

# Kenyon College

## Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange

---

Faculty Publications

English

---

4-2012

## J. B. Priestley in the Theater of Time

Jesse Matz

Kenyon College, [matzj@kenyon.edu](mailto:matzj@kenyon.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digital.kenyon.edu/english\\_publications](http://digital.kenyon.edu/english_publications)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Matz, Jesse, "J. B. Priestley in the Theater of Time" (2012). *Modernism/Modernity* 19(2): 321-342. *Faculty Publications*. Paper 13.  
[http://digital.kenyon.edu/english\\_publications/13](http://digital.kenyon.edu/english_publications/13)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [noltj@kenyon.edu](mailto:noltj@kenyon.edu).



PROJECT MUSE®

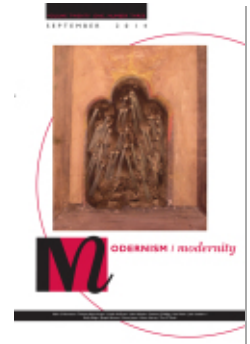
---

## J. B. Priestley in the Theater of Time

Jesse Matz

Modernism/modernity, Volume 19, Number 2, April 2012, pp. 321-342  
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: 10.1353/mod.2012.0040



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mod/summary/v019/19.2.matz.html>



## J. B. Priestley in the Theater of Time

Jesse Matz

At 10:00 p.m. on Sunday, March 17, 1963, J. B. Priestley appeared on *Monitor*, the BBC's fortnightly arts program, to discuss a work in progress. It was *Man and Time* (1964), his "personal essay exploring the eternal riddle," which surveys ways time has been reckoned throughout history, time's challenges to philosophy, science, and the arts, its character in "this age," and, finally, Priestley's own fascination: "multiple time," in which past, present, and future become at once available to human understanding. *Monitor* gave him a chance not only to promote his theory of multiple time but also to get England to prove it. At the end of the program, the interviewer, Huw Weldon, asked the audience to send Priestley "accounts of any experiences they had that appeared to challenge the conventional and 'common-sense' idea of Time."<sup>1</sup> Priestley particularly wanted examples of "precognition" (dreams or other visions of the future) and what he called "future influencing present" (cases in which an experience proves to have been caused by a later event). The hope was to use these experiences in *Man and Time* as evidence in the last chapters of the book itself, and Priestley was not disappointed. England readily obliged: "The response was so immediate and so generous that my secretary and I spent days and days opening letters."<sup>2</sup> A photograph in *Man and Time* shows Priestley peering intently at a billiard table covered with hundreds of letters, many of which he quoted to powerful effect in the book's final speculations (fig. 1).

One letter tells of a woman once brought to tears, for no good reason, by the sight of a hospital. Many years later, her long-time companion "died in that same hospital at which the girl so many years before had stared through her inexplicable

MODERNISM / *modernity*  
VOLUME NINETEEN,  
NUMBER TWO,  
PP 321–342. © 2012  
THE JOHNS HOPKINS  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**Jesse Matz** is associate professor of English at Kenyon College. He is author of *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* as well as a number of articles on modernist literature and culture. His article is part of a larger project on modernist time ecology.





▲  
 Fig. 1. Priestley surveys the letters he received as a result of his 1963 *Monitor* appearance. J. B. Priestley, *Man and Time* (London: Aldus Books Ltd, 1964), 191.

tears” (*MT*, 201). Another letter recounts a woman’s dream of washing clothes in a creek with her baby standing nearby and throwing pebbles into the water. Seeing she had forgotten to bring soap, the woman went to get some, only to discover upon her return the baby “lying face down in the water” (*MT*, 225). She awoke with a “wave of joy” to see her baby safe, but then, months later, was astonished to find herself actually doing washing by a creek with her baby at her side—without soap, too, but forewarned by her dream against leaving her baby alone. One man wrote to Priestley telling how his brother had dreamt in detail about his own funeral: “He had dreamt of a funeral cortege, of the mourners, the bearers with red and white flowers, even me wearing a wide black hat” (*MT*, 324). Not long after, “he got a bad kick on the football field, it turned to peritonitis, he died, and his funeral was exactly as he had dreamed it—the red and white flowers, his football club colours—and it passed through the same streets, everything the same as in his dream.”

Other precognitions were less portentous: for example, one of “an Indian canoe sailing across the Town Hall Square” which turned out nine years later to be theatrical scenery in transit. But together the letters do significantly challenge the conventional,

common-sense idea of time. They helped Priestley prove his point: more exists for us than the present alone allows. And yet the letters were themselves the point. The whole situation—the television appearance, the letter-writing, the response—was itself a tactical performance, part of a life-long campaign in the theater of time.

By 1963, it had been more than three decades since Priestley published *The Good Companions* (1929), the first of many best-selling books to attain the runaway popularity that prompted Virginia Woolf to class him as a mere “tradesman of letters” and to write the essay “Middlebrow” (1932) in reaction against what he represented.<sup>3</sup> By 1963, his *English Journey* (1934)—an inspiration, some say, for George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937)—had long since made him a beloved little-Englander, and his “time plays,” often the talk of the West End, even three at a time in 1937, had been some of the nation’s most popular entertainments. He had been called “a leader second in importance only to Mr. Churchill” in 1940 by Graham Greene, in recognition of his inspiring and daring wartime radio broadcasts, and the public arena had also seen him active as a soldier in the First World War, as a founder of the Authors National Committee (which found ways for writers to pitch in during the Second World War), and as a leader in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.<sup>4</sup> Even if F. R. Leavis had announced that “life isn’t long enough to permit of one’s giving much time to Fielding or any to Mr. Priestley,” and even despite “the myth of the hard-headed and coarse-grained Yorkshireman who knew exactly what the public liked and who gave them it,” Priestley in 1963 had become (in the words of one critic) “the most widely-known of all living English writers: the only one whose name can produce beams of recognition among readers from Liverpool to Los Angeles, Sydney to Smollensk, and so on through the alphabet and around the world.”<sup>5</sup>

All of which is significant here for the way it makes Priestley’s 1963 television appearance a kind of culmination, for himself and for a more widespread form of public performance. Challenging time on television, Priestley was making no new departure, but linking together his signature pursuits and postures into a significant cultural intervention. Popular performance, temporal experiment, social leadership, and middlebrow zeal together marshaled a campaign to regain time itself, and, in so doing, redeem English society.

It may have been the only thing he and Woolf had in common. Priestley was not alone in his bid to transform public temporal possibilities. Woolf as well as a host of modernist writers sought to make such a difference to time; temporal redemption achieved through aesthetic form was integral to modernist invention. Of course, we know full well that the modernists experimented with time, but their experiments are known as efforts at experiential or theoretical verisimilitude, efforts to represent or to theorize the real experience of time. But they also—more characteristically, even—had designs upon time. Beyond any interest in reflecting the truth about it, they tried to intervene in the reality of time, to reclaim or transform temporalities destroyed or enabled by modernity.

In other words, they had what we might call *ecological* motives. They wanted to cultivate the temporal environment and husband its resources, concerned to restore

324 the temporal landscape. Priestley's project makes the ecological motive unusually explicit. The 1963 *Monitor* appearance together with *Man and Time*, the "time-plays," and his popular activism amount to an avowed effort to bring the public over to new and better ways to experience time. Put so plainly, pursued so broadly—so gladly *middlebrow*—Priestley's project most baldly represents the motives, tactics, and goals of modernist time ecology more generally.

