Disbelief and the Aesthetic

Literary, Experimental and Prophetic Language in Joseph Priestley

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Abstract: This paper considers some implications of the hesitation or interruption inherent in disbelief by looking at some instances from the English polymath Joseph Priestley (1733–1804). It suggests that the aesthetic, the mode of response characterised by disbelief, influences judgements in other fields of inquiry despite Priestley's hostility.

If unbelief is an ideology or state of mind, disbelief is more evanescent: a failure or refusal that may be corrected by subsequent knowledge. That moment of disbelief is provisional: it has to be supplemented or corrected and it must be followed by conviction. The term *conviction* comes from the believer who is the subject of this article, the English cleric and natural philosopher Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) and the evanescence of disbelief perhaps requires that we look at disbelief in time.

Modes of perceiving time are clearly marked by class and gender. E. P. Thompson's classic essay on the management of time in burgeoning capitalism, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism" (Thompson 1967), is about the commodification of this abstract entity. An earlier mode can be found in the clog almanacs in the enlightenment gallery of the British Museum. These almanacs seem to represent a wholly different conception of time—they are pieces of carved wood with incisions marking quarter days, holidays and changes of the moon. Conversely, at the time of writing this paper, I was looking at the work of a beginning doctoral student on the ways in which not to waste time were interpreted by aristocratic women largely as an imperative about the best ways of employing time in order to satisfy the demands of both piety and utility. There are chapters on

Catherine Talbot and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and in those and other cases, the fact that these are specifically Protestant imperatives returns me to my subject.

Joseph Priestley was both a Dissenting minister and a natural philosopher who made significant experimental advances in the study of optics, electricity and gases, among other fields. His work can represent what might seem to us a juxtaposition of religious faith with the protocols of scientific inquiry since Bacon and Newton, a juxtaposition of pre-enlightenment and modernity instanced in apparently opposed views of the world and time. The former is convinced that human life can be only probationary; the latter is subject to the scrutiny of experimental method. There is, however, an evident link between the kind of eschatological time everyone knows about in Priestley and others in a millenarian kind of decade in the 1790s, and a more prosaic world in which—like the present—things had taken an unpleasantly fictional kind of turn. By that, I mean not only that what had seemed certainties might be questioned, but also that the grounds of argument, the framing categories by which those arguments were negotiated discursively might themselves be questioned. These might be articulated in temporal terms as a heady sense of regress as well as progress, for instance.

For most of that decade, Priestley was in the United States. The new republic ought to have been the fulfilment of those eschatological hopes; it ought to have been the domain of promise, but it was also what he called an asylum, as did his friends John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, the second and third presidents. Priestley had remained in England for nearly three years after a traumatic event. In July 1791, on the second anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, his house, library and laboratory near Birmingham in the English midlands had been sacked and razed to the ground by a crowd which destroyed both his "apparatus of philosophical instruments" and his unpublished manuscripts.

That was the event he struggled with for the rest of his life—not just its material consequences but its meaning, because amongst other things, it certainly represented a break in the notion of inevitable progress that undergirded both faith and experiment. In this paper, I wish to consider three kinds of disbelief: firstly, that idea of 'progress' which many see as definitive of the Enlightenment; secondly, to suggest that Priestley's view of it might be compared with two contemporaries whose conceptions of time certainly seem opposed not only to him but also to each other, that is, Edmund Burke and William Blake and thirdly, to suggest that there

is a third (maybe mediating) term between faith and natural philosophy. This is the domain of Coleridge's disbelief, the aesthetic. It is the aesthetic that justifies a movement that may appear regressive rather than progressive, that wants to shape the future by revising the past.

