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Testimonies of precognition and encounters with psychiatry in letters to J. B. Priestley

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ABSTRACT

Using letters sent to British playwright J. B. Priestley in 1963, this paper explores the intersection between patient-focused history of psychiatry and the history of parapsychology in everyday life. Priestley's study of precognition lay outside the main currents of parapsychology, and his status as a storyteller encouraged confidences about anomalous temporal experience and mental illness. Drawing on virtue epistemology, I explore the regulation of subjectivity operated by Priestley in establishing the credibility of his correspondents in relation to their gender and mental health, and investigate the possibility of testimonial justice for these witnesses. Priestley's ambivalent approach to madness in relation to visions of the future is related to the longer history of prophecy and madness. Letters from the television audience reveal a variety of attitudes towards the compatibility of precognition with modern theories of the mind, show the flexibility of precognition in relation to mental distress, and record a range of responses from medical and therapeutic practitioners. Testimonial justice for those whose experience of precognition intersects with psychiatric care entails a full acknowledgement of the tensions and complexities between these two domains as they are experienced by the witness, and an explicit statement of the hearer's orientation to those domains.

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1. Context

Histories of psychiatry from the perspective of patients are well established, such that when Roy Porter regretted that “the history of healing is par excellence the history of doctors” (1985: p. 175) he conceded that “the mad ... are among the few groups of sufferers to have attracted much interest, and that largely because of the polemics of today's anti-psychiatry movement” (p. 183). In three decades since Porter's call for a redress of scholarly ignorance about “how ordinary people in the past have actually regarded health and sickness, and managed their encounters with medical men” (p. 176), further patient-focused histories of psychiatry have been produced, inspired not only by anti-psychiatry and patient advocacy movements but also by the emergence of “history of the emotions” and “medical humanities” as interdisciplinary fields that

are broadening the resource base and the methodologies available for social histories of illness and wellbeing.¹ Within these studies paranormal experience has not been prominent, though the occult is sometimes discussed.² The views of psychiatric patients and mental health service users with experience of the paranormal are almost completely absent from histories of Western modernity, where the discounting of testimony from witnesses with psychiatric histories is compounded by the discounting of paranormal phenomena by mainstream science.

Studies of the close relations between mind science and the paranormal tend to be organised around researchers, theorists and

¹ Patient-focused histories of psychiatry since 1985 include Porter (1987), Crouthamel (2002), Hubert (2002), Suzuki (2006). See also Small (1996), p. 37 for pre-1985 uses of literature in the social history of madness.

² For example, MacDonald (1981, pp. 198–217) discusses supernatural forces in relation to the experiences of mentally disturbed patients in seventeenth-century England.

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investigating organisations.³ The establishment of scientific credentials for psychical research involved its practitioners in the amplification of existing class barriers (Hazelgrove, 2000: p. 197). A history of parapsychology “from below”, recording paranormal phenomena in the context of everyday life, awaits development. This paper focuses on a neglected resource consisting of letters written to the British playwright and broadcaster J. B. Priestley (1894–1984) in response to a television appeal for experiences of non-linear time.

For reasons discussed below, television viewers felt a special bond of trust with Priestley, and were prepared to make extensive personal revelations. There was no formal consent procedure, and even those correspondents who are no longer data subjects (assuming a life span of 100 years) are likely to have living relatives who may recognise their story. In what follows, those who explicitly requested anonymity have been included in quantitative analysis only. In all other cases, identifying details are restricted to the minimum required for using the selected part of their story. As a compromise between open research and immediate identification, I have given the archive folder number but not the full manuscript identifier for each letter quoted here.⁴

2. Letters to J. B. Priestley

On March 17, 1963 the British playwright and broadcaster J. B. Priestley discussed his forthcoming non-fiction book *Man and Time* (1964a) on the BBC Sunday night arts programme *Monitor*. Viewers were invited to write in with their own experiences of precognition and other temporal anomalies. The programme was subsequently broadcast in New Zealand, and notices about Priestley's project appeared in the *Sunday Telegraph* (Purser, 1963), *Sunday Times* (Wiggin, 1963), *Radio Times* (4 April 1962, p. 34) (Anonymous, 1963), and *Punch* (4 December 1963). The response was unexpectedly profuse, and Priestley devoted two chapters to the correspondence in his book *Man and Time* (1964), including twenty-four examples of precognitive dreams. An excerpt from *Man and Time* in the *Observer* (25 October 1964) (Priestley, 1964b) yielded further responses from the public. Just under 1500 letters survive, held among Priestley's papers in Special Collections at the University of Bradford, UK and in the archives of the Society for Psychical Research at Cambridge University Library, UK.

