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Anthony Powell’s Secret Harmonies: Music in a Jungian Key

Although Anthony Powell never specifically mentions C.G. Jung’s theory of synchronicity in his work, it is a principle that is central to that mysterious level of life in Powell’s novels he has referred to as the “music of time”. Powell’s music of time readily accommodates a Jungian key; in fact he hints at such an accommodation himself at one point in *A Dance to the Music of Time* when he makes more than passing reference to Jung’s theory of psychological types. But beyond Jung’s typology, it is Jung’s theory of meaningful coincidence that provides a key to the underlying vision of Powell’s novels. Both Powell and Jung found in the reality of coincidence a higher meaning, a sense that secret harmonies were being sounded beneath the clatter of happenstance. What Powell called the “music of time,” Jung developed into a theory he called “synchronicity”. But both took as their starting point the fact of coincidence - especially what Jung termed the “fascinating coincidence.

Fascinating coincidences are indeed rife in all twelve volumes of Anthony Powell’s *A Dance to the Music of Time*. These uncanny “secret harmonies” suggest that transcendental forces are operating in the lives, brief and otherwise, of the characters who caper across the pages of Powell’s remarkable series of novels. After reading *A Dance to the Music of Time*, one comes away with a feeling that all has happened as it was somehow meant to happen, outside the realm of ordinary calculation and choice. Even when displaying his well-known good humor and good sense, Powell’s narrator and alter ego Nick Jenkins tends to be pulled out of the realm of the ordinary and autonomous and into supernatural directions, where fate plays a greater role than choice. It is part of Powell’s satiric style to make merry with the various mystics and necromancers that Jenkins encounters in his life - from Dr. Trelawney to Scorpio Murtlock - but at the same time Powell has not in any way turned his back on their otherworldly world, where life’s noisy chanciness is mysteriously rearranged into harmonic patterns. While the title of the final volume of Powell’s series, *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, is to some degree an ironic comment on the cults and occultism of the seventies, it is clearly and more strongly a phrase that sums up that sense of the mystical music of time that permeates the entire series.

It is obvious, of course, that from one point of view Powell’s narrative unfolds as a realistic, linear history. In Powell’s words, time is allowed to unveil the truth, and in his narrative, Powell seems to be able to wait time out with the patience of a geologist, confident that history will reveal its significance to the abiding and attentive observer. But the novels are not simply linear, or, even though the use of the seasons may hint at cycles, circular. The novels also operate within a “simultaneous” time scheme. Powell hints at this sense of simultaneity through his use of Poussin’s painting, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, as the major metaphor for his narrative structure. A painting, unlike a novel, does not unfold in time, historically, but lives in an eternal present, in which all time is experienced as an instant, or as a constant image. Time is, in Powell’s novels, not only a linear form of movement, but rests in a state of timeless equilibrium, in which endings and beginnings exist together simultaneously. On one level, events and characters do not so much succeed each other in *A Dance to the Music of Time* as coexist, as if on a space of canvas rather than in a period of time.
This suggestion of simultaneity points to the same metaphysic that gives rise to those fascinating coincidences which are so striking and often so hilariously funny in *A Dance to the Music of Time*. The coincidences are nearly always “meaningful” coincidences that fill us with “numinous” feelings - feelings that unseen, nonordinary forces are at work in the lives of Powell’s people. It is in this world that Jung’s theory of synchronicity becomes pertinent.

Jung used the term “synchronicity” to describe the way in which certain things seem to occur as if in sympathy with certain other things. Synchronicity describes a sympathetic falling together of an inner state of mind and outer events, or describes certain types of events that cluster together, or sympathetically cross-connect. Everyone has undergone experiences Jung would term synchronistic, and Jung himself was a storehouse of anecdotes illustrating the phenomenon. One that comes to mind concerns a patient of his, who dreamt of a golden scarab beetle; just as she was telling Jung this dream the rare insect appeared at the window. This is an example of a coincidence with a great deal of symbolic resonance; it begs to have something made of it. This sense that the coincidence somehow “means something” is, for Jung, an indispensible factor in synchronicity. Jung has even gone so far as to suggest that there is something he called a “formal factor” in nature that appears to us as “meaning”. But in any case the end result is that synchronicity provides us with a forest of symbols, to be apprehended intuitively by those whose psyches are in a state of readiness. For Jung, certain meaningful chance events arouse unconscious forces, which means that archetypes are activated and must be explored. These archetypes, which Jung saw as permanent residents in every human unconscious, bring a transpersonal dimension to experience, point to the presence of larger forces than those that reside in the personal ego.