To some, the 1790s promised to be the last days, while others preached that the kingdom of heaven "is not yet come, but much nearer than it was in [the gospel writers'] time" (*Works* 15. 532). Priestley read what he called the 'present disturbances in Europe' through the language of Revelations to show supersession of the kingdoms of the world by the kingdom of Christ (*Works* 15. 533). While figures such as Richard Brothers collapsed 'symbolic' and 'literal' levels, those—like Priestley on the rational fringe of millenarianism prophesied the downfall only of Catholic states, which was unlikely to disturb the British wartime government. Nevertheless, even in retirement thirty years later, the former United States President John Adams recalled with exasperation Priestley having averred in the 1790s that all his hopes for France were founded "on revelation and the prophecies" explaining "that the ten horns of the great beast in revelations, mean the ten crowned heads of Europe: and [. . .] the execution of the king of France is the falling off of the first of those horns; and the nine monarchies of Europe will fall one after another in the same way." Adams comments: "Such was the enthusiasm of that great man, that reasoning machine."

This apocalyptic sense, however, is a kind of accelerated version of progress. "That the world is in a state of improvement, is very evident in the human species, which is the most distinguished part of it," Priestley wrote in 1772 (*Works* 2). "If things proceed as they have done [...] the earth will become a paradise" (*Works* 2. 7–8). For Priestley, progress is a power akin to a natural force that could be harnessed but that operated outside the established channels of communication. He recommends continuous "improvement" in civil matters as the alternative to what otherwise would not even be stasis but decline: "Were the best formed state in the world to be fixed in its present condition, I make no doubt but that, in the course of time, it would be the worst" (Priestley, *Political Writings* 109). This is a kind of t-shirt slogan for progress and its challenge to those such as Burke is evident.

The political appeal is made by analogy with progress in science, but there are other disciplines not merely trumped or cancelled by science. Those attached to progress need not hold a monopoly on future time either. There is a mystic sense to Burke's claims in his controversy with Priestley with which the latter might have

sympathized, because of their relation to time. Although Burke's insistence on continuity with an unbroken past is at odds with the claims his opponents make for the restoration of ancient liberty, both arguments rely on seeing the present as a staging-post in existence rather than its be-all and end-all.

"By a constitutional policy, working after the pattern of nature," Burke writes in his *Letter to a Noble Lord*, "we receive, we hold, we transmit our government and our privileges, in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property and our lives" (120). This "philosophic analogy" ascribes vitalism to the constitution and, of course, it too implies a monopoly on "conformity to nature" (Burke 121). Like Voltaire, in reputation anyway, Priestley assumed the momentum of progress to be unstoppable. If Burke's history relies on repeated precedents from an unbroken narrative, Priestley's depends—like Blake's—on restoring an ancient usurpation.

II

The great progenitor of the notion that it might be possible to carry over calculation from the physical to the social world was Locke, for whom "Morality is capable of Demonstration, as well as Mathematicks" and "perfect Knowledge" as likely: "clear and distinct Ideas" arise from the consonance of words with ideas and words ought not to produce "Uncertainty and Obscurity" merely because they are "mixed modes" conveying "complex Ideas" (516). However, the aesthetic is a type of explanation susceptible neither to the rigours of experiment nor to the truth-claims of scripture; it is a discourse that cannot be reconciled to Priestley's system and sometimes it cannot be incorporated or even acknowledged within this system.

Priestley tells the young readers of his *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion* of 1772–4 that he aimed at "Conviction" (*Works* 2. xx), which is a rhetorical effect, or the end of a series of such effects. Priestley's movement to what he calls "conviction" is based on the reasonableness of an appeal to readers who are posited as similarly reasonable and who weigh the balance of probabilities. "Conviction," the term believing Protestants used to attest to acts of conscience, is nevertheless different from a claim of truth as it tends to be frequently revised.

