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Death and Beyond in J. B. Priestley's *Johnson Over Jordan*

Just as the imminence of the Second World War overshadowed the first production of J. B. Priestley's 'modern morality play', *Johnson Over Jordan*, in 1939, so did the disaster of 9/11 its only major revival, at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in 2001. Both productions boasted a major actor – respectively Ralph Richardson and Patrick Stewart – in the title role of a play which continued Priestley's search to find a theatrical style for his own metaphysical enquiries into the nature of time and the boundaries of human mortality. In this article, Alan W. Friedman sets the play in the context of western attitudes towards death and the nature of an afterworld, and relates these to Johnson's own journey after his funeral through rewindings of his past life towards some sort of reconciliation with its ending. Alan W. Friedman is Thaman Professor of English in the University of Texas, Austin, and has also taught at universities in England, Ireland, and France. He has published numerous articles and books, the latter including *Multivalence: the Moral Quality of Form in the Modern Novel* (Louisiana State UP, 1978), *William Faulkner* (Frederick Ungar, 1984), *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise* (Cambridge UP, 1995), and (edited with Charles Rossman and Dina Sherzer) *Beckett Translating/Translating Beckett* (Pennsylvania State UP, 1987).

A PROLIFIC, popular, and eclectic writer, J. B. Priestley was at the height of his powers when, shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, he wrote *Johnson Over Jordan*, an expressionist play about an ordinary foolish man who goes on an extraordinary journey after his death, which occurs just before the beginning of Act One. Perhaps partly because of the imminence of war, *Johnson* met with minimal success when it was first staged in 1939, despite 'what was reputedly one of Ralph Richardson's finest performances'.[1]

As luck would have it, the first major revival of the play since its initial staging, at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds with Patrick Stewart playing the Ralph Richardson role, occurred in August and September of 2001, and not even the presence of Captain Picard could salvage the production from the disaster of 11 September.

This is not to argue that *Johnson* is a great play done in (twice) by terrible coincidences. Rather, it is a fascinating though seriously flawed work that over-intellectualizes an emotionally powerful subject, relies heavily on stage gimmickry, and fails to develop its characters much beyond two dimensionsl. *Johnson* foregrounds death and its consequences, making them central to the play by beginning with the funeral of the titular character, tracking both his purgatorial journey and the parallel experience of his survivors as they move from grief to acceptance, and ending with Johnson poised to enter fully into the afterworld. But Priestley's treatment of death and the beyond sits somewhat uneasily within the literary and cultural tradition of the subject that he inherited, a history relevant to both Priestley's representation of death in *Johnson Over Jordan* and ultimately to its failure.

The very notion that death *has* a history might seem odd at first, since the common view is that life and death are absolute and absolutely distinct from each other; that death is universal, unchanging, natural; and that funeral and grieving rituals are more or less the same in all human societies. Yet links between life and death are embedded in our language. The word 'cemetery', for example, comes from the Greek for 'sleeping chambers',

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and cemeteries are the oldest of human cities, a notion inscribed in the many names of cities that end in '-bury' or the variant '-borough'. Analogously, the word 'bed', where people asleep are 'dead to the world', 'derives from the proto-Indo-European root . . . meaning 'to dig or bury'.[2] Some even argue that *humanitas*, our very humanity, derives 'first and properly from *humando*', ours being the only species that buries or inhumes its dead.[3]

Burial rituals were highly and widely developed by 50,000 bc; and Peking man was ritually burying his dead half a million years ago. Such rituals seem to have resulted from certain fundamental beliefs: that death is *un*natural, rather than natural, an assault on the communal body; that it is contagious and therefore dangerous; that the dead, understandably, prefer to remain in this world of teeming life rather than seek their way in the cold and desolate beyond; and that full entry into the afterworld occurs not as a sudden transformation at the moment of death, but as a gradual process.

Because death and the dead threaten our existence, rituals are performed both to honour the newly deceased and thereby propitiate them, and to speed them on their way so that the community that has been assailed and shaken may reconstitute what has been temporarily lost: its sense of wholeness and immortality. Survivors who have been close to death are seen as carriers, so they must be quarantined: removed from ordinary daily activities, housed in huts set aside for this purpose, dressed in special clothing, made to perform rituals that will allow them to re-enter society without spreading contagion, and the deceased finally to depart spiritually as well as physically.