To say this project took place in the "theater of time" is at once to capture the militancy of Priestley's campaign and to name the aesthetic mode through which he thought "multiple time" might be performed. For Priestley, drama was the theater in which to fight for time and chart temporal territory for a "New Britain." His "time plays"—*Time and the Conways* (1937), *An Inspector Calls* (1946), and others—demonstrate those practices of precognition, "future influencing present," and other forms of multiple time that were for Priestley key to vital cultural transformations. Beyond that, however, what he called "dramatic experience" had a closer and more essential relationship to temporal freedom, making the theater a space in which the temporalities Priestley thematized in his plays could transfer into real public advantages. As I will show, the theory of time Priestley promotes in *Man and Time* corresponds to the theory of dramatic experience he presents in *The Art of the Dramatist* (1957) and other critical statements. Dramatic experience and "multiple time" share a structure, which would make Priestley's time-plays a new pattern for English society. Correlations among time, drama, and freedom make the theater a space for aesthetic experience that is also political action, a central proving ground for modernist time ecology.

Priestley claimed always to have been "time-haunted," compelled "every few years to vanish into the mazes of the Time problem, returning, rather worn, with a play or a story."<sup>6</sup> It was in 1927, however, that he found new and enduring inspiration for this obsession. That was the year he read J. W. Dunne, "the most important figure in the campaign against the conventional idea of time," the author of *An Experiment with Time* (1927), *The Serial Universe* (1934), *The New Immortality* (1938), and *Nothing Dies* (1940). Other theorists would influence him greatly as well (mainly P. D. Ouspensky and Carl Jung) but it was Dunne's serialism that became essential to his way of thinking about time.

Essentially, Dunne argues that only our conscious selves are fixed to the present moment and compelled to follow the moving present inevitably toward death. Our dreaming selves are not, and they are the clue to an entirely different temporal framework. In dreams, a secondary consciousness transcends the present moment and ranges freely among past, present, and (most significantly) the future. Dreams that seem to predict the future actually perceive it, not through any paranormal magic but because the "observer" that produces them, normally pegged to our conscious awareness, is free of it, free in sleep to see the future, which eludes us only because of the limitations of normal awareness. The observer that produces our dreams is only the second in a "series" of observers that might open up limitless temporal dimensions (running right up against the divine) and endless temporal freedom.

Dunne's appeal to Priestley had everything to do with the purpose to which Priestley felt this freedom might be put. At the same time he was coming to appreciate Dunne, Priestley was developing his critique of England, the peculiar little-Englandism or "conservative radicalism" for which he would become known.<sup>7</sup> Like many, Priestley had come to feel that England had lost touch with the minor qualities that had made it great and were needed to resist evils developing around the world. Not only fascism but the commercialism represented by the United States and the routines of technological modernity were a threat to the natural independence, good nature, organic community, and honest practicality of the real England. *English Journey* famously surveys the result and calls for action. Throughout the nation Priestley discovers lost freedoms, social injustice, dehumanization, the "giant dirty trick" of the country's industrial supremacy, everything becoming "too mechanised and Americanised," "robot employment" and its corollary, "robot leisure," but he also notes that "if there is not as much liberty here as I should like . . . there is a good deal more than there is in many countries just now."<sup>8</sup> There is still hope for England, manifest in the folk in whom its spirit survives, and Priestley encourages it, calling for the nation to "waken up" and take active pride in everything that might sustain the "inner glowing tradition of the English spirit" (*MT*, 322). Most critical to this awakening, as we will see, was what Priestley found in Dunne's vision of temporal freedom. For Priestley came to believe that England's problems were essentially temporal ones, rooted in time's mechanization, the dominance of present interests, and excessive divisions among past, present, and future.<sup>9</sup>

Dunne promised solutions. As we will see, his serialism could enable new recourse to England's great past and its promising future. It could liberate England from present interests and confer upon its people new measures of temporal agency and even creativity. These alternatives were in turn essential to the politics Priestley would profess. He liked to say "it is little England I love," and, as John Baxendale has noted, this little-Englandism was not simply reactionary nostalgia. It was not defined against outsiders, progress, or modernity, but against "Big Englishers," those who want "to go and boss everybody about all over the world" (*MT*, 331). Pitched against Big-English single-mindedness, Priestley's politics entailed something more heterodox, a radical populism embodied in the serial observers through whom Dunne theorized temporal freedom. Any inquiry into Priestley's affinity for Dunne must take into account these political implications, which, I will argue, largely account for Priestley's interest in bringing Dunne's theory of time to the public stage.

Dreams come true—more than we tend to think, and for different reasons. Dunne begins *An Experiment with Time* with this claim and argues (from experience) that dreams actually can predict the future. Perplexed by such premonitions himself, Dunne had thought at first that he was "suffering, seemingly, from some extraordinary fault in my relation to reality, something so uniquely wrong that it compelled me to perceive, at rare intervals, large blocks of otherwise perfectly normal personal experience displaced from their proper positions in Time."<sup>10</sup> Far from uniquely wrong, these experiences came to seem "not abnormal, but *normal*," leading him to believe "that dreams—dreams in general, all dreams, everybody's dreams—were composed of images of past



326 experience and images of future experience blended together in approximately equal proportions” (68). Such a blending also composes the universe. Only our “lop-sided” view of it, “with the ‘future’ part unaccountably missing, cut off from the growing ‘past’ by a traveling ‘present moment,’” makes it seem to exist only now. Because that view defines the primary way we “observe” the universe, consciousness is “lop-sided,” and only ceases to lop time away while we sleep. Dreaming therefore reveals the truth about time. The dreaming self observes things differently, and Dunne makes that form of observation the crux of his “experiment with time.”

First there is waking consciousness or “observer 1,” fixated upon the present and cut off from real views of the past and the future. But next there is “observer 2,” normally compelled by the nature of consciousness to observe what is seen by observer 1. “But what if there is no focus of attention in field 1? What if field 1 becomes, as in deep sleep, a blank, owing to the passivity of the cerebellum?”: in that case, observer 2 becomes free to take a broader temporal view (194). No longer tied to the moving present observed in field 1, observer 2 yields visions of past and future, which not only characterize dreams but give us actual access to other moments in time. But it doesn’t end there, because observer 2 is watched as well, its visions and vantage point the basis for the temporal dimension of observer 3, and so on into infinity. An infinite regress gives way into any number of other temporalities, enabling possibilities and freedoms only denied us by the practical fixation of the “first” of them.