As in Jung’s concept of synchronicity, Powell’s use of coincidence allows us to feel that we are beyond the time-bound world of the personal and introduces a mythical or archetypal dimension to his work. As in Jung’s theory of synchronicity, Powell’s coincidences allow atemporal, archetypal aspects of events and characters to work their magic on the reader. By means of uncanny, fascinating coincidences, which seem to break through ordinary history, Powell gives us a sense that powerful, transpersonal forces are afoot. Time becomes a canvas on which numinous forces can impress their mysterious patterns.

The sixth volume of the series, *The Kindly Ones*, provides an excellent example of how Powell uses coincidence to forward symbolic or archetypal patterns. In the title of the novel and variously in the narrative itself, Powell introduces the motif of the Furies - entities that are not simply literary but which operate transcendentally as factors that penetrate and shape Powell’s temporal world. These agents (referred to ironically and also in traditional conciliatory fashion as ‘The Kindly Ones’) wreak the gods’ vengeance by spreading not only war and dissension, but also feelings of guilt, what Powell refers to in his novel as the “stings of conscience”. It is through two important coincidences in *The Kindly Ones*, one at the be-ginning of World War I, the other at the beginning of World War II, that Powell makes us feel the impact of the archetypal Furies.

Powell builds to one of these significant coincidences in the first part of *The Kindly Ones* by creating a disturbing concatenation of events in the Jenkins household on the very day that the

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Archduke Franz-Ferdinand has been assassinated in the Balkans, precipitating World War I, and, in Powell’s words, “the birth of a new uneasy age”. As the archduke is being murdered on the continent, the Furies that seem to have impelled that historic event appear simultaneously in the person of the Jenkins’ maidservant Billson. While the Jenkins family is entertaining the durable General Conyers in the drawing room, their tranquillity is shattered when Billson makes an unexpected appearance, nude and essentially beside herself. She appears, coincidentally, not only at the mention of Liman Von Sanders, the German general inspector of the Turkish army, but even more meaningfully, her appearance has coincided, it is later learned, with the assassination of the archduke on the continent. While Billson’s breakdown triggers imagery of apocalypse in several Jenkins family members’ psyches, it is left to General Conyers to cope with Billson, just as civil authority will give way to military direction in the outbreak of macrocosmic irrationality on the continent.

Powell is pointing to a connection between Billson’s state of psychic turmoil and the outbreak of World War I, suggesting an acausal, nonrational principle that united them in one field of meaning. There is no causal connection between Billson’s psychic state and the external events in Europe, and in fact we require Nick’s intuitive and narrative capacities to provide the crucial element of meaning in this coincidence. Jung has called synchronicity a “modern differentiation of the obsolete concept of correspondence, sympathy and harmony” and certainly Billson’s insanity is just such a “sympathetic report”. Billson’s unexpected appearance in the drawing room of the Jenkins household comes as the culmination of a series of unpleasant incidents and varying tensions in the Jenkins household; her hysterical nude visitation makes the family feel as if all hell has broken loose in their tidy domestic world. In a variety of ways, Powell makes it clear that this domestic fiasco coincides meaningfully with the anarchy Nick senses is being loosed upon the world with the onset of World War I. For instance, Billson’s appearance is an event Jenkins’ mother compares to the end of the world, and to a figure in an archetypal day of judgment. Later, Nick’s Uncle Giles refers to the death of the archduke as the “outbreak of Armageddon”, picking up the apocalyptic imagery employed by both Jenkins and his mother and applying it to the event that occurred simultaneously with Billson’s appearance. Powell has all along been preparing us for the Billson episode by a subtle interweaving of supernatural imagery with the reality of international politics, so that by the time we reach the climactic coincidence of Billson’s hysteria and the outbreak of war, it is clear that Billson has been possessed by those transpersonal agents that also worked their will in the matter of the archduke’s assassination - the unlovely Furies who have claimed the title of Powell’s novel. In Jungian terms, the meaningful coincidence of Billson’s madness and the madness in Europe announced the presence of an archetype - the unkind Kindly Ones.