This process of separation and reintegration of the bereaved lasts exactly as long as it takes the deceased to enter fully into the afterworld, which they are encouraged to do in various ways: they are dressed appropriately for the journey, and provided with money and food to sustain them – hence the origin of the Yorkshire aphorism, quoted in Priestley's novel *The Good Companions*, 'I buried 'im with 'am' (p. 624); mirrors may be covered over to prevent souls from taking refuge there; special songs are sung to encourage and instruct souls on their journey or to toast them on their way. Only at the end of this double process can society, its peace and wholeness restored, reconstitute the body politic and thus 'triumph over death'. 'All roads', anthropologists argue, 'lead to preserving the social system.'[4]

Variations on the Theme of Mortality

Yet anthropologists now generally argue that of even greater interest and significance are the variations on the theme: the different ways cultures respond to death and tell its story. According to Spengler, disposal of the dead expresses how a people link their historic past with their conception of death and what lies beyond. In *The Twentieth-Century Book of the Dead*, Gil Elliot writes: 'The manner in which people die reflects more than any other fact the value of a society.'[5] Concurring, the anthropologists Huntington and Metcalf maintain that in all societies 'Life becomes transparent against the background of death, and fundamental social and cultural issues are revealed.'[6]

But it is not only in the immediate reaction to dying and death that a culture manifests its deepest symbolic and mythic truths. Equally expressive and revealing are its artefacts of death: graveyards and tombs, monuments and icons, wills and death certificates, the treatment of the corpse itself (all of which have been fascinatingly studied in recent years and shown to vary greatly in different cultures) – and perhaps especially the stories of death and dying that a people constructs and tells.

Western literature from Homer to the start of the twentieth century commonly depicts death as doubly climactic, climaxing both the life at the centre of the work and the work itself. Epics, for example, are often defined by death in just this way: heroes such as Beowulf, Arthur, and Roland may think of themselves as aligned with life forces, but they are marked for death from the first: they kill their antagonists, and then die in turn. This pattern is explicitly established in *The*

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Iliad, since even before the opening of the epic Achilles has opted for a short glorious life rather than a long, peaceful one. He remains alive at the end, but he knows that his death is imminent, and the grief he shares with Priam is as much for himself as it is for Priam's son, Hector, whom he has killed.

Most of Shakespeare's tragedies are similarly structured: Macbeth, Othello, Antony, King Lear, and Coriolanus are larger-than-life figures who define themselves by wielding mortal power over others. Having proved their valour before their plays begin, they demonstrate on the stage their inability to transpose martial or political prowess into the domestic sphere. In consequence, they transfigure the orderly world they inherit until, as Othello puts it, 'chaos is come again', destroying those they love and then themselves in the process.

Death is implicit from the first in such plays, only waiting to be summoned, like Mephistopheles by Faustus. Other works are more explicit, so that Death is overtly initiatory as well as climactic, both defining from the beginning the life depicted and serving as the end towards which it moves, as their protagonists first recoil from death and then eventually accept what they cannot escape, and may even seek. Dante, for example, begins the *Commedia* by declaring himself 'in the middle of the journey of our life', fearfully lost in a dark forest that seems like death, entering a realm 'which no one before had ever left alive'. By the end of his terrible journey, he embraces the whole 'divine circle' of creation, affirming transcendence rather than mortality.

Chaucer's Pardoner tells a very different sort of tale, one in which three boastful young men resolve to seek and slay this 'traytour Deeth, / That in this contree alle oure freendes sleeth' (l. 753–54). But when they find golden treasure, the Pardoner scornfully comments, 'No lenger thanne after Deeth they soughte' (l. 772). The irony, however, is that they abandon their quest not because it is no longer of interest, as they claim, but because what was implicit from the first is now fulfilled, as they demonstrate by murdering each other. Their boisterous vitality proves a thin mask for their thinly disguised death-wish, and their actions reveal them to have been marked by the plague for death from the first.

Confrontations with Death

Like Priestley's Johnson, Everyman in the medieval morality play, John Bunyan's protagonist in *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Shakespeare's Hamlet are all claimed by Death at the beginning of their works, vehemently refuse its claim, but are forced to accede to it climactically. The figure of Death tells Everyman that he 'must take a long journey'. Insisting that 'Full unready I am such reckoning to give,' Everyman says, 'O Death! thou comest when I had thee least in mind!' He tries bribing Death to gain more time, and frantically begs the help of his worldly companions, Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods; but all of them desert him.

Bunyan's Pilgrim responds similarly to his summons: 'I am condemned to die, and after that to come to judgement; and I find that I am not willing to do the first, nor able to do the second' (p. 40). Equally unready and reluctant, Hamlet is challenged and claimed by Death, in the guise of his father's Ghost demanding that he perform the revenger's deed, which he instinctively knows is always a dual act: killing and being killed. Hamlet spends the bulk of his play evading the charge placed upon him, deflecting and recoiling from the death that awaits even as he verbally commits and recommits himself to its enactment. In the process this supposed weak-willed philosopher becomes the most physically active character in all of Shakespeare's plays, and responsible for a blood-bath of epic proportions.