For anyone “haunted” by time, Dunne held out intriguing hopes for everything from prophecy to total recall to immortality. More immediately, however, Priestley discovered some exciting dramatic possibilities. Undone by a bout of melancholy in 1937, Priestley was “blown away by the arrival, like a flash, of what seemed to me a glorious idea”: to make Dunne’s theory of time the basis for a new dramatic structure. “Suddenly I saw that there was a play in the relation between a fairly middle-class provincial family and the theory of Time, the theory chiefly concerned with J. W. Dunne, over which I had been brooding for the past two years”: Priestley saw in a flash that “multiple time,” by which past, present, and future exist at once to understanding, freely observed by a non-practical awareness, could become the aesthetic form for the arrangement of scenes in a play.<sup>11</sup> More specifically, the future could come before the present, its knowledge known to the audience, to give drama something like the power of comprehension Dunne attributes to temporal transcendence. Such was the inspiration for *Time and the Conways*, which Priestley wrote in just ten days under the influence of the “glorious idea” he had derived from Dunne.<sup>12</sup>

*Time and the Conways* opens upon a scene of a happy family at play. Conway brothers and sisters, young men and women on the brink of promising futures, prepare for a game of charades. As the Conways try on costumes and cheerfully tease each other, only two things lend an air of gravity to the action. Performance is an issue, suggesting that the Conways may not be who they seem, and indicating Priestley’s interest in setting up nesting worlds of “observation.” More ominously, the siblings remember the death by drowning of their father, and Kay, who will become the play’s central intelligence, wonders if he might possibly have known in advance that he was to die: “Do you think



that sometimes, in a mysterious sort of way, he knew?"<sup>13</sup> She asks if it is possible "to see round the corner—into the future," and the question becomes the play's key proposal, as Kay dimly perceives a terrible future for the family.

That terrible future then comes immediately into view. Act Two shifts directly to it. Act One takes place in 1919, at a moment of post-war uncertainty and excitement, with the young Conways all clamoring for progress, prosperity, and reform. Act Two takes place in the "present day" of 1937, and much has changed. The setting is the same, but "the general effect is harder and rather brighter," an apt background for a family now ruined by financial failure, death, professional disappointment, betrayal, and hatred (*TC*, 153). Amid the recriminations and bickering that characterize this portion of the play someone remembers the lost moment of happiness from the earlier scenes, "a long time ago, just after the War" when they "still thought we could suddenly make everything better for everybody. Socialism! Peace! Universal Brotherhood! All that" (*TC*, 173–174). All that has given way to failures Kay finally blames on time itself:

Remember what we once were and what we thought we'd be. And now this. And it's all we have, Alan, it's *us*. Every step we've taken—every tick of the clock—making everything worse. If this is all life is, what's the use? Better to die . . . before Time gets to work on you. I've felt it before, Alan, but never as I've done to-night. There's a great devil in the universe, and we call it Time. (*TC*, 176)

But Alan calms Kay, taking a different view of time, making fairly direct reference to ideas taken right from Dunne. First Alan calls time "only a kind of dream," claiming that the better days of Act One are still "real and existing," that "the whole landscape's still there" (*TC*, 177). Then he offers up Dunne's theories to this effect (even making direct reference to *Experiment with Time* itself):

There's a book I'll lend you—read it in the train. But the point is, now, at this moment, or any moment, we're only a cross-section of our real selves. What we *really* are is the whole stretch of ourselves, all our time, and when we come to the end of this life, all those selves, all our time, will be *us*—the real you, the real me. And then perhaps we'll find ourselves in another time, which is only another kind of dream. (*TC*, 177)

And Kay does indeed take a "longer view," seeing that "we're—immortal beings" in for a "tremendous adventure" (*TC*, 177). Alan's version of Dunne proves redemptive. But not before Priestley more fully exploits the dramatic ironies of "multiple time." *Time and the Conways* returns to 1919 in Act Three, which becomes a solid block of bitterly ironic foreshadowing as the happy scene from Act One continues now with the audience knowing all too well where it will ultimately lead. The sister who will die declares with utter certainty that she is "going to *live*"; mother boasts she has refused a business deal which, we know from Act Two, could have been the family's salvation (*TC*, 195). A whole series of such overdetermined missteps and misprisions make the end of *Time and the Conways* a full study in the kind of irony that usually only punctuates a play's climactic moments. Throughout it all, only Kay guesses at what's really

328 to come, sensing the future, and, in an echo of her prior/posterior 1937 scene with Alan, asks him for consolation from “something . . . something you could tell me” (*TC*, 197). He responds, “There will be—something—I can tell you—one day. I’ll try—I promise,” and Priestley thereby moderates the horrors of the known future with the better possibilities of time as Dunne redefines it.

Priestley’s immediate goal was to make “multiple time” the basis for the most “poignant dramaturgy”—the best possible dramatization of the “tearing ironies” always most captivating to theater audiences.<sup>14</sup> He pursued that goal in his many “time-plays,” including *Dangerous Corner* (1932), *I Have Been Here Before* (1937), and *Desert Highway* (1943). But this play’s emphatic moral lesson indicates that Priestley’s time-plays had another goal. Their dramatic structure advocates a redemptive form of temporal understanding. *Time and the Conways* encourages us to think like Kay, to sharpen our vague sense of what is to come, and, in so doing, avert disaster and even realize a fuller form of life. Dramatic structure translates into a mode of temporal perception apparently valuable for its profound tactical advantages and moral benefits. And dramatic effects therefore intervene in the very structure of time, not only representing that structure (our experience of it, the truth about it) but engineering a transformation through which the future might actually redeem the present moment.<sup>15</sup>

The intervention in question may indeed have become an ecological one, given the hit status of *Time and the Conways* as “by far the most important of the new plays of the season”—by one account, Priestley’s 1930s time-plays were also the “most *discussed* plays of the London season” (emphasis added)—and given Priestley’s wider efforts to publicize the link between his plays and Dunne’s theories.<sup>16</sup> He had Dunne work with the original cast of *Time and the Conways* (fig. 2), timed a new review of *An Experiment with Time* to coincide with the play’s American production, noted himself that “one good result of the play’s success was that it turned the attention of many people towards J. W. Dunne and his Serialism,” and more generally promoted his play’s temporal relevance to the point where at least one contemporary characterized it as an effort to “popularize” temporal experimentation.<sup>17</sup> As indicated in a headnote to his 1940 review of Dunne’s *Nothing Dies*, “Nothing has done more to familiarize the general public with what is commonly known as ‘the time problem’ than Mr. Priestley’s plays ‘Time and the Conways’ and ‘I Have Been Here Before,’ as well as passages in some of his recent books.”<sup>18</sup>

And yet Priestley’s campaign in the theater of time went beyond Dunne, its full activity dependent upon the way Priestley marshaled other conceptual and political possibilities. To make the “experiment with time” actually transformative, Priestley rethought its relations both to art and to politics: he revised its system of “observers” to match them to “dramatic experience” and to link them to possibilities for new political freedom. And he enacted the whole dynamic as a social project, in plays like *Time and the Conways* and activist endeavors based in the same theory that inspired them.

Priestley noted repeatedly that Dunne’s “observers,” each operating at a further remove from time as we know it, multiply into a bad infinite regress, endlessly deferring temporal understanding. He proposed instead a more limited, triadic structure.



▲  
Fig. 2. Priestley, the actress Jean Forbes Robinson, and J.W. Dunne, at Dunne's meeting with the London cast of *Time and the Conways* in 1937. J.B. Priestley Archive, University of Bradford.

He agreed that “observer 1” is that which is bound to the present moment and to the passing of time. He agreed that “observer 2” focuses on “observer 1” and achieves temporal freedom during that first observer’s blank moments. But whereas Dunne had argued that it took an “observer 3” to perceive that freedom, and, in turn, subsequent observers to achieve freedom’s fuller possibilities, Priestley established a different dynamic. He theorized a dialectic in which tension between the first two observers becomes the crucial object of understanding for the third. Observer 1 is fixed upon temporal action (in the present, in sequence); observer 2 is detached from action and free to contemplate past, present, and future together; and a dialectical relationship between these two temporalities—the practical time of observer 1, the contemplative freedom of observer 2—is the basis for real temporal empowerment at the level of observer 3. Observer 3 is most fully free, temporally, because it knows both freedom and limit, and can choose between them. Priestley thought this version of “multiple time” at once more plausible and more inspiring than the regress into which Dunne’s theory seemed to vanish.

