ORIGINS AS FUTURES IN THE TIME PLAYS OF J.B. PRIESTLEY

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Abstract: J.B. Priestley (1894–1984), a prolific English writer, lived through two world wars and the twentieth-century’s mix of physics and metaphysics, sociology and psychology, and called himself “a Time-haunted man.” He used playwriting to illuminate certain theories about time that were circulating during his life and influenced his own ideas regarding time—especially precognition. Priestley was convinced that his culture’s understanding of social justice, both its traditional perception and the possibility of change towards greater mutual care and equitability, was connected to people’s perception of time. He also felt that the current state of drama in England should be adjusted to allow greater control by theatre artists themselves, so that stronger embodiment of his (and others’) new ideas could more easily be presented. This paper addresses the place of Priestley’s plays in dramatic history, and the insights that his theories and dramas offer towards the human experience of time.

Keywords: J.B. Priestley, P.D. Ouspensky, J.W. Dunne, time-haunted, eternal recurrence, déjà vu, serialism, precognition, time dimensions.

Imagine yourself being an audience to a play. The set on stage presents a quaint inn somewhere in the English countryside, June 1937. Staying at this inn are the main characters: Walter Ormund, age 45, his 27-year-old wife Janet, and a man around 35, Oliver Farrant, who was unacquainted with the Ormunds before their chance meeting in the country. Additionally there is a very odd, scholarly, older German gentleman who has a particular purpose in being at this particular inn and meeting these particular three guests. A professorial mathematician, Dr. Görtler is here to conduct an experiment, for he has had dreams and inklings about these three individuals. He is testing a hypothesis that his dreams are not only true life, but that his theory of “time recurrence” includes the possibility of intercepting a repeated life and shifting its future—basically changing the past.

The play is *I Have Been Here Before* (1937) by J.B. Priestley, a prolific English writer who published and produced plays in the middle of the twentieth century. Influenced by time theories circulating during his life, Priestley illuminated his contemplations and fascinations with the human experience of time in his playwriting; in this way he made these theories accessible to a larger audience, translating the more esoteric ideas
into the type of entertainment that would both appeal to and rouse the average playgoer. In this essay, I explore his curiosity with time through analysis of two representative plays, *I Have Been Here Before* and *Time and the Conways* (1937), labeled “Time Plays” by the playwright himself in a 1938 published collection, *Three Time-Plays*. The third play in the collection, *Dangerous Corner* (1932), is looked at in less detail. The first two analyses include an overview of two time theories of the era. Additionally, I enlarge the discussion with some perspectives on other plays that use a “trick of time,” as Priestley has described them. In all these plays, one observes that Priestley’s overriding concerns are with the interaction of people within their society, humans caring for one another and consciously being together; he understood there to be a direct connection between how one views the nature of time and how one treats one’s fellow citizens. Priestley’s work was driven by theories that propose a non-linear, extra-dimensional view of time, which allows an individual to peek into times other than the current moment, particularly into the future, and adjust his or her next step according to the insight gained. But the ability to steal a peek into one or more futures is not about gaining an advantage of decision or outcome so much as it is about situating an individual in a larger context of concern beyond the self. In short, glimpsed futures may guide us to decisions involving more agencies than our own ambitions and happiness. A corresponding logic for such understanding is central to the theory of time recurrence, the central thesis in the play introducing this essay.

In *I Have Been Here Before*, Dr. Görtler explains the idea to Walter Ormund, who is at a mid-life crisis point:

> We do not go round a circle. That is an illusion, just as the circling of the planets and stars is an illusion. We move along a spiral track. It is not quite the same journey from the cradle to the grave each time. Sometimes the differences are small, sometimes they are very important. We must set out each time on the same road but along that road we have a chance of adventures.

Ormund, who had been planning to commit suicide, responds:

> I wish I could believe that!…They’ve never told me yet about a God so generous and noble and wise that he won’t allow a few decisions that we make in our ignorance, haste and bewilderment to settle our fate forever. Why should this poor improvisation be our whole existence? Why should this great theatre of suns and moons and starlight have been created for the first pitiful charade we can contrive?