Opposing extraterrestrial claims, the material world asserts a powerful hold on its inhabitants. Perhaps the best example is Achilles who, having opted for eternal glory over long life, reappears in *The Odyssey* to say that he made the wrong choice:

> Better, I say, to break sod as a farm hand
> for some poor countryman, on iron rations,
> than lord it over all the exhausted dead.
> (XI, 544–6)

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On a similar note, the dying Beowulf asks Wiglaf, his heir, to fetch the dragon's 'priceless shimmering stones' so he can assure himself that they are worth what they cost:

> once I
> have set eyes on such a store, it will be
> more easy for me to die, to abandon
> the life and land that have so long been mine.
> (l. 2739–42)

At the end, Beowulf claims a kind of success in having bartered 'my old life / for this treasure hoard' (l. 2792–3). Everyman and Pilgrim are reluctant to separate themselves from earthly things, while Hamlet is discomfited by his material being (his 'too too solid flesh'), and worries, even while dying, about who will next be king and how he will be remembered.

Even pious Aeneas, the most predetermined of epic heroes, is distracted by sensuality. Although he defines an overarching purpose as the measure of Aeneas's actions, Virgil seems less moved by the founding of Rome than by the doomed love between Aeneas and Dido, the terrible poignancy of her suicide after Aeneas loved her and left her, and the encounter in Hades when, reunited with her husband, she turns silently from the visiting Aeneas, now her enemy, who 'wept for her' – and also for himself.

The death that has been metaphorically and often literally present from the first in these works nonetheless usually occurs climactically, and as goal and vindication, just as Johnson dies at the beginning of his play but then enters fully into the afterworld at the end. Despite material distractions, Beowulf dies thanking God. After denial, anger, bargaining, and despair, Everyman and Pilgrim relinquish materiality and accept as inevitable and appropriate the death they had long sought to escape. A weary and relieved Hamlet, having become as guilty as Claudius by trying to *avoid* killing him, at the end renders unto Caesar what is Caesar's by giving 'his dying voice' to Fortinbras, the perfect embodiment of the world's mindless machismo values he had fought and failed to transcend, even as he departs accompanied by 'flights of angels'. The irony of Hamlet's fate is underscored when Fortinbras, sounding exactly like Claudius at the beginning of the play, claims the throne: 'with sorrow I embrace my fortune' (V, ii, 388), and then gives Hamlet the stately military funeral he clearly thinks would be appropriate for himself.

Death in the Enlightenment – and After

This overlapping and interweaving of life and death, a dying process that looks both back and forward, largely went out of style in the eighteenth century. Enlightenment thinkers generally affirmed a rigid separation between life and death, viewed doubts about the firmness of these categories as superstition, and expressed little interest in the transition between them. For the most part they shared Samuel Johnson's anti-Catholic view that, 'It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance, it lasts so short a time.'[7] The great exception to this generalization is, of course, Richardson's novel *Clarissa* (1747–48), a massive tome on the art of dying that seems spiritually closer to the nineteenth century, when dying, death, and funerals returned with full panoply.

Deathbed scenes feature prominently in many of Dickens's novels;[8] in *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*; in Browning's *The Ring and the Book*; in Cooper's *The Prairie;* and in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; and they recur in most Victorian biographies. Climactic, familiar, and domestic, Victorian death was an aesthetic drama, usually centered on an innocent person represented as too good for this world, with family, friends, and often strangers gathered to grieve and bear witness. As Ian Wilson comments, in the nineteenth century:

> Death was a social event, the tolling of the bell that signified the giving of the Last Rites being a call for even complete strangers to hurry to a dying person's bedside.[9]

Public and accessible, Victorian deathbed scenes were at once emotionally extravagant, crowded, and full of activity: 'Hence the profound significance of Pascal's remark that

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one dies alone, for at that time one was never physically alone at the moment of death.'[10]

A rare exception to this rule, Dickens's Scrooge is deemed not to have been 'natural in his lifetime' because if 'he had been, he'd have had somebody to look after him when he was struck with Death, instead of lying gasping out his last there, alone by himself'.[11] The death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* was both a literary and a cultural phenomenon – a child mourned not only by those at her bedside but by an entire society, and sentimentalized by no one, John Morley suggests, more than her author:

> Dickens was moved to forget his grammar: 'Nobody shall miss her like I shall. It is such a very painful thing to me, that I really cannot express my sorrow.'[12]

But at least Dickens had lots of company: Pascal's statement resonated less in the twentieth century, when dying alone in a hospital room first became likely.

Between new medical technology and the killing fields of the Great War, death moved out of the home, disappearing into hospitals or banished to battlefields. For the first time in history, patients were more likely to be helped than harmed by medical treatment, although the plot of *The Last Holiday* (1950), Priestley's filmscript written for Alec Guinness, turns on a misdiagnosis. Self-confident male doctors, like the one in *The Last Holiday*, seized control of the medical profession from women (who had been keepers of the so-called mysteries of birth and death), created fiefdoms over which they could preside, and along with their white jackets donned an authority over mortality by marginalizing and silencing awe-stricken patients whose physical being, the profession decided, had to be sustained no matter the quality or cost. Death came to be viewed as preventable – not natural and inevitable but a sign of medical failure, and so all efforts were made to forestall, deny, and hide it.