But Priestley valued it most for its correlation with “aesthetic feeling.” The crux of his temporal campaign is here, in a unique association of the freedom of observer 3 with that of aesthetic creativity. He claims that imaginative creation depends upon “time three” where “purpose and action are joined together and there seems to be an

330 almost magical release of creative power,” where “the creative imagination has its home and does its work” (*MT*, 298). In this reinvention of the terms of aesthetic theory, this variation on the dialectics that had long defined the aesthetic in terms of its synthesis of opposed modes of human understanding, Priestley readies Dunne’s temporality for entrance into the space of aesthetic engagement, and in turn, in the theater, the space of art’s redress.

The aesthetic revision enabled him to correlate Dunne’s “observers” to aspects of the theater. In *The Art of the Dramatist*, he suggests that “time three” is the temporality of dramatic experience, setting up the theater as the space in which temporal freedom might uniquely obtain. The dramatist, Priestley argues, does not simply aim to reflect reality. What appears on stage always has a “double character,” “seen in the strange light and shadow of belief and disbelief,” belonging to “a heightened reality that we know to be unreal” (*AD*, 5). Reality combines with the unreal (fantasy, prophecy, the symbolic) to generate dramatic experience. But the audience must contribute to dramatic experience “by allowing our minds to function on two levels at the same time,” the levels of empirical judgment and imaginative disbelief. As we function on both levels, “when these two are delicately balanced and both are excitedly meeting the demands made upon them,” then we achieve an “ecstatic state” of aesthetic awareness. This state is a mode of “exhilarating” aesthetic awareness to be had only in the theater; “the Theater exists to provide it for us,” for “the simultaneous double response . . . makes this experience unlike any other” (*AD*, 10, 39). Any other, that is, but that of temporal freedom. Priestley notes that his own effort to conceive his plays “on both levels at once” aimed at

the kind of freedom of the fourth dimension that comes to us in a fragmentary fashion in dreams, events out of chronological order, childhood and adult life interrupting each other, all of which can bring a piercing sweetness, a queer poignancy, and, again, dramatic experience a little different from what one has known before. (*AD*, 52)

Dramatic experience shares with temporal freedom awareness of a certain “double response”: both involve a balance of opposed forms of attention, one pegged to reality and the other unreal, and both drive toward a third stage of ecstatic aesthetic awareness defined by the responsibility and the pleasure to choose between what exists and what lies beyond it.

Now Priestley claimed he “would never have dreamt of trying to use the Theatre to convert people to some particular view of Time I held, nor of turning the playhouse into a lecture hall in which I would explore the intricacies of my own problem” (*AD*, 50). But this disclaimer was in fact simply Priestley’s way to express the hope for a more fundamental way to make temporal freedom publicly available through dramatic experience. If he “had no hope of handling it intellectually, on the level of debate, as Shaw would have done,” it was not his goal to write time-problem plays, because intellectual representation could only upset the balance essential to temporal drama as Priestley defined it. His goal was to expand “our whole complex feeling about Time,”

and to transform the theater in such a way as to make it a forum for action at that level. He elsewhere noted that “the theater is the place for action and emotion rather than thought,” and that distinction reflects Priestley’s wish to correlate dramatic experience more directly to a temporal framework fundamental to the expansion of human interests.<sup>19</sup> Matching time and the drama at this fundamental level of experience made Dunne’s “experiment with time” one that could be conducted practically, and publicly.

The need for such an experiment was one felt across the mid-century theater. Priestley took part in a set of like-minded efforts at temporal redress. Clive Barker has discussed the interest in “playing with time” active across the interwar stage, in plays including J. M. Barrie’s *Mary Rose* (1919), Lord Dunsany’s *If* (1921), Sir Arthur Pinero’s *The Enchanted Cottage* (1922), and Richard Pryce’s *Thunder on the Left* (1928).<sup>20</sup> George Kernodle, writing in 1949 about the “time-frightened playwrights” of the day, noted that Priestley and many of his contemporaries had seen “a vision of the twentieth century heading straight for destruction, insanity, and suicide” with time as the main problem:

Time has ceased to be a mere setting for human history; it is an active force, a force of evil. It seems to be going faster and faster, always bearing man nearer some frightful finish. Caught in a vortex, he looks back with anguished nostalgia to some blissful age of confidence and leisure—before the atom, before the war, before the depression, before the twentieth century. Fifty years ago he wanted to cut himself free from all bonds of the past and walk boldly into the modern age. But now he no longer walks, he is being taken on a machine ride faster and faster.<sup>21</sup>

Kernodle concludes this assessment by observing a general objective very much central to Priestley’s campaign: “Somehow he must get a firmer footing in time.” Kernodle contrasts this firmer footing with the forces of Nazism: “Which vision will prevail? Will men accept the vision of destruction and like Hitler grimly watch the world collapse on top of them, or will they try to adapt themselves to a slowly changing time?”<sup>22</sup> Priestley and contemporaries including Thornton Wilder, Jean Giradoux, Noel Coward, and Tennessee Williams implicitly ask the same question, in plays dedicated to dramatizing the miseries of time-haunted modernity. And some answer the question with visionary dramatic forms not only reflective of prevailing temporal evils but fit for transforming them. They suggest “a vision of man in relation to the whole stream of time” in something like the way “multiple time” could envision all times at once; they “build a vision of man secure in the longer view of history, in his present control of time, and in his creative control of the future,” much the way Priestley’s time-plays model forms of human agency defined by the simultaneity of past, present, and future understanding. At their best, they dramatize a way for modern man to “[see] himself creating history out of his vision of the past and his will for the future,” engineering just the capacities Priestley would promote through dramatic experience.<sup>23</sup>

Tennessee Williams, most of all. As Kernodle notes, *A Streetcar Named Desire* dramatizes “the trauma of time” and hearkens back to the *belle rêve* of a better past.<sup>24</sup> More pointedly, Williams made an argument similar to Priestley’s argument about the

332 relations among dramatic experience, time, and public life. In his well-known essay “The Timeless World of a Play” (1951), Williams regrets the way the “continual rush of time . . . deprives our actual lives of so much dignity and meaning,” and contrasts the “depth and significance” conferred upon the world of the theater by its “arrest of time.”<sup>25</sup> Theater exists to afford an opportunity for timeless contemplation, a chance, for example, to look with extended solicitude upon Willy Loman, someone likely to be quickly dismissed by us in real life. And a play’s moments of recognition last as such. “By a sort of legerdemain, events are made to remain *events*, rather than being reduced so quickly to mere *occurrences*”: this distinction corresponds to the contrasting temporalities through which Priestley engineers a chance for real temporal change. For Williams, however, no such result is likely. When the play ends, time reasserts itself; “by the time we have arrived at Sardi’s,” we return to a real life that cannot accommodate human dignity and higher meaning.<sup>26</sup> Audiences can only temporarily gain access to something better, without much hope of recognizing any potentially redemptive relationship between the time of the world and the time of the theater. Priestley, by contrast, tries for something longer lasting, a timeless world enabled by the example of dramatic experience.

