality", but that experience incorporates within it his acts of fictional construction, just as a reader's experience of a novel includes the fictions he himself constructs through his interpretation of the text. Hence, one might say that Powell, through his narrator, creates "fictions within fictions", thereby illustrating the creation of fiction itself.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Miller, "Three Problems", p. 44. In "His Master's Voice? The Questioning of Authority in Literature," in The Modern English Novel, ed. Gabriel Josipovici (London: Open Books, 1976), p. 118, Jeremy Lane says, "The fiction itself is the process of becoming, a being with no security in the assumed possession of truth but incessantly in search of truth . . . denying truth's possessibility, perpetually affirming its possibility."

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