At the same time, a generation of young men went off to the Great War, and many never returned, not even as corpses to be buried and mourned. Their disappearance left an enormous rent in the social fabric: the vast numbers of sudden dead who could not be properly memorialized overwhelmed and disabled the last remnant of the Victorian apparatus of mourning: 'The stage had become too wide for propriety.'[13]

An extraordinary cultural transformation resulted: it was rare in nineteenth-century life or literature for someone not to have witnessed a deathbed and paid respect to a 'beautiful corpse'; but as the twentieth century progressed, it became ever rarer to have this experience.[14] As a result, death and its rituals became what sex had been for the Victorians: a 'dirty little secret' – shameful and fearful, clandestine, not spoken of in the light of day or polite company.

Modernist Representations

There are, however, two forms of representation that serve as alternatives to the Victorian aesthetic process that unfolds seamlessly: dying in bed, the moment of death, the funeral, and mourning. First, certain continental writers – Flaubert in *Madame Bovary*, Tolstoy in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Thomas Mann in *Death in Venice* – depict what has been called the 'dirty death', with its relentless focus on bodily disintegration, with moral and psychological corruption manifested as physical rot on the still-inhabited body. Modernist representations of dying tend to be similarly materialist and gruesome, as in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Lawrence's *Women in Love*, Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, or Hemingway's 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro'.

On the other hand, modernist literature, reflecting society's loss, increasingly omitted the dying process entirely, or else rendered it as disrupted, fragmented, maimed. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for example, is replete with unburied corpses and empty holes; for all its deaths, no one is properly buried. Sudden deaths are announced in the novels of E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, as is Carol's in Priestley's play *Time and the Conways*; but, as with Carol, both dying and mourning are elided, as are public rituals.

Joyce's *The Dead* turns on the revelation of a death that occurred prior to the beginning of the work, as does Priestley's *An Inspector*

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Calls; and in both, the deceased, having been accorded neither funeral nor public mourning, remains unpropitiated. In *Ulysses* Joyce depicts a funeral but no death, and its young artist figure is haunted by a dead mother he never mourned. Priestley's Johnson, who seems to have experienced the gamut of modernist death, tells the Figure of Death of his fears when he recalls:

> seeing the half-rotten carcase [*sic*] of a cat, white and crawling with maggots. Then once, the swollen purple face of a drowned man. Then later, my mother, smiling but turned into wax; a sickly sweet smell [*of embalming, the modern attempt to aestheticize 'the dirty death'*] all over the house. . . . I went to the War and I remember the vacant eye-sockets of my dead friends. There was a hand I have tried to forget. It was sticking out of a parapet, a mute and rigid cry for help, as if the rest of him had been turned into earth and sandbags, and he knew – he still knew – and held out a hand towards the warm living flesh. (p. 44–5)

Unpropitiated spirits, unappeased revenants, haunt the modern world and its literature.[15]





The Figure of Death. Top: in the 1939 production at the Saville Theatre, directed by Basil Dean, with Ralph Richardson as Johnson. Bottom: in the 2001 production at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, directed by Jude Kelly, with Patrick Stewart as Johnson.

Johnson's Journey to the Afterworld

Johnson Over Jordan is structured like Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. Both begin with the protagonist's funeral, and then enact dying as a journey through what are now commonly viewed as the stages of the process: denial, anger, bargaining, despair, and acceptance.[16] Tolstoy's narrative loops back in time from the funeral, depicting Ivan Ilych's empty life and painful dying as first a complacent and then an alienating process, leading to a funeral that is an empty ritual because no one grieves, and at which Ivan Ilych's wife is concerned only with how much *she* has suffered and the amount of money she can expect from her government pension. Unlike Tolstoy's readers, those at the funeral do not and cannot know that, while dying, Ivan has spent his time reviewing his entire life, beginning with a

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sense that he had done everything entirely properly, clinging to that view even as his agony intensifies – and even as his doing so intensifies his suffering – and letting go of it only just before the end, when he finally acknowledges the selfishness of his life, feels sorry for others, and moves from fear to acceptance, from darkness to light, as he dies.

Johnson's post-funeral journey is more complicated than Ivan Ilych's. When he first appears, Johnson speaks from his hospital bed 'like a man in a delirium'. He seems, simultaneously, to travel forwards in time from his funeral; imaginatively reviews the life that has led to it; and then, as Basil Dean, the play's first director, puts it, re-experiences his life from 'the middle years of temptation, thence to unsullied youth – a life history in reverse order as it were'.[17]

The funeral at the beginning of *Johnson Over Jordan* implies that life and death are categorical opposites: a point made explicit first by Mr Clayton, Johnson's self-satisfied and prosperous boss – 'when you're dead that's the end of you' (p. 5) – and then by Johnson's son Richard: 'When you're dead, you're dead' (p. 49). But things don't work like that in this play because, as Priestley learned from reading about death and separation rituals in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, departing souls are thought to enter 'a prolonged dream-like state, in what might be called the fourth dimension of space, filled with hallucinatory visions directly resultant from the mental-content of the percipient'.[18]