His sense of this possibility was also shared by contemporary dramatic theorists, most notably Susanne Langer, whose *Feeling and Form* (1953) similarly correlates dramatic experience to broadened temporal recourse. Langer defines drama as “form in suspense”; it is the aesthetic mode of “destiny.” Whereas other dramatic theories posit that theater exists to create a perpetual present, Langer notes that “it is only a present filled with its own future that is really dramatic.” In dramatic action, the future is implicit, because the present moment is performed always implying the existence of what is to come. The sense of destiny “makes the present action seem like an integral part of the future, howbeit that future has not unfolded yet,” and the “total action” of drama is not just action in the present but action undertaken always with an implication of outcomes.<sup>27</sup> Not unlike “multiple time,” this theory of the temporality of dramatic experience is what Priestley makes explicit, in plays that literalize destiny’s implication in the present moment. He makes the “feeling” Langer theorizes a reflexive object of dramatic attention. Langer would not have argued that drama’s mode of destiny could transfer into a function of human awareness, but practical understanding was in fact a key concern of *Feeling and Form*: pragmatism motivated Langer to bracket philosophical sources and ground her work in impulses of studio practice. She shared Priestley’s sense that dramatic experience was not special to an isolated aesthetic realm but a product and source of real know-how.

That sense was shared as well by Jackson Barry. Barry’s *Dramatic Structure: the Shaping of Experience* (1970), also roughly contemporary with Priestley’s explanation of the time-schemes implicit in dramatic experience, claims that drama offers a purchase upon a fundamental tension between two forms of time: “drama is an image of man’s life in time in which the pattern structures represent our view of time as fixed—as capable of being viewed as *pattern*—whereas the improvisational quality corresponds to our sense of time as the eternally changing, eternally present ‘becoming.’”<sup>28</sup> In his



time-plays, Priestley makes a similar duality the basis for dramatic experience but also, in turn, a focus for transformative “observation,” making what is implicit in Barry’s theory of the dramatic “shaping of experience” an actual activity in audience response.

A play like *Time and the Conways*, then, was poised to do more than present Dunne’s theories or make them the basis for a compelling dramatic structure. Along with Priestley’s other time-plays, it would create an opportunity for dramatic experience to transfer temporal freedom to a public audience. Any play would do so, given Priestley’s definition of dramatic experience, but these plays provoke their audience to enact the freedom they embody, thematizing their structure in such a way as to make it an explicit and active achievement. That theater as an institution might play such a role—actively enhancing real lives—was always Priestley’s hope, one articulated in *The Arts Under Socialism* (1947), *Theatre Outlook* (1947), and other texts that align aesthetic engagement with progressive social ambition. It was a hope perhaps best expressed in his celebration of the way England’s regional theaters “have opened little windows into a world of ideas . . . have kept going a stir of thought and imagination . . . have acted as outposts of for the army of the citizens of tomorrow, demanding to live . . . a life at once more ardent and imaginative and more thoughtful than their fathers and mothers ever knew.”<sup>29</sup> But it was in terms of time that Priestley tried to lead this audience-army—in terms of the temporality of dramatic experience that could in turn redeem the life of their forebears. The temporality of dramatic experience made plays like *Time and the Conways* a chance to put Dunne to vital public use.

It was vital because Priestley also saw in Dunne a surprisingly direct solution to the social problems that concerned him in *English Journey* and elsewhere. If he correlated multiple time to dramatic experience and thus to theatrical performance, he also correlated it to political agency, and thus to a renewal of English culture.

Priestley sums up his enthusiasm for Dunne by noting that “the temporal freedom of the dreaming self” is “not a privilege enjoyed by a few very strange people” but “part of our common human lot,” proof that we are not “the slaves of chronological time” but “more elaborate, more powerful, perhaps nobler creatures than we have lately taken ourselves to be” (*MT*, 250). Populist rhetoric makes time theory into political theory, suggesting that the temporal freedom found in Dunne justifies Priestley’s little-English egalitarianism. This rhetoric becomes more explicit, too, developing beyond rhetoric into explicit connections between temporal freedom and democracy itself. In a remarkable passage written in the late 1930s, Priestley blames “the idea of inexorable passing time” for the rise of fascism:

When masses of men, feeling anything but positive, come to believe that life is a meaningless accident, that they are homeless among the cold black spaces, that they are huddled together in an execution chamber, that their humanity is without sense and dignity, then they are soon trapped within a vicious circle. They allow their essential rights to be taken away from them. Democracy, which may be rowdy but is nevertheless based on an idea of man’s dignity, becomes a sham. Power is unchallenged; the slave mentality grows. The natural rhythm of work is sacrificed to the machine tempo. The dehumanising process succeeds everywhere. The satisfying patterns of living are broken, and men in the mass,



feeling obscurely that they have been somehow cheated, burn with resentments that may result finally in mob cruelty. (The signs are with us now.) Above all, this frustrated modern man is haunted by the idea of inexorable passing time.<sup>30</sup>

Inexorable passing time—conventional time, as known to observer 1—is bad not only for the way it deprives us of the fuller insight of “multiple time” but for the social implications of that deprivation. Without a sense of the way time hangs together, life comes to seem accidental, and “humanity” suffers. Without a sense of human dignity, people lose claim to their rights and become “men in the mass,” subject to those who would take power over them. Thus, fascism: “much of the evil of our age comes from the notion that we have merely so much time before oblivion overtakes us,” and Priestley explicitly attributes both this notion and that evil to “Nazi leaders” and their cult of death, making an association prevalent throughout the critique of fascism.<sup>31</sup> So when Priestley speaks of his reasons for wanting to popularize Dunne’s theories in terms of a wish to “liberate” the public from the “bad idea” of time “still dominating our age,” he has extended Dunne from theoretical interest to pressing political practice, for the liberation in question is inseparable from that which would deliver mankind from real political subjugation (*MT*, 282).

Priestley makes the connection between conventional temporality and contemporary politics clear again in *Out of the People*, the book he wrote for the Authors National Committee in 1940: “It is this all-too-common belief that events are now out of our control that gives enormous power to ambitious and wicked men who know this foolish view is wrong and proceed to shape events.”<sup>32</sup> As much as he was alarmed about the content of the events in question, Priestley was more concerned with the form of time that put events beyond the control of the English people. Hoping to make the English people capable of greater temporal agency, he hoped to make them more capable of democracy. How the former might enable the latter is something Priestley explores throughout his career. This link is most explicit when he theorizes multiple time as a kind of intransigence, for example in his late work *Over the Long High Wall: Some Reflections and Speculations on Life, Death and Time* (1972), where he suggests “that we begin our protest not by marching and shouting, creating yet another mob, but by working quietly through attention and memory and by changing our attitude.”<sup>33</sup> Whereas real political activism might only redouble the mass-political crisis of modernity, Priestley suggests, temporal innovation could amount to an activism of a better (if quieter) variety.

