



From Dunne to Desmond: disembodied time travel in Tolkien, Stapledon and *Lost*

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In her introduction to H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, Marina Warner explains that "dreams and trance states used to be the principal . . . methods of time travelling" before Freud. Wells' 1895 novella brought time travel into the scientific realm in literature, and openly drew on current mathematical and scientific discussions of the nature of time. The time traveller explains to his houseguests that "there is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of space except that our consciousness moves along it . . . Time is only a kind of Space". Wells drew on the writings of mathematician Charles Howard Hinton, including his 1884 essay 'What is the Fourth Dimension?', which argued that if we assume the existence of one additional dimension of space, we can explain all apparent motion in the Universe as the motion of our field of observation across this higher dimension.

The ideas of Hinton and Wells found an eager audience in British aeronautical engineer J. W. Dunne. He was intrigued by a series of curious dreams that he later claimed to be prescient. He began to 'experiment' with his dreams, carefully writing them down as soon as he awoke, and noted any instances in which the dreams were later found to be foreknowledge of

future events. He enlisted the help of friends and family, and came to the conclusion that there was nothing supernatural in these occurrences; instead the dreams were "merely displaced in Time". Clairvoyance did not exist; instead, our understanding of time is faulty, and with practice, we can train our minds to overcome the habit of experiencing events only in the rigid order of past–present–future. It is in the dream state that our minds are most open to such travels.

Dunne's new concept of time, called serialism, is based on the idea that what we call the present is a window through which we view the entirety of reality, like a train rider looking at a landscape through a small window. Like the train, our present moves along a track, in the dimension we call time T1. Dunne argued that like the train track, T1 is actually a spatial dimension, and that there must exist a higher dimension, a more ultimate time T2, in which we measure the rate of motion of our journey along time's track. There exists a higher-dimensional observer in this T2 who has the freedom to observe all events in T1 (all events in our perceived time) in whatever order he or she wishes. He argued that there exists an infinite regression of these higher times and observers, leading to some Ultimate Time and an

Ultimate Observer, which Dunne calls the “Super-Mind”. Dunne published his model as *An Experiment with Time* in 1927. In subsequent books, *The Serial Universe* (1938), *The New Immortality* (1939) and *Nothing Dies* (1940), Dunne used his model to argue that death only occurs in T1, our perception of the present, and that in higher dimensions we achieve immortality as part of the Super-Mind.

Dunne’s work attracted a lot of attention, not all of it positive. Ernest Nagel’s review in the *Journal of Philosophy* begins: “This is a book very difficult to take seriously . . . the temptation to substitute satire for a serious review is repressed with some hardship.” Nevertheless the work generated serious discussion among members of the general public, psychologists and philosophers. For example, Dunne’s ideas were explored in the 1937 University of London psychology PhD thesis of Miss Mary Cleugh, *Time and its Importance in Modern Thought*. Dunne addressed a number of his critics, including Miss Cleugh, in his 3rd edition. Was the character of Ms Klugh (spelled differently) one of *Lost*’s ‘Others’, named after this author? Interestingly, a contemporary of Dunne who also explored time as a fourth dimension was Laurence J. LaFleur, LaFleur being the pseudonym that *Lost*’s Sawyer takes when time-travelling to the 1970s. Coincidence? Dunne’s work was still widely read as late as 1959, being referenced in *The Mathematical Gazette* as “far fetched” and a work “which some mathematicians are said to have been misguided enough to take seriously”.

In the past 20 years, literary scholars have begun to take notice of Dunne’s impact on the literature of his time. For example, Jane Fenoulhet argues that J. J. Slaurhoff’s 1931 Dutch novel *Het Verboden Rijk* (*The Forbidden Realm*) is based on Dunne’s work. The impact of Dunne on the plays of J. B. Priestley and the novels of Olaf Stapledon are widely acknowledged, and in her 1997 book *A Question of Time*, Verlyn Flieger traces the influence of Dunne on J. R. R. Tolkien. This essay will briefly examine the influence of Dunne and Stapledon on Lewis and Tolkien, as well as extending this analysis to a new target, the TV series *Lost*.