Those who enter this realm are to review their lives to determine the truth about them before they are ready for full entry into the afterworld. (It is a nice coincidence that Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, published in 1939, the year *Johnson* was first staged, makes extensive use of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, a work that has been called a 'mythography of postmortality',[19] and which Joyce punningly calls 'The Bug of the Deaf'.[20]) Echoing both the Egyptian and Tibetan *Books of the Dead*, and expressing something close to Priestley's view, Johnson's daughter Freda wonders if the mind still operates after death, in a kind of dream experience, so that the dead person is unaware of the body's decease.[21]

Like Odysseus, Aeneas, and Dante, Johnson enters an afterworld that is a surreal or expressionistic version of the mortal one he has known. The figures that the epic heroes encounter, however, are bodiless shadows of what they once were (Odysseus carries a bucket of blood from which the dead must drink in order to be able to speak), or else they are souls in mortal agony; and the heroes themselves are still alive, able to return to earth the wiser for their journeys into the beyond. Johnson, on the other hand, is like the characters in Shaw's *Man and Superman* and Sartre's *No Exit*: postmortem figures who enter into an afterworld defined largely by what they can imagine – and Johnson, who was originally named Smith,[22] is a man of quite limited imagination.

At the end of Act Two, Johnson asks the Figure of Death, who is like the play's afterworld in becoming increasingly benign, what he will find at his next venue, the Inn at the End of the World. The Figure responds, 'I do not know what things have illuminated your mind and touched your heart' (p. 76–7). As Priestley implies, Johnson, like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, will find what he brings.

Further suggesting that Johnson's afterworld may be viewed as what he imagines, Priestley offers several other possibilities: that it is an allegory of Johnson's life in this world; a dream; a review of his life during his dying; a process of letting go. In one of his most discursive stage directions, he introduces Johnson in this way:

> *Obviously the real Johnson is not lying in that oak box which the* undertaker's man *is now having conveyed to the waiting hearse. What is happening to the real Johnson? Just as we are wondering this, we see him. That is all we see –* johnson*'s face strongly illuminated against a background of darkness. He is talking away in an odd confused manner, like a man in a delirium.* (p. 7)

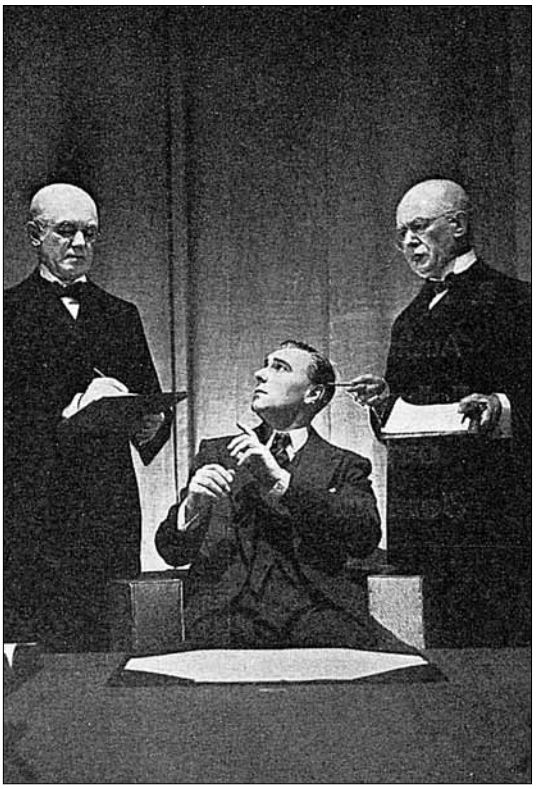
So although much of this stage direction is curiously unplayable (as are many of Shaw's), Priestley does offer a naturalistic explanation, if we want it: Johnson's experiences in the play, he suggests here, are produced by the workings of a delirious imagination on the brink of death, though we still have to

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consider that 'the real Johnson is not lying in that oak box', and that his dying seems to occur posthumously, after his funeral.

Like Everyman, to whom Priestley compared him ('Johnson seemed a good name for an English Everyman', p. 119), Johnson is reluctant to depart, clinging to worldly things as he seeks money at the Universal Insurance Company, hedonistic pleasure at the Jungle Hot Spot nightclub, the recapturing of youthful innocence and romance in the Inn at the End of the World. In Priestley's original conception, each of the three acts began with the ongoing funeral service, so that it seemed to contain Johnson's afterworld experience, and both the service and Johnson's journey concluded at the end of the play. But he discovered that:

> Many playgoers, on edge after the first funeral scene, detested having to return to that atmosphere in Acts Two and Three. Again, audiences





Johnson and the Examiners. Right: in 1939. Below: in 2001.