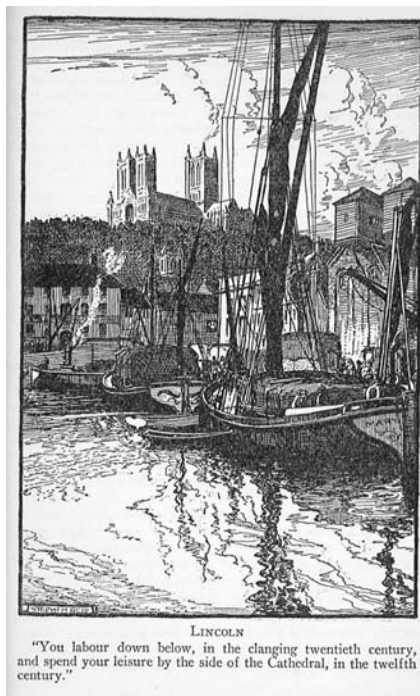
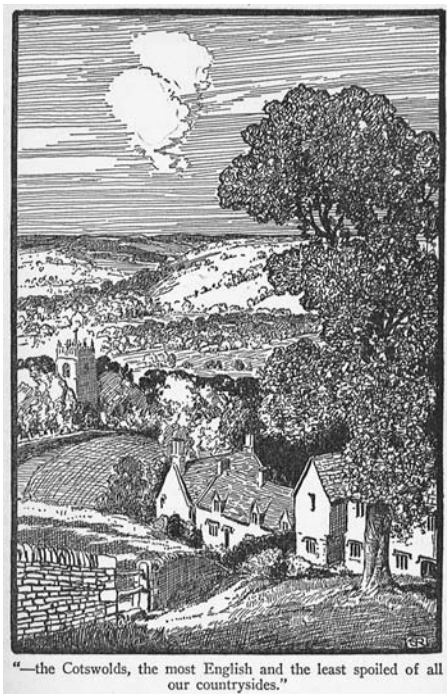
“What interests me here is the effect a rejection of the ordinary view of time would have on men’s outlook and their conduct”: put this way, Priestley’s interests very clearly amount to a public project, a bold transformation of Dunne’s theoretical “experiment” into a social one.<sup>34</sup> And these interests extend further, from a sense of the reasons to reject the ordinary view of time to a sense of what should take its place. If Priestley associated conventional time with fascism, he associated “multiple time” with the virtues of the great lost civilizations. In *Man and Time*, he sets up a contrast between the two:

Passing time, once almost meaningless, is now the inescapable beat, like that of the engine of some space ship, of the whole vast universe; we seem to be utterly at its mercy; while any idea, once so all-important, of the Great Time, the eternal dream time, the other time of gods and heroes of mythology, seems to have vanished. (*MT*, 141)

The “Great Time” matches what Dunne’s serial observers together achieve: all possible times coexisting, eternity in its true form. Priestley’s goal is to restore it, believing that this restoration really might only require the kind of public interventions his own projects could accomplish. For the Great Time “is here with us, if we do not deliberately blind ourselves to it, and is ready to give us courage and strength” (*MT*, 141). Courage and strength could in turn mean England’s redemption. If English democracy is in a poor state largely because the time-frame necessary to sustain it has been lost, restoring the Great Time could mean giving the nation the strength to reassert its great popular identity. Not a great imperial one—Priestley’s England is never more than a home for its folk—but one great for its transcendence of immediate interests into the wider scheme of eternal concerns. Such an outcome is nowhere inherent in Dunne’s Serialism, but Priestley’s version of it adds the sociopolitical associations necessary to dramatize a very pressing need to experiment with time. Politicizing Dunne, Priestley makes his theory of time the basis for public action.

There is an allegorical figure for Priestley’s ideal England that reflects the way “multiple time” would redeem it. Priestley once argued that the unicorn ought to be England’s heraldic symbol. In “The Unicorn,” he claims that “we are losing because we are backing the wrong beast”: not the lion but the unicorn should be the symbol of England, in part because it “escapes the withering process of time,” in part because of its association with little-English enchantment, but also because of the way it figures Priestley’s hybrid of timelessness, freedom, and Englishness: “I am seeing it, of course, as the heraldic sign and symbol of the imaginative, creative, boldly inventive, original, and individual side of the national character.”<sup>35</sup> The unicorn stands for the national character as Priestley’s temporal campaign would have it: Englishness made quirky and free, creative and impractical. Just as the unicorn differs from the lion for its loopy, pacifist sentimentality, trading imperial vigor for magical unrealism, Priestley would engineer a utopianism different from that which tends to motivate fantasies of national coherence. Another good image for it appears in *An English Journey*, in a contrast between what one might expect from Priestley and the utopianism the book really favors. One illustration envisions the Cotswolds as an object of fairly predictable sentimental nostalgia, “the most English and the least spoiled of all our countrysides” (fig. 3). But another envisions Lincoln as something more peculiar. Observing that there “you labour down below, in the clanging twentieth century, and spend your leisure by the side of the Cathedral, in the twelfth century,” Priestley associates Englishness with a certain power of temporal liberty, the power to put together the nation’s best moments into a composite identity (fig. 4).<sup>36</sup>

It is worth pausing over this utopianism to distinguish it from that common to Priestley’s contemporaries, or, rather, to note how the utopianism he shared with them entails



▲  
Figs. 3 & 4. The standard little-Englandism of *English Journey* vs. the different framework enabled by “multiple time” (*English Journey* 40, 292).

a form of understanding more radically experimental than which shapes the utopias of William Morris and H. G. Wells on the one hand and J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis on the other.<sup>37</sup> Whereas it was common to wish to depart from the present into an imaginary world (often but not always a future) that was actually an idealized version of England’s past, Priestley’s “Great Time” utopianism entails an effort to alter the form of time itself. It is really *meta-utopian*, because it does not project a better future in terms of a nostalgic past but instead reframes pastness and futurity themselves.<sup>38</sup> It revises the very structure of utopian thinking; its better world is one in which all better alternatives present themselves. The result has important implications for Priestley’s politics. Not the quaint, isolated, heedless form of denial it has otherwise been, “little England” for Priestley is a world made rigorously timeless, escaping modernity not through escapism but a broadened field of attention open to projects and judgments more essentially experimental than what we might expect from any middlebrow in the moment of modernism.<sup>39</sup>

But the theater of time was a space Priestley did share with his modernist contemporaries, with whom he would seem to share little else. Although Woolf, Proust, and others would seem to have little in common with Priestley’s jolly wish to ride the unicorn into a better English future, their versions of the relationship between aesthetic engagement and public time share Priestley’s sense that the former might redeem the latter. Their texts hold out the same hope made so explicit in Priestley’s public campaign

to encourage England to pursue the unconventional time-frames of its dreams and his plays. Woolf, Proust, and other modernist writers known for their temporal experiments did not simply represent or theorize the truth about time; they too modeled and advocated the process whereby failed temporalities might reconfigure into the means by which temporal freedom and its correlative powers (at once psychological, cultural, and political) might develop. Proust represents the art of memory, but also encourages his readers to make use of his book, “my book being merely a sort of magnifying glass like those which the optician at Combray used to offer his customers—it would be my book, but with its help I would furnish them with the means of reading what may lie inside themselves.”<sup>40</sup> Woolf shows how to keep time from passing with a view toward multiple time not unlike that which Priestley stages in the theater, despite the way *To the Lighthouse* apparently represents subjective time for psychological insight alone. Even if Woolf’s novel would seem to conclude with the wholly private experience of art hidden away in attics, she models the format through which aesthetic experience yields forms of temporal agency. Other modernist temporalities likewise present themselves as meta-utopian public opportunities, forms in which art might enable people to reclaim time.