Before examining these works, two additional sources of influence must be noted. In 1911, the principal and vice-principal of St Hugh’s College, Oxford, published *An Adventure* under the pseudonyms of Miss Morrison and Miss Lamont. In it they claimed that in 1901 they had engaged in a telepathic journey back through time to the consciousness of Marie Antoinette when visiting the gardens of the Petit Trianon. Although the claim was not taken seriously by the Society for Psychical Research, *An Adventure* enjoyed four editions and was widely discussed. Central to all these works is the concept of what physicists call the ‘block universe’, in which the past, present and future exist simultaneously. Philosophical difficulties exist in that the block universe seems to negate the existence of free will, as all we can do is bring the fixed future into existence. Modern quantum theories of time work around these problems by positing the existence of multiple realities or universes, and Dunne appealed to his higher dimensions to somehow avoid strict predeterminism. He wrote that the reason we do not recognize some dreams

as precognition is that when in response to the dream, we change that future, all points along the future continuum are immediately changed, and we do not experience the event when we arrive at that moment in our T1 future, thus never knowing that we have indeed changed it.

Philosopher William Olaf Stapledon published a number of science-fiction books based on Dunne’s method of mind-only time travel. In 1930’s *First and Last Men*, 1932’s *Last Men in London* and 1937’s *Star Maker*, the protagonists travel through both time and space by inserting their consciousnesses into the bodies of others, thus viewing the past through the eyes of those who actually lived it. In *First and Last Men*, Stapledon’s exploration of 18 fictional stages in the evolution of humans beginning with their current form, the ‘Fifth Men’ first achieve this method of time travel after millions of years of genetic manipulation directed at this goal. The first child to be forced to past-travel successfully accomplishes the task, only to die during the debriefing after a subsequent experiment. In further experiments, “experience seemed to set up a progressive mental disintegration which produced first insanity, then paralysis, and within a few months, death”. With further genetic engineering the dangers were removed, and a vast recapturing of a previously lost history was begun. But as with all species of humans in Stapledon’s work, the Fifth Men came to extinction, and it was not until the eighteenth and last species of humans that the past was once again explored. Using a special organ in their brains, and following a number of ritualistic precautions developed to keep their bodies safe while they were ‘away’ for perhaps weeks or months at a time, the Last Men not only observed the past by co-habiting the bodies of others, but influenced those whose bodies they entered, thus allowing them to (in a limited way) change the past. The future narrator explains that there is no paradox, as “some feature of a past event may depend on an event in the far future. The past event would never have been as it actually was . . . if there had not been going to be a certain future event, which . . . influences it directly.” Therefore the Last Men intercede in the past because this is what they have always been meant to do.

In the sequel, *Last Men in London*, one of the Last Men observes the twentieth century through the eyes of Paul, an Englishman whose body he inhabits. When his attempts to convince Paul that he is not a demonic spirit or a sign of mental illness fail, he directs Paul to read Dunne’s *An Experiment with Time*. The narrator also recounts the tragedies that accompanied the Last Men’s first attempts at mind-only time travel, in which some travellers allowed their bodies to starve to death while they were in a trance, or fell into violent convulsions. In some cases, the travellers kept falling back into trances, travelling from time to time to time, while in others the trances were permanent, and the travellers’ unresponsive bodies were kept in stasis for millions of years.

Star Maker recounts the journey of an ordinary modern man who inexplicably finds himself journeying, sans his body, in search of the creator of the Universe. Although some of his journey was as a pure consciousness through interstellar space itself, most of his adventures were



accomplished in the same manner as that used by the Last Men, briefly co-inhabiting the bodies of various extraterrestrial creatures throughout the history of the Universe.