The Furies’ appetite for havoc will not be satisfied by the Great War, however. They return to punish and disrupt again, later on in The Kindly Ones, pushing the world to war once more in 1939, and, on a personal level, punishing Nick Jenkins with “stings of conscience” that impel him to take his place in the armed forces. For many critics, while the impression of turbulence remains, the archetypal presence of the Furies - so apparent as a motif in the first half of the book - seems to be less noticeable as the novel builds to the onset of World War II. Often the Furies are perceived as simply fading into an abstraction rather than as having a more existentially felt reality. Once again, however, Powell employs the phenomenon of

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synchronicity to reveal the archetypal presence of the Furies, this time more subtly, not through an hysterical woman, but through the unlikely person of the ubiquitous Kenneth Widmerpool.

Widmerpool is throughout *A Dance to the Music of Time* a creature of the synchronistic laws of coincidence, those “secret harmonies” that suffuse Powell’s narrative. For instance, in *A Question of Upbringing*, it happens that both Widmerpool and Jenkins find themselves spending a holiday with the same family in France. Jenkins’ coincidental encounter with Widmerpool at Madame Leroy’s is presented as part of a cluster of difficulties that end in a distressing bout of nausea on Jenkins’ part. Powell here places the appearance of Widmerpool in a field of turmoil and illness; the coincidental encounter with Widmerpool is laced with upsetting significance. Whenever Widmerpool turns up in Jenkins’ life - and he does so, often - it will mean mischief, a worsening of things, new difficulties, upset apple carts, a loss of some kind of balance. In *The Acceptance World*, for example, when Nick chances to meet Widmerpool at Stourwater, the vaguely sinister castle belonging to the vaguely sinister Sir Magnus Donners, it first appears to Jenkins that Widmerpool has been imprisoned by Donners in a medieval dungeon. This chance encounter becomes a symbol for Nick of a whole field of degradation and tyranny tied to Sir Magnus Donners; it takes on psychological import for Nick, and can even be seen as, mystically, a warning to Nick about the disturbingly medieval nature of Sir Magnus Donners and his world.

Later in *The Acceptance World*, Widmerpool is at the center of a more ambiguous coincidence. During an Old Boy Dinner, Widmerpool’s incandescently boring speech coincides with the sudden heart attack, at table, of the retired headmaster Le Bas. While Widmerpool’s speech and Le Bas’ illness are presented as coincidental on the face of it, there is in this case a strong impression that Widmerpool has nearly bored his old headmaster to extinction. Nevertheless, Powell also sustains a wider field of meaning for this event, for Le Bas’ indisposition during the speech reminds us of the uncanny way in which Widmerpool seems to turn up whenever things are about to go wrong. Le Bas’ heart attack also escalates the level of disturbance that seems to accompany Widmerpool, for, in the subsequent wartime books, Widmerpool’s coincidental encounters with Nick Jenkins are placed in the context of international disaster.

During the war years it is Nick Jenkins’ misfortune to find himself coincidentally encountering Widmerpool in situations that place him more and more in Widmerpool’s power. But later in the series Widmerpool himself becomes a victim of coincidence. As “chance” would have it, he marries Pamela Flitton, the niece of Charles Stringham, his old schoolmate. Widmerpool was indirectly responsible for sending Stringham to his eventual death in a Japanese labor camp. While his marriage to Pamela is on the surface just another coincidence, Pamela is in fact Widmerpool’s nemesis, almost a punishment from God. It is as if Widmerpool has become a victim of the field of escalating disaster through which he has been moving. Justice works through coincidence as well in the final pages of *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, the last book in the series. When Widmerpool comes upon yet another old schoolmate, Akworth, whom he had betrayed half a century earlier in *A Question of Upbringing*, their coincidental meeting becomes the occasion for the fullness of time to bring Widmerpool to a deserved act of penance. Here, the forces that have accompanied the appearance of Widmerpool seem to have turned against him, are devouring him.

But it is in the novels pertaining to World War II that Widmerpool and the forces of coincidence conspire to bedevil others. It is these books - *The Kindly Ones, The Valley of Bones*, and *The Soldier’s Art* - that bring home to Nick Jenkins the mystical synchronicity in
back of Widmerpool’s chance invasions of his life. In *The Kindly Ones*, Widmerpool is in fact the agent for the return of those archetypal Furies that launched World War II. Towards the end of his novel, he appears as a punishing force at the culmination of an evening in which various members of a dinner party given by the reprobate Magnus Donners are enacting the Seven Deadly Sins with the aid of that mechanical voyeur, the camera. Powell has prepared us for this next entrance of the Furies through the character of Peter Templer’s dotty wife Betty, whose hysterical outbursts call to mind Billson’s earlier derangement. But it is a less likely candidate who incarnates for Powell the archetype of the Furies:

> The door of the dining room, so recently slammed [Jenkins tells us] opened again. A man stood on the threshold. He was in uniform. He appeared to be standing at attention, a sinister threatening figure, calling the world to arms. It was Widmerpool.5

The spectre of Widmerpool appearing as if by magic at the culmination of Donners’ symbolically decadent parlor game brings home to Jenkins the absolute imminence and certainty of war, and he goes on to tie Widmerpool’s appearance to the archetype of the Furies in a subtle but unmistakeable manner:

> I had never before thought of Widmerpool as possessing physical characteristics at all feminine in disposition [Jenkins remarks] but now his bulky, awkward shape, buttoned up and held together by a Sam Browne belt, recalled Heather Hopkins got up as an admiral in some act at The Merry Thought.6

The Furies have here, in other words, chosen to make their appearance “in drag”, but while their decision to cross-dress is devious, it should not disguise the fact that in Widmerpool Powell has carried forward from one world war to another the archetypal presence of the terrifying “Kindly Ones”.

The synchronistic appearances of Widmerpool do not always announce the intrusion of archetypal material into the narrative, however. He also operates, to extend the use of Jung’s terminology, as Nick Jenkins’ “shadow”. Basically, what Jung terms one’s psychological shadow are all those negative elements one refuses to allow to scramble out of the unconscious and into one’s conscious self. Widmerpool is everything Jenkins hopes he is not; they are linked together in an oppositional way, but joined they are. From schooldays onward, they encounter each other over the years in London, France, Italy and elsewhere, share innumerable acquaintances and friends, share a romantic attachment to one girl (Barbara Goring), and the sexual favors of another (Gypsy Jones). Widmerpool is, as Jenkins puts it in the first novel of the series, *A Question of Upbringing*, one of those people with whom one is “inextricably linked in life”.7 Eventually, through yet another psychologically significant coincidence, Nick, in *The Valley of Bones*, comes under Widmerpool’s tricky power by being dispatched to a certain army divisional command during World War II.

After a not particularly auspicious beginning with his chosen regiment in Wales and Northern Ireland, Jenkins is assigned to a new post with a new military superior. Nick walks into his new superior’s office, salutes, and finds that an officer, wearing major’s crowns on his shoulder, was sitting with his back to the door, dictating, while a clerk with a pencil and pad

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5 *The Kindly Ones*, p.133.
was taking down letters in shorthand". For a time, Nick only hears this major’s voice droning out exquisitely stupefying bureaucratic dicta. Eventually the clerk folds his pad and rises.

> “Will you sign them sir?” he asked.
> “For Major General,” said the DAAG. “I’ll sign them ‘for Major General.’”
> He turned in his chair.
> How are you?” he said.
> It was Widmerpool.

Once again, we see Jenkins fated to find himself linked with Widmerpool - only this particular connection is the most sinister of all their various contacts and relations. And not only does this remarkable encounter signify a new and dangerous phase in Nick Jenkins’ life, it coincides with a new upsetting international development. “I saw that I was now in Widmerpool’s power.” Nick tells us at the very end of The Valley of Bones. “This,” he continues, “for some reason, gave me a disagreeable, sinking feeling within. On the news that night, motorized elements of the German army were reported as occupying the outskirts of Paris”.

The synchronistic pairing of Germany’s invasion of Paris and Widmerpool’s domination of Jenkins once again gives us the feeling that large, transpersonal forces are at work in these novels. And, of course, the continual pairing of Widmerpool and Jenkins points to the bond between them. Powell himself brings forward this oppositional twinning of Widmerpool and Jenkins in a rather odd and lengthy conversation between Jenkins and the aged General Conyers in the fourth novel of the series, At Lady Molly’s. Interestingly, it is a conversation that draws heavily on Jung’s psychological theories. While his fictional persona Nick Jenkins appears to be completely out of his depth here, Powell himself communicates his own knowledge of Jung’s typology through the medium of the aging and eccentric General Conyers. At Lady Molly’s inimitable salon, Conyers draws Nicholas aside and begins to pelt him with Jungian terminology Jenkins doesn’t really understand. Conyers makes a point of comparing and contrasting Jenkins and the ubiquitous Widmerpool. Widmerpool is characterized by Conyers as an “extraverted intuitive type,” whereas Conyers calls Jenkins an “introverted intuitive type.”