This difference between modernism’s well-known representations of temporal complexity and these pragmatic performances of temporal redress may seem minor, but it makes a major difference to our understanding of the nature and purpose of the representation of time in modernist art. Especially in the context of Priestley’s public-intellectual pursuits, time ecology redefines aesthetic engagement. Representations that have seemed to pursue regretful mimesis of ironic failure or escape from public time into worlds of private transcendence now pursue an active public mission. The divide between aesthetic experience and public life so durably definitive of modernist culture not only disappears but becomes an active dialectic, or, more than that, itself an object of redemptive play. And the divide between aesthetic form and instrumental action—so vexing to theorists throughout the history of the aesthetic, and particularly a problem for political theorists wanting to find a central place for art without destroying its status as such—similarly disappears. The instrumentality in question, the use of aesthetic form to redeem public time, is one that would bring the object of its action back around toward the ideal. In other words, putting art into practice here does not entail any undoing of art’s definitive nonpracticality but instead modifies praxis such that it more closely resembles aesthetic engagement. For if time becomes a field of freedom, it makes gains in the structure definitive of art, that free play of impressions that has for so long distinguished aesthetic experience from forms of ideality on the one hand and action on the other.

The Priestley play most dedicated to the politics of temporal redemption, and the one that has had most success advancing his temporal campaign, is *An Inspector Calls* (1946). It made a powerful impression upon an England traumatized by war and has since become a staple of mainstream culture, a hit West End production throughout the 1990s and a standard text on the GCSE English Literature syllabus.<sup>41</sup> Here, the

338 temporal freedom enabled by dramatic experience is key to social responsibility and the truest recognition of a citizen's role in social justice.

Like *Time and the Conways*, *An Inspector Calls* begins at the center of bourgeois English family life, showing a happy scene of a prosperous family on the brink of a happy marriage and new professional prospects. Into this scene famously arrives the mysterious Inspector Goole, with the shocking news that a young woman has committed suicide. As the play's first two acts progress, each member of the family turns out to be responsible for the suicide: the father had fired her (after she led a group threatening a labor strike); the daughter had been responsible for the loss of another job (at a shop, where the daughter felt she'd been treated with insolence); the mother had turned the girl away when she came in search of charitable help, and the son had been responsible for the pregnancy that finally drove the girl to suicide. It's an absurd set of coincidences—how could each of them have destroyed the same girl?—and the play's first clever surprise is that they actually did not. Inspector Goole is no inspector at all, and he has only threaded together disparate circumstances into this single drama, fooling the family into thinking the many young women they'd wronged in one way or another were a single suicide when in fact there has been no suicide at all. Or so it seems, until the play's final and famous surprise ending, in which an Inspector really does call—about a suicide that has only just occurred.

*An Inspector Calls* is good, serviceable, boiler-plate drama, the basis of any number of imitations and parodies since its first production in 1946. Its message is obvious enough: as the Inspector notes,

there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering, and chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives, with what we think and say or do. We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.<sup>42</sup>

In the context of Priestley's temporal campaign, however, and in the context of time ecology more generally, the play's message has more powerful resonance, and not just because the play bears out Priestley's association of multiple time with "seriousness and a sense of responsibility" (*MT*, 278). Even if innumerable English GCSE students have discussed dramatic irony and personal responsibility in *An Inspector Calls*, there is more to say about it, since Priestley's temporal campaign links these lessons to a more comprehensive and dynamic cultural project. For in and through that campaign the play holds that social justice could become truly possible were England's leading citizens capable of *forethought*—able to understand how consequences link them tightly to each other in ways present concerns might not—and that such a possibility might become a reality through temporal proficiencies learnt from the theater. And from *An Inspector Calls* especially, insofar as the "observer" able to perceive time as a whole as a result of dramatic experience is embodied in the function of the Inspector, who stands for the theatrical purview, and teaches the play's family to see the future in a fashion that will make a real difference when the true Inspector calls.



The very fact that innumerable English GCSE students have had to discuss *An Inspector Calls* suggests that Priestley's campaign achieved some measure of success. The play's routine canonicity is a sign that Priestley did indeed make his theory of time a public institution. And yet the point here is not that we should credit him for making a real difference to English culture, and not that we should rethink the cultural status of *An Inspector Calls* and Priestley's other works. I do not mean to revalue Priestley as much as to make him represent a certain approach to the relationship between aesthetic engagement and temporal modernity. Priestley was a leading figure in this effort to make of art a new purchase on time and, in turn, to rectify a range of social and cultural practices necessarily structured according to temporal custom. As such, he can help us to understand that effort—to see how it characterizes the arts of the twentieth century and how it still (or perhaps even increasingly) motivates a certain form of aesthetic innovation.

Perhaps the best way to make this last argument is to discover Priestley's campaign in a twenty-first-century work that would hardly seem to have anything to do with anything Priestley represents. Dunne's *Experiment with Time* makes a striking appearance at the end of *Irreversible*, the 2002 film directed by Gaspar Noé. So visually experimental and recklessly disturbing that *Newsweek's* David Ansen predicted it would be "the most walked-out-of movie of 2003," *Irreversible* is worlds away from Priestley's little England, and therefore perhaps the most striking evidence that Priestley's campaign represents a larger endeavor.<sup>43</sup>

*Irreversible* proceeds in reverse order, beginning with mayhem in a gay club and proceeding through scenes that show the cause of it: first, a scene in which we see a that a woman has been brutally raped; next, the scene of the rape itself, surely the most horrific scene of violence in contemporary film, and which made *Irreversible* such a film to walk out of. Notoriously the rape is another single shot, fully ten minutes long. That scene gives way to prior ones: the woman and the two men consorting happily at a party, until she takes offense at something and leaves on her own; earlier, single long shots of the woman and her lover in intimate states of loving joy; and then, the clincher: the scene in which the woman discovers she is pregnant. So first, a violent murder, which turns out to be a scene of vengeance, following upon a rape, which in turn follows scenes of bliss and promise. The film ends here: disclosing that the woman is pregnant, and then, finally, showing the woman as a girl in a park, at peace amid a swirl of life rolling merrily along. The point of showing things in reverse is to cultivate a dramatic irony as brutal as the film's notorious rape scene. Unless there is another point, one indicated by something else we see in the film's final scene: as the progress of life spins around her, the girl whose life will one day be so brutally destroyed holds—but fails to read—*An Experiment with Time* (fig. 5). The book is here to suggest that what is so horribly irreversible in her life could be reversed were Dunne heeded, just as it is reversed in the visual language of film. What leads to her fate would not have had to lead there, were she able to follow the example set out by Dunne and modeled in the form of filmic reversibility.



▲  
 Fig. 5. Monica Belucci fails to read Dunne's *Experiment with Time* in the final/first scene of Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* (2002) (the image, originally upside-down and reversed, has been inverted for legibility).

*Irreversible* thus proposes the same kind of temporal intervention undertaken and so thoroughly theorized across the career of J. B. Priestley. The same wish to make aesthetic form a field for temporal agency that is also at work across modernist literature is yet active here as well, in Noé's implication that forms available at first only to art might transfer into capabilities that would in turn enhance the quality of culture, justice, and human meaning. Priestley's life-long, thorough articulation of the terms through which one might imagine art and time to collaborate can help us understand not only the meta-utopian impulses of his day, and not only those somewhat surprisingly at work in the modernist endeavors otherwise so antagonistic to Priestley's cultural fraction, but our own contemporary dreams of temporal freedom.