C. S. Lewis called Stapledon “a corking good writer” but in a 1938 letter explained that he was “spurred” to write *Out of the Silent Planet* by Stapledon’s *Last and First Men* and geneticist J. B. S. Haldane’s *Possible Worlds*, both of which Lewis accused of having the same “desperately immoral outlook” that he wrote into the Space Trilogy’s corrupt scientist Weston. *Out of the Silent Planet* ends with the claim that Weston had “shut the door” to space-travel and that “if there is to be any more space-travelling, it will have to be time-travelling as well...!” Although Lewis seemed to violate this in the sequel, *Perelandra*, we do see time travel in the final book of the series, *That Hideous Strength*. In this novel, Merlin, a fifth century mage, is able to awaken in the twentieth century because “he had not died. His life had been hidden, sidetracked, moved out of our one-dimensional time ... in that place where those things remain that are taken off time’s mainroad. ... Not all the times that are outside the present are therefore past or future.” Walter Hooper, Lewis’s former secretary and editor of his posthumous works, ties these ideas to the work of Dunne, ideas that found more explicit expression in Lewis’s unfinished novel *The Dark Tower*. This work begins with the scientist Orfieu flatly stating: “Of course, the sort of time-travelling you read about in books — time-travelling in the body — is absolutely impossible.” He explains that this is because the very particles that make up one’s body do not exist in the past or future. Instead, he creates a chronoscope, a device that sees other times remotely, like a telescope views distant places. His friend, MacPhee, is sceptical of Orfieu’s theories about time travel, even when Orfieu references “the story of the two English ladies at Trianon” — that is, *An Adventure*

— and Dunne’s work. Orfieu encourages MacPhee to try Dunne’s dream experiments for himself. “They’re irresistible,” he explains.

The chronoscope shows the men an alternate reality called Othertime. Scudamour, Orfieu’s assistant, somehow exchanges consciousness with his doppelganger in the Othertime, and in an attempt to understand what has happened to him and return home, Scudamour scours the Othertime library. He reads about the history of that universe’s experiments with travel between realities, and for several pages Lewis paraphrases Dunne’s work in such mind-numbing detail that the reader is rather relieved when the manuscript ends unfinished. The first experiment — as in the case of Stapledon’s works, on a child — led to the successful transference of consciousness but the consciousness from our reality could not adapt to being trapped in Othertime and “was finally used for scientific purposes”.

Lewis’s friend J. R. R. Tolkien likewise did not complete his own works based on Dunne’s model, but what was written was far less dark than Lewis’s novella. Flieger notes that both Lewis and Tolkien owned copies of the third edition of *An Experiment with Time*, and that Tolkien’s contains numerous comments that suggest that he understood Dunne’s theory yet did not completely agree with it. As Flieger argues, Tolkien undoubtedly took Dunne’s dream mechanism as the starting point for both of his abandoned time-travel projects, *The Lost Road* and *The Notion Club Papers*. *The Lost Road* centres on a father-son pair who travel back through time through what Flieger describes as “racial memory and serial identity” combining “the memory transfer of *An Adventure*” with Dunne’s work and Tolkien’s own ideas on the subject. In fact, Flieger argues that the title *The Lost Road* derives from “the deliberate presentation of time as space”. Although the

work was abandoned not long after it was begun (*circa* 1937), Tolkien revisited the idea of time travel through dreams after he had completed what would become *The Two Towers* (late 1944). The result was *The Notion Club Papers*, which like Lewis's *The Dark Tower* was never finished.

The completed drafts of Part 1 of *The Notion Club Papers* detail the discussions of a group of intellectuals not unlike Tolkien and Lewis's Inklings, focusing on the improbability of space travel "in mortal flesh". After criticizing Lewis's "crystal coffin" method of getting Ransom to Venus in *Perelandra*, attention turns to a space-travel story written by Ramer, one of the members, which seems far too realistic to be fiction. Ramer admits that he does not know where the alien planet is, only that "I went there". Ramer explains that when he began writing the story he had become "attracted by what you may call the telepathic notion", which he notes he got from reading Stapledon's *Last Men in London*. Ramer then gives a brief synopsis of Dunne's model of time, which he does not mention by name, but which he notes has had "a pretty good case" made for it. Ramer is able to train his mind to travel through time and space, and is careful to explain that in these travels "the mind is still ... anchored to the body" for it "would feel terribly loose without the anchor".