The timing of Priestley's project, five months after the Cuban missile crisis, was significant: the future of humanity was a very real, collective concern for Western media audiences. The period 1945 to the early 1960s was “permeated by a sense of spiritual or religious crisis engendered by the Holocaust and prospect of nuclear Armageddon, reinforced by economic austerity at home, loss of Empire, and continued military involvements abroad” (Richards, 2009: p. 186), with “new psychological categories” coming to replace “old-fashioned religious, moral, and material principles” (Porter, 1996: p. 388). Priestley featured on a roster of British public intellectuals, academics and religious thinkers with ready access to

the media, who were “inclined toward rather more open-minded and collaborative relations with one another than they had been until 1939” (Richards, 2009: p. 186) and he helped to articulate the “new and baffling complexity” of English life for his readers (Porter, 1996: p. 393). An optimistic, adventurous orientation to crisis and renewal is shared by Priestley and members of his audience, exemplified by a correspondent who states “I do so agree with your feeling that things are moving rather quickly ... The *Observer* today gives its front page to the Bishop of Woolwich's article – it is exactly what my dear husband had been hoping for, expecting, + waiting for – a ‘break through’ – I think we are in most exciting, if dangerous, times. But Christianity was always meant to be dangerous – I have not yet dreamed of a Bomb!” (SPR MS 47/2)

Born in Bradford in the North of England to a schoolmaster and a mill worker, Priestley served in the First World War as an infantryman and officer, before studying English and History at Cambridge University with some support from an ex-officer's grant. His main source of income during the 1920s was journalism for London periodicals, but he also began publishing fiction before launching a career as a playwright in the 1930s. Priestley's rise to literary prominence coincided with the latter years of overtly experimental writing by modernist authors such as T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, and with the arrival of new modes of textual clarity and explicit left politics associated with George Orwell and W. H. Auden. His output remains absent from university curricula while these two broad groupings endure, yet Priestley achieved a distinctive blend of experimental realism, chiefly through the manipulation of time in plays that confront the audience with questions about morality and privilege in relation to bourgeois life choices.⁵ These plays reached a wider audience through television adaptation, and many viewers remembered their author fondly for his morale-raising radio broadcasts during the Second World War. Priestley was instrumental in promoting the work of C. G. Jung in Britain, largely through radio broadcasts in the 1940s and 50s (Schoenl, 1998). Describing himself as a “broadbrow” (Baxendale, 2007: p. 18), Priestley was noted for his commitment to a classless realm of British knowledge and culture in which intellect was directly engaged with lived experience. As one respondent to the *Monitor* appeal noted, “I can think of no other writer who evokes so strongly the urge to talk back” (Priestley MS 17/5). For many viewers, the request for personal experiences of temporal anomaly offered a pretext to write fan mail.

Priestley's standing among the British public influenced the volume of correspondence received in response to the *Monitor* programme, the nature of what viewers were prepared to disclose, and the terms on which they narrated their experience in relation to established authorities. Correspondents were prepared to relate intimate and problematic experience to a renowned storyteller whose plays and novels were interwoven with their own life stories. “I've always had a special feeling for your work ... as if you were one of the family, like Gracie Fields or the Halle orchestra, bless you all”, wrote one audience member, capturing a sentiment widely shared across the correspondence. (Priestley MS 17/8) Many enclosed examples of poetry, fiction, scripts, autobiography and philosophical and mathematical work for his consideration. Priestley's lack of scientific or academic standing conferred freedom on those who perceived the limits of existing modes of knowledge and wished to speculate about future prospects. Discussion during the *Monitor* broadcast of Priestley's own precognitive dreams (Priestley, 1964a: pp. 197–198) assured viewers that similar reports would be taken seriously. In sum, Priestley was a

³ The notable exception is mediumship which has been explored from the perspective of female and working class practitioners by Owen (1989) and Oppenheim (1985). Besides contributions to the present volume, the relations between psychology, psychiatry and paranormal phenomena are explored in Ellenberger (2008, first published 1970), Williams (1985), Crabtree (1993), Shamdasani (1993), Shamdasani (1994), Shamdasani (2003, first published 1996), Luckhurst (2002), Wolffram (2009), Lachapelle (2011), Le Maléfian, Evrad, and Alvarado (2013), Sommer (2013) and a special issue of *History of the Human Sciences* (2012) on Relations between Psychical Research and Academic Psychology in Europe, the USA and Japan.

⁴ Items in the Priestley papers at the University of Bradford are in any case unnumbered within the folders.

⁵ On Priestley's time plays and his engagement with the work of J.W. Dunne and P.D. Ouspensky see Fischer (2013).

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