## Notes

1. J. B. Priestley, *Man and Time* (1964; London: Bloomsbury Books, 1989), 187 (hereafter cited in text as *MT*).

2. *Ibid.* Priestley later noted that "as this particular program was shown a few years afterwards in Australia and New Zealand, I received a number of letters from viewers over there, and to this day some belated communications are still arriving" (*Over the Long High Wall: Some Reflections and Speculations on Life, Death and Time* [London: Heinemann, 1972], 81).

3. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 318. Woolf also called Priestley a denizen of the "stinking underworld of hack writers" (Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4 [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979], 259), but, on another occasion, a "great novelist" (*Letters*, vol. 6, 100).



4. Qtd. in John Baxendale, *Priestley's England: J. B. Priestley and English Culture* (Manchester University Press, 2007), 140.

5. *Ibid.*, 17; John Braine, *J. B. Priestley* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 26; Susan Cooper, *J. B. Priestley: Portrait of an Author* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 2.

6. J. B. Priestley, "Time Please!," *Thoughts in the Wilderness* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 40.

7. Vincent Brome, *J. B. Priestley* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988), 484.

8. J. B. Priestley, *English Journey: Being a Rambling but Truthful Account of What one Man Saw and Heard and Felt and Thought During a Journey Through England During the Autumn of the Year 1933* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1934), 211, 319, 104, 328.

9. For a full account of Dunne's influence on Priestley's philosophical view of time see his review, "The Time Problem," *The Spectator* (July 19, 1940): 55–56, and Grover Smith, Jr., "Time Alive: J. W. Dunne and J. B. Priestley" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 56 (1957): 224–233. For a broader account of Dunne's influence on his contemporaries see Victoria Stewart, "J. W. Dunne and Literary Culture in the 1930s and 1940s," *Literature and History* 17.2 (Autumn 2008): 62–81.

10. J. W. Dunne, *An Experiment with Time* (1927; New York: Macmillan, 1938), 63.

11. J. B. Priestley, *Rain Upon Godshill: A Further Chapter of Autobiography* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1939), 39.

12. If the idea seems to resemble the idea behind *Merrily We Roll Along*, the 1934 play by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, Dunne's theory does give *Time and the Conways* a different philosophical cast.

13. J. B. Priestley, *Time and the Conways* (1937) in *The Plays of J. B. Priestley*, vol. 1 (London: William Heinemann, 1950), 137 (hereafter cited in text as TC).

14. J. B. Priestley, *The Art of the Dramatist: A Lecture Together with Appendices and Discursive Notes* (London: Heinemann, 1957), 51 (hereafter cited in text as AD). Clive Barker notes that "Priestley follows Dunne but, being a playwright, is more interested in the dramatic usages of such thinking. His use of Dunne helps him to create poignant dramaturgy when the present can be judged in terms of future outcome, or when characters are troubled and disturbed by echoes and dreams from the past" ("The Ghosts of War: Stage Ghosts and Time Slips as a Response to War," in Barker and Maggie B. Gale, eds., *British Theatre between the Wars, 1918–1939* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 232).

15. The shift from representation to this more ecological intent matches a shift Priestley always tried to achieve in what he called the "apparent naturalism" of his plays: only apparently naturalistic, they often went from realistic portrayal to something more fantastic or speculative—often toward a higher understanding—as they went along (qtd. in Morton Eustis, "On Time and the Theatre: Priestley Talks About Playwriting" *Theatre Arts Monthly* 22.1 [January 1938]: 54).

16. Ashley Dukes, "The Scene in Europe," *Theatre Arts* 21 (December 1937): 934, qtd. in Dorothy Clifford, "Time Concepts in the Plays of J. B. Priestley," Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1962; Eustis, "On Time and the Theatre," 45.

17. See *MT*, 244; Priestley, *Rain Upon Godshill*, 44; Charles Hartshorne, "The Reality of the Past, the Unreality of the Future," *The Hibbert Journal* 37 (January 1939): 247.

18. Priestley, "The Time Problem," 55.

19. Eustis, "On Time and the Theatre," 52.

20. Barker, "The Ghosts of War," 216–217, 223–224, 230–236.

21. George R. Kernodle, "Time-frightened Playwrights," *American Scholar* 18.4 (Autumn 1949): 446.

22. Kernodle, "Time-frightened Playwrights," 455.

23. *Ibid.*, 452.

24. *Ibid.*, 447.

25. Tennessee Williams, "The Timeless World of a Play," *Where I Live: Selected Essays*, ed. Christine R. Day and Bob Woods (New York: New Directions, 1978), 49.

26. Williams, "Timeless World," 52, 54.

27. Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A New Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 307, 308.

- 342 28. Jackson Barry, *Dramatic Structure: The Shaping of Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), 81.
29. Priestley, *English Journey*, 157.
30. Priestley, "Time, Please!," 43–44.
31. *Ibid.*, 44. The critique in question is most rigorously detailed in Peter Osborne's identification of the "reactionary modernism" key to the temporal politics of fascist Germany (*The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* [London: Verso, 1995], 162–168). See also David Herman's *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* for its contrast between multi-temporal narratives and the discourses of fascism (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 236. Priestley drew other links between conventional time and fascism. In *Over the Long High Wall*, he notes that multiple time would have to be a kind of hell for Nazis: "But what about the appallingly wicked, the brood of monsters our age has spawned, the chuckling torturers, the wholesale murderers, the masters of concentration camps and gas chambers? How would they fare in 'eternity' or Time 2?" (129).
32. Priestley, *Out of the People* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 157.
33. Priestley, *Over the Long High Wall*, 65.
34. Priestley, "Time Please!," 45.
35. Priestley, "The Unicorn," in *Thoughts in the Wilderness*, 162, 167.
36. Priestley, *English Journey*, 40, 292.
37. Maggie Gale and Susan Cooper have noted affinities between Priestley's outlook and various forms of utopian thinking, Gale categorizing aspects of his "utopian vision" in terms of Raymond Williams' definitions (*J. B. Priestley* [London and New York: Routledge, 2008], 100) and Cooper affiliating him with "Morris and Owen and Wells hoping for a new and better Camelot" (206).
38. For this construction I am indebted in part to Michael Snediker's account of "meta-optimism" in his definition of the temporality of optimism in his *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
39. See Chris Waters for an account of the way Priestley transformed the idioms of Englishness ("J. B. Priestley: Englishness and the Politics of Nostalgia," *After the Victorians: Private Consciousness and Public Duty in Modern Britain*, ed. Susan Pedersen and Peter Mandler [London and New York: Routledge, 1994], 209–228).
40. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, vol. 6: Time Regained*, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Gilmartin (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 508.
41. Steven Daldry, who staged the 1992 production, called Priestley "a radical playwright who was trying to break the mould and reinvent theater for moral purposes" (Gale & Cooper, *J. B. Priestley*, 156).
42. Priestley, *An Inspector Calls* (1946), *The Plays of J. B. Priestley*, vol. 3 (London: William Heinemann, 1950), 311.
43. David Ansen, "How Far Is Too Far?" *Newsweek*, March 3, 2003, <http://www.newsweek.com/2003/03/02/how-far-is-too-far.html>.