For Priestley, the study of revealed religion held out the promise of a leap beyond time in to a millennial state—promise that events of the 1790s seemed to go some way to confirming—and not only that but the same kind of study may also reveal

the route to progress to be back in time rather than forwards. He shares with a contemporary such as Blake the ambition of reforming Christianity to a pristine state: for Priestley this meant before its 'corruption' by the accretion of superstitions—as he regarded them—that included original sin and the virgin birth, but chiefly of course the divinity of Jesus Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. The Dedication to *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782) promises:

> The gross darkness of that *night* which has for many centuries obscur'd our holy religion, we may clearly see, is past; the *morning* is opening upon us; and we cannot doubt but that the light will increase, and extend itself more and more unto *the perfect day.* (*Works* 5. 4)

Enlightenment is an ultimate state rather than an event, though it depends on an apocalyptic event to which Priestley looks forward not least because the rhetorical confusion into which his own work intervenes will be rendered lucid: "the time will come when the cloud, which for the present prevents our distinguishing our friends and our foes, will be dispersed, even that day in which *the secrets of all hearts will be disclosed* to the view of all" (*Works* 5). Secular progress is guaranteed by the biblical account of apocalypse and millennium.

This optimistic contemporary view is the kind of thing to which some object, seeing belief in 'progress' as a delusion foisted on us by Enlightenment (Gray).[1] Disliking what they see as the instrumentalism of enlightenment thinking (the ruinous environmental impact of technology, for instance) its opponents have come to see belief in 'progress' as definitive of enlightenment. Priestley's is a double notion of progress that depends on a negative activity and one that recedes as well as proceeds, goes backwards as well as forwards, that is, by a method of historicizing that is forensic, even archaeological in uncovering the errors with which Christianity has been overlaid.

1 Liberalism now being the only game in town, the alternative is a mode of thinking that would bypass Kant and the Enlightenment altogether, a kind of 'agonistic liberalism', to which Gray himself had, he says, previously subscribed. That is, only if the town is in the West: in Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and maybe even China the free market exists successfully without Enlightenment civil society (Gray 127). They are not liberal democracies but they are successful, economically and otherwise. However, they have the same instrumental and exploitative relation (Gray calls it 'nihilist') to the earth and its resources as the West.

Parallel to the history of inevitable progress, it seems that there must be a history of degeneration as well, a degeneration beginning with the ancients.

For some in Priestley's circle, reason and the experimental method may be antithetical not to religious faith but to an aesthetic sense with which it could sometimes be confused. Thomas Cooper opined in 1812 that the literary in particular may be "licentious" and appeal in an individual's "boyish years" and therefore be symptomatic of a society stuck in its own infancy: "When experience has taught us wisdom, we begin to estimate utility as the criterion for desert, and look back with some regret at the time misemployed in mere amusement" (Kramnick 9). Priestley was distrustful of fiction from childhood; his brother remembered the young Joseph having torn from his hands the book of chivalric romance he was reading and thrown it away and Joseph Priestley was pretty clearly the descendant of the kind of Protestants who beheaded statues of the virgin, broke stained glass and whitewashed wall paintings.

All the same, Priestley is never as outspoken as Cooper in demeaning the aesthetic, towards which he is suspicious rather than antagonistic. Priestley wrote an interesting if derivative treatise on aesthetics, but it is rather the way aesthetics leak in to the experiments, the theological work or the polemics that is significant. It is the return of the repressed or the revenge of *id* on *superego*. In that sense, disbelief is like the moment of the sublime—or at least it would be a moment where epistemological issues are suspended in favour of aesthetic issues. In Priestley's *Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (1778), the aesthetic features as a discourse (or perhaps as a set of effects) that even where it is explicable, it could not be assimilated.