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The nightclub scene – Johnson throws off sobriety in the Jungle Hot Spot. Above: the masks designed by Elizabeth Haffenden for the nightclub scene in 1939. Opposite page, top: Johnson (seated, left) meets Madame Vulture in the 1939 production. Opposite page, bottom: The Jungle Hot Spot in 2001.

could not understand that the big Johnson scenes were supposed to be happening within the brief limits of a short funeral service. (p. 123)

In the revised version, each act occurs a day later than the previous one, although lines from the funeral service intrude late in Acts Two and Three, as if the funeral *were* still in process (p. 75–6, 113), so the family's grieving process parallels Johnson's journeying into the afterworld.

At her first appearance, Jill, Johnson's wife, is 'terribly distressed', and his children, Richard and Freda, 'are both making a desperate effort to carry it off well' (p. 3). By the second act, they are able to enter into ordinary conversation: about getting rid of the funeral lilies, about settling affairs, about where Johnson is now.

Act Three begins with the house looking 'much warmer and more cheerful than it did before', with Johnson's family and boss reminiscing pleasantly about his life. Jill, '*still in black, of course, but . . . no longer the wan figure we saw before*', is greeted by Freda '*happily surprised*': 'Why – mother – you look different.' Jill's response indicates that she has begun to let go, to recover from the illness of grieving: 'I know, darling – and I feel different. . . . You see, I know. I suddenly saw – quite clearly – everything's all right – really all right – *now*' (p. 80).

The enchanting scene at the Inn at the End of the World, which follows immediately, validates what she says here. Shortly before Johnson gets to relive the evening he and Jill met, the figure of Don Quixote appears and, echoing Shakespeare's Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, offers the play's most explicit comment on the equally imaginary nature of fictional and human existence:

> Your great poet once said that the best of our kind are but shadows, though I think he knew that your kind too – who appear so solid to yourselves for a little time – are also only shadows. And perhaps you too take life from the mind that beholds you and your little tale, so that you live as we must do, in another and greater being's imagination, memory, and affection. (p. 90)

What Don Quixote expresses here accords with Priestley's notion that we live multiple lives simultaneously in parallel universes or

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that we sometimes take quantum leaps between very different kinds of lives, as Priestley depicts not only in many of his plays but also in novels such as *The Good Companions* and *The Magicians*.

When Johnson is reunited with his wife, he declares his transcendent love for 'the essential Jill, whom I was for ever finding, losing, then finding again', and Jill, alluding to the ongoing relationship between the living and the dead, tells him, 'Like you, I am at peace. . . . We have no more peace in ourselves than you have, but when you find peace in us, then we find it too' (p. 105).



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Allowed to select an evening from the past to relive, Johnson chooses the idyllic night in 1912 when the couple first met: 'We'll be ourselves as we were then,' he says, 'but we'll also be all the selves we've been since, so that we'll have *everything*' – and so they do, but, like the world on the brink of massive war, only briefly. Very soon, Jill disappears; the music and dancing stop, and the clergyman completes the funeral service: 'Lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word.' The Figure of Death pronounces solemnly, 'Robert Johnson, it is time for you to go,' and then allows him to overhear the earlier conversation (or else has it repeated for his benefit) in which Jill had said that 'Everything's all right – really all right – *now*' (p. 112–14, 80). Johnson, accepting at last, sums up, bids farewell, prepares to enter fully into the world beyond as the play ends.

Artistic Success, Commercial Failure

How well does all this work? The play's stage history suggests not very well despite the fact that, according to Christopher Innes, 'Priestley won a reputation alongside T. S. Eliot, as the leading serious dramatist of the thirties and forties.' It was because of his prominence, as well as his supposed nostalgia for pre-World-War England, that 'he became the main object of attack in the theatrical revolution initiated by John Osborne in the mid-1950s, being singled out by the angry young protagonist of *Look Back in Anger* as "like Daddy – still casting well-fed glances back to the Edwardian twilight from his comfortable disenfranchised wilderness".'[23]

The attack is somewhat ironic given Priestley's socialist views, his championing of the so-called 'little man' (somewhat in the manner of playwrights like Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller, who remained popular), his satirizing of the smug hypocrisies of the comfortable bourgeoisie, and his stirring anti-Fascist radio broadcasts during the Second World War which made him nearly as popular as Churchill.[24]

According to Dean, *Johnson Over Jordan* received an ovation every night it was on, and John Braine, in his admiring book on Priestley, writes that 'It was a triumph of the highest order,' both Priestley's and Ralph Richardson's 'supreme moment in the theatre'.[25] Yet the production was a commercial and critical failure, receiving very mixed reviews. It ran for only a matter of weeks, and has rarely been attempted subsequently.[26] A major problem was the enormous cost of the production, which Priestley fearfully prophesied might be the case: 'I shudder to think what will happen to *Johnson Over Jordan*, which employs over sixty people and will cost the earth.'[27]

