

A DANCE TO THE MUSIC OF TIME

By Michael Ventura

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Is it frightening or comforting that what Robert Burton wrote in 1621's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* applies perfectly to any moment in which you read it?

"I hear new news every day, and those ordinary rumours of war, plagues, fires, inundations, thefts, murders, massacres, meteors, comets, spectrums, prodigies, apparitions, of towns taken, cities besieged, in France, Germany, Turkey, Persia, Poland, &c., daily musters and preparations, and suchlike, which these tempestuous times afford, battles fought, so many men slain... shipwrecks, piracies, and sea-fights, peace, leagues, stratagems, and fresh alarms. A vast confusion of vows, wishes, actions, edicts, petitions, lawsuits, pleas, laws, proclamations, complaints, grievances, are daily brought to our ears. New books every day... whole catalogues of volumes of all sorts, new paradoxes, opinions, schisms, heresies, controversies in philosophy, religion, &c. Now come tidings of weddings, maskings, mummeries, entertainments, jubilees, tilts and tournaments, trophies, triumphs, revels, sports, plays: then again, as in a new shifted scene, treasons, cheating tricks, robberies, enormous villainies of all kinds, funerals, burials, deaths of Princes, new discoveries, expeditions; now comical then tragic matters. Today we hear of new Lords and officers created, to-morrow of some great men deposed, and then again of fresh honours conferred; one is let loose, another imprisoned, one purchaseth, another breaketh; he thrives, his neighbour turns bankrupt; now plenty, then again dearth and famine; one runs, another rides, wrangles, laughs, weeps, &c."

The English genius Anthony Powell (1905-2000) read that passage in his 20s and quotes it near the end of his opus, *A Dance to the Music of Time*. (His last name, by the way, is pronounced Poe-ell, rhyming with Noel and Joel.) *Dance* is, as he describes, "a 12-volume novel, [with] four or five hundred characters, a million words." In the handsome University of Chicago edition, *Dance* runs to 2,948 pages.

This is no doubt why it is rarely read in the United States, where Powell is the least known of the half-dozen or so greatest 20th century novelists. My friends and acquaintances tend to be eclectically but thoroughly literate, even embarrassingly well educated, yet only two to whom I've raved about Powell had even heard of him.

Those two friends tried to read *Dance* years ago but bogged down midway through the first book. There's a reason for that, which I might as well tackle now: that book's long third chapter is Powell's only misfire in all 2,948 pages. In the last 15 months I've read *A Dance to the Music of Time* twice and that chapter twice tried my patience. Otherwise I was enthralled, captivated, excited, inspired, enchanted, propelled, compelled, "&c" (as Burton would say).

Another warning: Powell's punctuation, grammar, and usages – though always clear – would drive American editors, copy-editors, proofreaders, and English teachers to fits and frenzies. One pleasure of reading England's more expansive novelists is that they justifiably feel it's *their* language, to do with as they please, so long as they remain comprehensible. They take liberties. No grammarian or style book dictates how they employ the birthright of their English. By contrast, these days most Americans timidly strain for grammatically overcorrect, simply constructed sentences that would make an

Anthony Powell feel bound and gagged. If you dig language for its own sake, such Brits are fun.

No one can summarize a story of four or five hundred characters that spans some 60 years, except to say that only 100 or so characters are important and, of those, only about 25 are central. The earliest scenes (not told until the sixth volume) take place in 1914; the story ends in 1971. Most novels follow maybe a half dozen central characters through a story that concerns only them, however large the backdrop. This is largely true even of the massive works of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Proust, and Joyce. Rare is the novel like *Dance* – or Laurence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet* – in which the “story” is the relationship of many characters to each other and to their era as they and their era change over time. In such a work “time” and “life” are revealed as interchangeable and inseparable words. In Powell's vision one's primary relationship is not to others or even to oneself but to time. To life.

To me, this is an enormous idea. (Or am I just a slow learner?) In such a vision fields of thought like psychology, history, and science become as pebbles clanking in a can.

Powell's subject is not “the meaning of life.” A search for meaning is not worth his time. Powell is after how life *behaves*. The behavior of individuals fascinates him – he was an unrepentant gossip. But his creative force focused on building a 12-volume model of many individuals interacting within the larger, impersonal medium that is life itself. Fish inseparable from the salty sea in which they swim -- unthinkable (merely edible) apart from it.

A descriptive clause on the very first page tells of “an abyss in the road [that] led down to a network of subterranean drain-pipes.” It's a kind of announcement: Pay attention to my surfaces, and you shall see the depths! Far from hiding his meanings, he broadcasts his plan plainly on p.2, where something the narrator notices “suddenly suggested Poussin's [painting] in which the Seasons, hand in hand and facing outward, tread in rhythm to the notes of the lyre that the winged and naked greybeard plays. The image of Time brought thoughts of mortality: of human beings, facing outward like the Seasons, moving hand in hand in intricate measure: stepping slowly, methodically, sometimes a trifle awkwardly, in evolutions that take recognisable shape: or breaking into seemingly meaningless gyrations, while partners disappear only to reappear again, once more giving pattern to the spectacle: unable to control the melody, unable, perhaps, to control the steps in the dance.”

For the following 2,946 pages Powell demonstrates how this works in real life, terribly, funnily, sweetly even (when not deadly).

Don't get the impression Powell is solemn! He's ruined me for novels in which there is no laughter. I was hoping to re-read Tolstoy and Dostoevsky before I die, and maybe finally assail Thomas Mann, but I'm not sure I could stomach them now – by comparison to Powell their profundities, however inspiring, are kind of glum. Powell can be funny ha-ha, funny peculiar, sly smile funny, funny for a wink, or the kind of fun a person of spirit might indulge in just prior to his execution. The British are constantly trying to be British, even while bombs rain on London, and Powell finds that fact quietly and consistently hilarious, without denying, or joking about, what bombs do.

He observes that “there [are] no limits to the sheer improbability of human fate” – and he makes the most of that.

He believes “it’s no more normal to be a bank-manager or a bus-conductor, than to be Baudelaire or Genghis Khan. It just happens there are more of the former types.”

Here’s a line anyone over 50 can steal for use at parties: “Growing old’s like being increasingly penalized for a crime you haven’t committed.”

If you read *A Dance to the Music of Time* once, I urge you to read it again, for, remarkably, Powell has written not one but two 12-volume novels in which the same words function differently on second reading. Scenes that were comic become poignant. Scenes that seemed obvious become mysterious. Scenes that seemed serious become absurd. Lines you didn’t notice hit you upside the head. Characters you thought minor become large. A multi-headed tale that slowly transformed from largely comic to largely tragic goes, on second reading, in the opposite direction. And, as Powell says, “Life becomes more and more like an examination where you have to guess the questions as well as the answers.”

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