The aesthetic really only comprises the last and longest part of the *Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, "Of Style" in which style is defined as the ornament or exterior of that to which the earlier two parts have given body. Priestley might seem an unlikely theorist of aesthetics, claiming elsewhere that his own writing is always only instrumental: it is never play, display, nor anything other than a medium for arriving at conviction or agreement. This puritanical and utilitarian approach to the aesthetic is evident in his rhetoric. Fine writing can be a cloak for a dangerous, even atheist suspension of certain knowledge, as is also evident elsewhere when he criticises Hume "as a mere writer or declaimer" (*Works* 4. 368) to whose seductive style the reader needs to remain alert because it might lead them to overlook logical flaws in the analytic method: Hume therefore "ought […] to be read with very great caution" (*Works* 24. 301). Priestley says sternly that the goals of the orator are

to inform and to influence action: "let him only attempt to please or affect, when it is subservient to that design" (*Works* 23. 307); and he speaks of reading "history, romance, familiar essays and poetry" rather than harder study as if he were condemning computer games or masturbation—"we give over with disgust, and a secret dissatisfaction with ourselves" (*Works* 23. 364). What is needed, Priestley insists, is conviction rather than speculation.

The lectures are principally concerned with method (with the ordering of thoughts and materials) and make an absolute distinction between narrative and argument. Conviction is the intellectual reflex of a process that originates in the body: "all our *intellectual pleasures* [are] derived originally from *sensible impressions*, variously mixed, combined, and transferred from one object to another, by that principle" (*Works* 23. 422). The theory of association from Hartley (but originating in Locke) underlies his work in all the disciplines to which he contributed and the lectures, too, are based on them. Rhetoric for Priestley is a province of the understanding of "human nature" as a whole. In the case of aesthetics, a method of association makes him suspicious of anything apparently unmotivated or novel: not only that the ode, for example, may offend against unity or regularity (*Works* 23. 306) but that "the mind is greatly disgusted with unusual, and consequently unexpected, and, to us, unnatural connexions of things" (*Works* 23. 281). In that sense the aesthetic shares a rational basis with the experiments and with the biblical interpretation.

Of course Priestley is not alone in his attempt to generalize—or even to essentialize—what may by its nature resist generalization, but if his aesthetics are conventional in that sense there are also ways in which the aesthetic may serve to destabilize the "convictions" of other discourses. Priestley's treatment of the sublime in Lecture XX of the *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* provides him with a means of conjoining the aesthetic with experiment, and with biblical interpretation: while "instances of the true sublime abound no where more than in the *Scriptures,*" he says, there is also a sublime of science and it is also the case that "the sciences of natural philosophy and astronomy exhibit the noblest fields of the sublime that the mind of man was ever introduced to" (*Works* 23. 373, 377), so the potential for electricity, for example, "is a prospect really boundless, and sublime" (*Electricity* ii).[2]

2 Some of the most suggestive accounts of the sublime—by Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla in their *Reader*, or more recently by Sharon Ruston or Isobel Armstrong are concerned respectively with the history of the concept in aesthetics, in its interaction with the practice of poetry or with the claim that co-religionists might have found in Priestley an aesthetic adapted to the

Priestley was less an opponent of sublimity than he was wont to claim for polemical purposes, averring that biblical texts can "produce feelings similar to those which we receive from the view of grand and elevated objects" (*works* 23). Theological speculation is not only an improving but a pleasurable pursuit, requiring a change of perspective from which to contemplate sublimity:

> there is a peculiar pleasure attending the speculations; and from the relation they bear to the greatest of all objects, they have a dignity and sublimity in them, and eminently contribute to inspire a *serenity* and *elevation of mind*, which both improves and enlarges it, and thereby enables us to look down upon the trifling but tormenting pursuits of a bustling world. (Priestley, *A Free Discussion*)

This is not a defence of the aesthetic as much as an attempt to find a vocabulary of equivalent terms for the religious sublime. "The object and end of all speculation is practice," he writes (Priestley, *A Free Discussion* viii), and the utilitarian criterion applies to theology, which will lead to practice where art cannot. Priestley found, like Robert Lowth, that sacred poetry was sacred but that it was also poetry, however the move from the subject being sublime to a representation being sublime is a step too far. He wanted to resist a secular sublime that was merely an aesthetic effect because it was not susceptible to reason.