This idea of an anchor, or constant, is a central theme in the time travel plotlines of the recently completed television series *Lost*. Putting aside the controversial alternate reality/limbo/afterlife portrayed in the final season, four identifiable kinds of space-time travel were portrayed in the series:

- 1) Teleportation from one place to another, as in the case of Ben and Locke using the 'donkey-wheel' to travel to Tunisia from the Island;
- 2) The constant jittering motion of the Island in space-time that makes it difficult to locate (and results in the disjointed time measurements between the Island and the off-shore freighter in Season Four);
- 3) The motion of persons through time while on the Island (including the 'time-travelling bunnies' seen in the Orchid orientation video);
- 4) The motion of consciousnesses in space and time (and perhaps between alternate universes), including incidences of precognition.

Although only the last of these directly aligns with the works previously mentioned, certain aspects of mind-only time travel and the constraints of the block universe model are apparent even in the whole-body time travel so central to Season Five.

Physicist Daniel Faraday explained in the season opener that Ben's intentional moving of the Island resulted in it and its inhabitants becoming "dislodged" in time. As Daniel and his companions flash back and forth through time, they are increasingly plagued with headaches, nosebleeds, memory lapses, periods of unconsciousness and moments of disorientation. Charlotte finally succumbs to her symptoms four episodes later. Daniel describes the deleterious symptoms as being caused by their brains' internal clock being thrown off by the disorientating flashes of time travel. Although the Losties' symptoms are more graphic than the disorientating

effects seen in the works of Lewis and Stapledon, one can draw connections to those works. It should also be noted that Charlotte — Charlotte Staples Lewis — owes her name to C. S. Lewis. When Locke resets the donkey wheel and travels to Tunisia, the Island quits its seemingly random swings in time, and the physical symptoms abate. However, the remaining Losties are trapped in 1974, forcing them to assume the identity of DHARMA Initiative recruits. The Losties blend in with the past timeline and do not seem to affect history, for as Daniel explains time is

like a street. ... We can move forward on that street, we can move in reverse, but we cannot ever create a new street. If we try to do anything different, we will fail every time. Whatever happened, happened.

However, Daniel had previously violated his slavish adherence to the block universe when, in his desperation to stop the Island's time flashes and save Charlotte's life, he banged on the Swan Station's door and begged Desmond's past self to go to Oxford University and find Daniel's mother, Eloise Hawking. Hawking herself is an unwavering adherent to the block universe, as she knowingly directs her son's entire life to lead to his death at her own hands. Although Daniel's intervention does not in itself stop the flashes or save Charlotte, it does change the timeline (for, as he notes, Desmond is "uniquely and miraculously special"). In the future, Desmond wakes from a dream with a "new memory" of Daniel's visit to the hatch, and helps to set in motion the return to the Island of many of Jacob's candidates for future caretaker of the Island. Desmond's actions can be explained in the context of Dunne's model, in which the future 'resets' as it incorporates the new event. Perhaps Desmond's 'special power' to move through time and make changes in the timeline are possible because he can access the position of a higher-order Observer in T2 more readily than other people.

We also see a connection with Stapledon's work in the 1977 plotline, when a young Ben is shot by Sayid and the other Losties argue as to whether or not Ben can die, as doing so would certainly change the timeline. Kate realizes that they are "supposed to save him". Indeed, as the episode title says 'Whatever Happened, Happened', and in saving Ben the Losties are merely playing the part that had always been ordained for them. This mirrors the actions of the Last Men in Stapledon's novels in affecting the past because that is what they were supposed to do.