What other factors might help to account for the lack of theatrical success for a play designed as an entertainment on a grand scale, and which has been called Priestley's 'most ambitious and experimental'?[28] Perhaps part of the problem was its very ambitiousness – its attempting, as Priestley put it, 'to make full use of all the resources of the theatre':[29] mime, music, ballet, masks; complex sound and lighting effects; multiple changes of elaborate costume and scenery. Further, on the eve of the Second World War, it employed a dramatic style suggestive of German Expressionism (a term Priestley disliked but one that he himself first applied to this play):[30] the hedonistic cabaret scene; allegorical figures with blank faces or wearing animal masks; distortions of surface reality with stylized action and non-naturalistic and subjective treatment of time; the attack on modern life, particularly capitalism, as mechanistic and dehumanizing. (As the illustrations accompanying this article suggest, the West Yorkshire Playhouse revival had a sparer, contemporary setting, but since neither the language nor the cultural milieu was updated, this made for an uneasy mixture.)

The play is also tonally ambiguous, an uneasy mix of prose and largely unsuccessful poetry; and it is uncertain how seriously we are meant to take the ideas of two writers who influenced Priestley: the mystic P. D. Ouspensky, who proposed the existence of alternative time sequences in parallel universes, and the mathematician J. W. Dunne, whom Priestley called 'the most important figure in the campaign against the conven-

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The Inn at the End of the World (1939). Johnson relives the night he met his wife.



tional idea of Time',[31] who conceived of a temporal plane on which past, present, and future could converge.

Both Ouspensky and Dunne argue 'that man is endowed with an immortal soul or consciousness continuing in other existences after physical death', and both account for the sense of *déjà vu* as a re-experiencing of something we have actually lived through – what Priestley expresses in the title of one of his plays as *I Have Been Here Before*. Priestley, who thought of himself as 'a Time-haunted

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Johnson marches 'into the huge, heroic void'. Photos for the 1939 production in this article by Angus McBean, those for the 2001 production by Keith Pattison.



man'[32] and who said that his 'temperamental bent is always towards the rather fantastic and the romantic-mixed-with-humour',[33] seems quite serious when he says that he wanted to suggest

> life outside Time as we usually know it, 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 [as in his play *Time and the Conways*], all of which can bring a piercing sweetness, a queer poignancy, and, again, dramatic experience a little different from what one has known before.[34]

But it can also be disorienting in ways that Priestley did not intend.

Letting Johnson off the Hook?

Finally, although *Johnson Over Jordan* has been called 'a morality play',[35] the moral treatment of Johnson's character raises even more fundamental questions, and the play fails to take them seriously, let alone answer them. As Joyce demonstrates in *Ulysses*, an ordinary decent man may indeed harbour sadistic, incestuous, and homicidal fantasies. But Priestley ends his play with Johnson implausibly acting them out, and then getting away with doing so because, according to the Figure of Death (who has become angelic rather than demonic), the girl he tries to rape and the man he kills were not his children, as they seem to be, but only shadows of his own imagining.

And so Johnson is let off the hook, deemed foolish rather than evil – although, the Figure adds, it *would* be evil to return home to try to comfort his bereaved family (presumably because the barrier between the living and the dead is suddenly deemed to be firm). Johnson himself is far more credible when he tries to accept responsibility for his terrible actions: 'If they were only shadows, that is no merit of mine. What I did, I did' (p. 75). Priestley claims that Johnson has 'been purged by terror and remorse' (p. 122), but he fails to depict this crucial transformation. Rather, Johnson is simply sent on to the next stage in his progress as if he had *passed* rather than *failed* an important test, which muddies

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the moral and psychological as well as the dramatic waters.

The play, then, seems to move arbitrarily from Kafkaesque nightmare to sentimental optimism. As one critic writes, it 'disintegrates out of the sharp black shadows of a powerfully imagined hell of dreams into the cosy and, yes, somewhat jolly sunlight of the last act'[36] – a scene that Harold Hobson describes in triumphalist terms:

> Just before its close [the play] reached a level that the theatre has seldom attained in this country in this century. The gentle, affectionate toying with his past existence came to an end. Johnson had to prepare for a longer journey, and an uncertain destination. The stage of the New Theatre opened up to show a coldly glittering blue immensity, a chilled infinity. For a moment, Johnson hesitated, then took up his small attaché case, the badge of all common people, turned up the collar of his coat, and marched, with a step absolutely unfaltering, into the huge, heroic void.[37]

That would be all well and good had Priestley depicted Johnson earning such an ending. As Gareth Lloyd Evans notes:

> Johnson has it too easy. The average man triumphs despite his iniquities. He goes out in a blaze of glory to an unknown but promised land. He has suffered little in the course of the action, though he has experienced the pangs of the unthinking and the selfish. . . . Johnson is an irritating character because there is no fight in him. He questions nothing, and accepts everything that comes his way be it good or bad. The most potent emotion he displays is . . . the emotion of bewilderment. He is, in short, not big enough to house or react to the issues which the play creates around him. (p. 133)

What Priestley offers finally is a thematically confused, though picturesque and visually striking, ending: Johnson, done with the immediate afterworld, acknowledges that 'I have been a foolish, greedy and ignorant man', elegizes the time he has had 'beneath the sun and stars', insists that he will not rest until he sees Paradise (whatever it turns out to be), vacuously blesses everyone, and stands poised on the brink of entering into the vast 'blue space and the shining constellations' that lie beyond the afterworld that Priestley depicts.