Priestley tries to account for the sublime effect in the associationist terms that derive from Hartley. The sublime is a kind of foundational phenomenon: the sublime is immanent, or may pre-exist that which triggers it. Association is cognate not only with Priestley's belief in "a gradual rise and improvement in things" but also with the sublime effect as the climax of a series of terms (*Works* 23. 455–6).

Those ideas can derive from the spectacle of virtues just as much as the spectacle of large natural objects—or, for the mathematician, of numbers—but, significantly, it is the aesthetic that for Priestley enables a solution to communicative failure. He claims that there are similar terms for sensations analogous to those provoked by natural objects across foreign languages—so 'a great man' can be physically small—implying the universality of the effect (*Works* 23. 372).

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distinct literary needs of religious dissent. Only Kingston, whose Sussex doctoral dissertation is the best account I know of the place of the aesthetic in Priestley and for whom Priestley's aesthetics are a central problem, tries to locate them within the broader context of his own writings.

It remains, however, an effect that ought to be susceptible to rational explication from start to finish. Priestley resists the obfuscatory potential of sublime discourse, Burke's claim that *obscurity* may be a source of the effect. Rather, for Priestley the sublime is an effect dependent upon an Addisonian insight that "we contemplate ideas" derived from sight and hearing "as if we were wholly abstracted from the body" (*Works* 23. 351). It is therefore dependent upon comparison, on a "secret retrospect to preceding ideas and states of mind" (Priestley, *Works* 23. 369). The habit or custom that even for the generation of Locke may hinder lucid understanding is here the source of a comparative understanding, even a kind of dialectical one.

Isobel Armstrong has recently written illuminatingly on the way a "Unitarian Poetics" in the poems and speculative writings of Joanna Baillie and Anna Barbauld might also have found a warrant in Priestley's aesthetics, which she describes as "characterized by a paradoxical kind of sacramental materialism with an empirical base" (Armstrong 64). For Armstrong, Priestley provides not only a critique of the Burkean sublime but an alternative to it that might perhaps mediate the evident masculine bias of the Burkean account and which is implicitly progressive:

> Priestley demystifies the sublime; in place of Burke's terror and power Priestley offers a range of concepts that all depend on an enlarging hermeneutic to comprehend them—"Fortitude, magnanimity, generosity and universal benevolence." He is anti-gothic. (Armstrong 67)

For Armstrong, the "gothic" is an attachment to a past which carries weight because of its survival in to the present rather than because it can be rationally defended.

Despite the "disgust" with which we are likely to respond to what is unusual, there is in the human mind a "constant appetite [...] for novelty," a novelty upon which the mind exercises itself:

> As the mind conforms itself to the ideas which engage its attention, and it hath no other method of judging of itself but from its situation, the perception of a new train of ideas is like its entering upon a new world, and enjoying a new being, and a new mode of existence. (Priestley, *Works* 23. 365–6)

Priestley had described the effect of reading Hartley to be also like "entering upon a new world" (*Works* 3. 10).[3] Objects take on qualities from those they do not possess themselves through association. It is not that Priestley's account of the sublime is incoherent nor that it is out of step with his "system" as a whole, but rather that the associationist method that reaches an apotheosis here is as it were portable. Priestley's is a "transferred sublimity" in which the transfer does not take place between objects but from the aesthetic to the world of actions; sublimity is not to be found in the vocabulary but in the means of argument which produce the sublime effect.

Priestley, a couple of generations older than the generation of Southey and Coleridge—who briefly toyed with establishing a utopian community around him on the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania—is a Dissenter but only reluctantly a Romantic. His time is not theirs but he was never disillusioned, as they were, of the faith in improvement (partly because secular improvement had a kind of divine guarantee attached). If disbelief is an interim stage to be distrusted as the scepticism of Hume was to be distrusted, its flourishing as belief depends on convictions that always have to be defended rhetorically.

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3 See Kingston 48.

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