Returning to consciousness-only time travel, we see the works of Dunne, Stapledon and others reflected in this aspect of *Lost's* time-travel plotline. After imploding the hatch, Desmond's consciousness briefly travels to another reality (or perhaps "off time's mainroad" as Lewis described it) his body meanwhile lying unconscious and naked on the Island. When he returns, he finds that he has the curse of precognition, and repeatedly saves Charlie's life over the course of Season Three. In each case, we can explain this in Dunne's model, in which Desmond can access the point of view of a higher-order observer in T2, and as he changes the


timeline (by saving Charlie) the rest of the timeline adjusts.

Desmond later endures uncontrollable bouts of mind-only time travel in Season Four, as he travels from the Island via helicopter to the offshore freighter. Apparently as a side effect of the Island's constant jittering in space-time, Desmond and the freighter's communications officer Minkowski become mentally dislodged in time and suffer life-threatening symptoms similar to the writings of Stapledon and Lewis. At the insistence of the present's Daniel Faraday, Desmond travels to past Oxford during one of his out of body flashes and witnesses past Faraday's experiments on the lab rat Eloise, lovingly named after his mother. Eloise's consciousness leaves her current body and travels to her future body, learns how to run a new maze, and then returns to her current body and successfully completes the task. However she dies of a brain haemorrhage shortly thereafter. Faraday explains that she couldn't tell which was which — the future or the present. "She had no anchor" — no constant. Desmond is able to return to the present and remain there after arranging for his beloved Penny to call him at a prearranged time, thus acting as his constant. As for Minkowski, his flashes escalate, he has a seizure, begins bleeding, and gasps "I can't get back" before dying. We also learn that one of Daniel's two human test subjects (the other being himself), his girlfriend Theresa, has fallen into a permanent disabled state as she uncontrollably travels between the past and present. As her sister

explains to Desmond when he visits: "Theresa's away now."

In the opening lines of his poem *Burnt Norton*, T. S. Eliot wrote:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present.

In introducing the scientific scaffolding of intense electromagnetism and the Casimir effect that the writers of *Lost* use to explain the time-travelling bunnies and scientist Pierre Chang's intense interest in the Island's properties, Dunne's largely pseudoscientific ideas are given a flash of hard-science credibility within the mythos of the series. But given the intricacies of the plotlines involved, who can blame the readers and viewers of all the works discussed here for commiserating with Eloise the rat right before her brain exploded? 

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Going back: time travel in Tolkien and E. Nesbit

VIRGINIA LULING

He felt that he could say that his most permanent mood ... had been since childhood the desire *to go back*. To walk in Time, perhaps, as men walk on long roads; or to survey it, as men may see the world from a mountain, or the earth as a living map beneath an airship. But in any case to see with eyes and to hear with ears: to see the lie of old and even forgotten lands, to behold ancient men walking, and hear their languages as they spoke them, in the days before the days.

The Lost Road and other writings 1987, p. 45

Among the many things that nourished Tolkien's imagination was the reading of his childhood and youth. This includes George MacDonald, the Kipling of *Puck of Pook's Hill*, H. G. Wells, Rider Haggard's *She* and also E. Nesbit's fantasy stories. Others have pointed this out, though not analysed it in detail, and I think that anyone who is familiar with those stories must recognize their presence in his work. Here I want to look at one particular and rather peculiar idea, found in one of his many

abandoned projects, which is clearly derived from E. Nesbit.

That Tolkien read Nesbit as a child goes without saying; there can have been few English-speaking children who read anything, at that time or for some time after, who did not read her books. Also he must have given them and possibly read them to his own children. I don't know how many read her now, apart from *The Railway Children* (whose ending, by the way, is one of the best examples I know of what Tolkien named 'eucatastrophe', though I am not suggesting he noticed that). I think there are a number of echoes of Nesbit in Tolkien, but there is one link that as far as I know nobody has noticed, but that I believe is obvious when you see it. This is in his unfinished, indeed barely begun, time-travel story *The Lost Road*. In a letter of 1964, he wrote:

When C. S. Lewis and I tossed up, and he was to write on space travel and I on time travel, I began an abortive book of time-travel of which the end was to be the presence of my hero in the drowning of Atlantis. This was to be called *Númenor*, the Land in the West.