What Priestley – and apparently many in the play's initial audience – found most compelling was this image, rather than the play's ideas or psychological depth: 'From the first,' Priestley writes, 'I saw this final and impressive picture – this man of our time, an ordinary citizen of the suburbs, a small but gallant figure against a huge background of blue space and glittering stars' (p. 122). I suppose that we are free, like Johnson, to imagine whatever sort of afterworld suits us, but that ending does seem something of a cop-out on Priestley's part, especially given the horrific context of its only two major productions. Perhaps one day, in a differently configured world, the play might have the opportunity to live or die on its own genuine if limited merits.

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Notes and References

1. Benedict Nightingale.
2. Bishop, *Joyce's Book of the Dark*, p. 66–7.
3. See Vico, *The New Science*, and Bewell, 'History of Death', p. 190.
4. See Hertz, p. 78–9, 86; Huntington and Metcalf, p. 28.
5. Elliot, *Book of the Dead*, p. 10.
6. Huntington and Metcalf, *Celebrations*, p. 2.
7. In Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, p. 69.
8. Among others, *The Old Curiosity Shop, Dombey and Son, Our Mutual Friend, Bleak House*, and *Hard Times*.
9. Wilson, *After-Death Experience*, p. 5.
10. Ariès, *Hour*, p. 19.
11. Dickens, 'A Christmas Carol', p. 472.
12. Morley, *Death, Heaven*, p. 18.
13. Ibid., p. 79.
14. Gorer, *Death, Grief, and Mourning*, p. xv, 195. Gorer's vividest childhood memories concern the death of Edward VII.
15. Examples include Mrs Wilcox in *Howards End* and Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India*, both by E. M. Forster; Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* and Septimus Smith in *Mrs Dalloway*, both by Virginia Woolf; May Dedalus in *Ulysses*; Christ in Lawrence's *The Man Who Died*; Addie Bundren in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*; and the title character in Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*.
16. First detailed in Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, p. 34–121.
17. Quoted in Braine, p. 91. In a letter to Priestley (11 August 1964), Alec Guinness comments on how much he had learned from Dean, who directed him in a production of Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*. The letters quoted in this essay are housed in the University of Texas, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center.
18. Priestley, *And All About It*, p. 120–1.
19. See Bishop, *Joyce's Book of the Dark*, p. 86–125, 405 n. 4.
20. Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 134.
21. Atkins, p. 75; Priestley, *Johnson Over Jordan*, p. 49–50, *And All About It*, p. 120–1.
22. Priestley, *And All About It*, p. 118.
23. Innes, p. 367. Priestley responded: 'A bit much . . . seeing that most of my contributions to this paper have been attempts to take a genuine look at our present time – discovering, for example, political apathy about two years before the politicians and leaderwriters found it out' (*Thoughts in the Wilderness*, p. 175).
24. Ernest Bevin wrote to thank Priestley for his broadcasts: 'the whole country owes you a debt of gratitude. I am convinced that it is a great national service to make the United States and the Dominions understand that our social policy is not only not going back, but is even going ahead in spite of the war. No one in this country can do that more effectively than you' (9 August 1940). Others who wrote to Priestley praising his talks include G. B. Shaw (1 August 1940) and Sean O'Casey (12 May 1942). Priestley himself commented on the success of his broadcasts in a retrospective letter (to F. Warren Roberts, 4 October 1962): 'At this time, 1940, my radio Sunday night "Postscripts" were the most popular radio talks in the country except for Churchill's speeches.'
25. Braine, p. 92.
26. Subsequent stagings include occasional amateur productions, a German translation, radio broadcasts, and a TV version (files of A. D. Peters, Priestley's literary agent).
27. Priestley, letter to Richard Church, 8 February 1939.
28. Cooper, p. 126.
29. Priestley, *And All About It*, p. 128.
30. In a letter to Hugh Walpole (17 March 1938), Priestley refers to his 'rather expressionistic drama'.
31. Priestley, *Man and Time*, p. 244.
32. Ibid., p. 12.
33. Priestley, letter to Hugh Walpole, 16 March 1940.
34. Priestley, *The Art of the Dramatist*, p. 52.
35. Cooper, p. 126.
36. Hughes, p. 152.
37. Hobson, p. 53.

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