

Anthony Powell's A Dance to the Music of Time: First Movement

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (April 2019)



Dance to the Music of Time, Nicolas Poussin, 1634-36

The Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset, believed that people can be judged by their interests in life. If this is true, surely people can also be judged by the books they read, and writers the content and themes of their writing.

Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time* is a monumental 12 volume novel that chronicles the life of its narrator, Nicholas Jenkins, beginning in 1920s England and continues for a total of six decades. Partly biographical fictional saga of life in mid twentieth century, *Dance* follows Jenkins' life through his memories, and how he reacts to a world in dissolution. The title of the work is taken from Nicolas Poussin's 15th century painting, *A Dance to the Music of Time*.

Powell's *Dance* belongs in the same category as Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* and Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, and not just because these works are long tales of passing time and changing milieus. Powell has been called "the English Proust." Powell's lyrical rendition of life is a masterful stroke of gathering events that, because they are dispersed throughout a lifetime, few people will remember.

The definitive publication of *Dance* is the four-volume University of Chicago Press 1995 edition. Each volume includes three novels. The subtitle of the four-volume compilation of Powell's 12 novels that make up *Dance* is an allusion to the sections of a four-movement symphony. Volume one, *First Movement*, includes the novels *A Question of Upbringing*, *A Buyer's Market* and *The Acceptance World*. This is the volume that my essay addresses .

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So, if people can be judged by the books they read, writers also convey much about themselves through the themes that their books and other publications embrace. In Powell's case, it is the pathos that *Dance* evokes. Being one of several grand figures of twentieth century English literature, a man of letters of old, Anthony Powell tackled questions relating to interwar English life like few other writers have been able to accomplish. Several glaring questions inform Powell's themes, as these are presented as lived experiences of his characters: Do the young characters truly change according to the times? Or, are they the builders of the nascent world they eventually come to be part of?

These questions are important in several ways. One reason is because in a novel that chronicles six-decades of a man's life, characters can be shown inhabiting their world—like animals at the zoo—while perhaps failing to convey much substance of their inner life as lived experience. The difference is important because life for people of flesh and blood is never experienced as a series of chopped up events. The unity of consciousness that human beings experience is fluid. For example, Jenkins, who wants to be a writer, begins the first novel—*A Question of Upbringing*—by describing a scene of men working on a city street. Some of Powell's critics accuse him of making Jenkins too reticent. Yet diligent readers come to know Jenkins best by paying attention to the tone of his revealing thoughts. The opening of the novel has Jenkins telling the reader much about himself, which I suggest, answers the question whether Powell's characters change throughout their lives.

Powell's prose is lyrical and evocative of genuine emotion. Several pages into the work Powell offers a stunningly melancholic view of time. This early description sets up the

pathos of the novel. Jenkins reflects on Poussin's painting of the seasons, represented by ladies holding hands and turning in a circle as an old man plays the lyre. Poussin's painting appears on the first two pages of the book. This classical depiction of time sets the mood for the series.

The way that young Jenkins describes the passage of time easily becomes stamped in the reader's mind. Before elaborating on this beautiful passage, it is perhaps best to cite it:

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 recognizable 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 of the dance.[\[1\]](#)

The first striking image that Jenkins brings to mind is his equating time with mortality. This is significant because he is a young man, and young people are not normally overly concerned with mortality. He is not in a dangerous situation. For example, he is not in the trenches in battle or in a stormy sea as a sailor—situations when people might think about mortality. Young Jenkins thinks about mortality in an abstract manner, more so than he will later, as an older man in subsequent novels as the years wear on. This is how Powell sets up the young Jenkins as being a reflective person. The fact that Jenkins is telling his story from memory establishes him as reflective.

Another important aspect of this passage is the comparison of the four seasons, each moving around a central pivot that defines and limits their movement. The seasons signal human possibility and fate. "Moving hand in hand in intricate measure" signifies the inter-connected nature of human beings, each facing a specific lot, and each commanding a given step of the dance. Yet, even though Powell describes the seasons-hand-in-hand, his allusion is not to man having to face uncertainty together, but rather that each person must face the dance alone.

Young Jenkins ruminates on the nature of time and how it will shape his life. The recognizable shape of the present eventually gives way to "seemingly meaningless gyrations" in the future. *Dance* is a novel about passing time and what this means to human life. More importantly, the novel is a meditation on time and its effect on people, depending on character and temperament.

What time has in store for different characters in the novel informs the plot of *Dance* Ortega's '*Revolt of the Masses*' and *the Triumph of the New Man*, [Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity](#). He also published a translation and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset's last work to appear in English, "Medio siglo de Filosofía" (1951) in