Jung’s idea of extraverted and introverted types is well known, but his further typology, in which the characteristics of feeling, thinking, sensation and intuition take on an introverted or extraverted aspect, is less familiar. According to Jung, the extraverted intuitive type, while often a successful business tycoon or politician, can also degenerate into an opportunist, ready to ride the crest of change and rather frustrated by any state of equilibrium or status quo. The extraverted types can become, in Jung’s words, “immoral and unscrupulous adventurers”. Thinking and feeling, Jung continues, are largely repressed by the extraverted intuitive type, as he strives to manipulate the external world. Although Powell himself does not elucidate what Conyers means by his cryptic references to Widmerpool’s extraverted intuitive personality, Jung’s description of the type is easily recognizable as a good general description of Powell’s Widmerpool. Powell himself elected to use a less expository and more dramatic and

9. Ibid., p.239.
10. Ibid., p.243.
entertaining way to communicate the essence of Widmerpool, retaining his tantalizing references to Jung’s typology as yet another way to both unite and polarize Widmerpool and Jenkins.

Jenkins is characterized by General Conyers as an introverted intuitive type. According to Jung, the introverted intuitive type is a mystic, a dreamer, and artist.12 This type tends to remain aloof or detached from the hurly-burly of life, preferring the richness of his inner life and for that reason can appear enigmatic to an onlooker. Although Powell does not say this in so many words, clearly Jenkins is just such an artist. While Powell gives Nick a positivist, no-nonsense military man for a father, Nick’s mother, with her visions of ghosts, her dreaminess and her interest in things spiritual, represents intuitive values later vested in her son. Although Nick is on one level a cheerful realist, his cast of mind is also deeper, more contemplative. His is the kind of attentive, meditative mind unavailable to the calculative intellect, who strives to dominate or manipulate situations. Jenkins’ mysticism is a Heideggerian resting in being, a mode of consciousness which can suspend calculative activity and, sniffing eternity in the air, can patiently bide its time. Even Jenkins’ humor partakes of this art of waiting, of letting be. He can plant the seeds of a comic situation in one book and wait for at least several volumes for it to ripen. In fact, there are elements, humorous or otherwise, in the first novel of the series, that are not fully realized until the final volume. There is a strikingly self-effacing quality about this patient waiting. Nick’s is an unselfish attentiveness, a Heideggerian Achtung, which allows him to sense in things a second, somehow ultimate level. In this essentially mystical mode of consciousness, all the clamor and clutter of life are resolved into a series of archetypal patterns - spiritually significant and emotionally satisfying harmonies.

On a less exalted level, this attentiveness to “the music of time” also gives Nick certain parapsychological gifts. Nick seems to have special luck, for instance, with the planchette at Peter Templer’s house party in The Acceptance World. Although many hands are on the planchette, Nick himself admits that it was only he who could have directed the planchette to write, mystically, the upsetting words, “Karl is not pleased”. This pronouncement synchronistically coincides with the sudden illness of St. John Clarke, lately an improbable convert to Marxism. These words are taken by some members of the house party to represent an urgent message by an ectoplasmic Karl Marx. It is clear, however, that Powell is taking a higher mystical road, whereby Nick’s intuitive personality constellates synchronistic coincidences - in this case the blending of the planchette’s words with St. John Clarke’s illness. In a classic Jungian way, Jenkins’ telepathy is a product of his ability to tune into a preternatural psychic field, where there are no accidents and where coincidences are in reality important moments of truth.

Nick’s flashes of precognition are only one aspect of his intuitive gifts, of course, but they do dramatically emphasize his almost uncanny sensitivity to “the music of time”, that synchronistic level of being, cut off from those who seek merely to dominate and manipulate events and situations. Nick’s introverted intuitive capacity allows him to ferret out synchronistic events, and also to intuit his own destiny. He can “know” at once for instance, that he will make Isobel Tolland his wife; or, he immediately “knows” that Germany’s invasion of Russia will be his country’s salvation. This second sight is always glamorous in its own right, but on a metaphysical level, this precognition is a function of a system of simultaneous time wherein past, present and future are all part of a unified field. Jung posits such a metaphysic as the basis for synchronistic phenomena, and his introverted intuitive personality type does not

12 Ibid., p.401.
simply tell fortunes, but is attuned to a reality that moves beyond the linear and temporal and into a simultaneous, atemporal order of things. This view of time infuses Powell’s narrative with its mystical undercurrents, its archetypal patterns, its “secret harmonies”. In this way the amusing coincidences in the novels seem to strike a deep chord, sustained within an intuitive flow that transforms the inconsequential into the mysteriously momentous, giving time its ulterior music.