

Island time

Tales of temporal bureaucracy and intergalactic pranksters

M. JOHN HARRISON

Christopher Priest

THE GRADUAL
352pp. Gollancz. £16.99.
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Luke Rhinehart

INVASION
441pp. Titan. Paperback. £8.99.
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The classical musician and composer Alessandro Sussken was born in Glaund, a drab northern country led by a junta and enmeshed in a distant, endless war. Talented from the start, he never questions where his future lies; but at the age of seven, with the aid of his father's binoculars, he discovers the Dream Archipelago, a thousand islands spilt like a box of coloured sweets across the ocean around the mainland. Physical details of the islands are difficult to make out, but the mere sight of them is enough "to charge his imagination". There's more: through the binoculars Sussken receives "a sense of compressed space, a feeling that time was shortened by this view". Facts about the Archipelago are hard to come by. Although you can travel there, getting a visa can be problematic, depending, oddly enough, on the direction in which you intend to travel.

Much later in life, successful and feted, Sussken makes his first visit to the islands. It's a strange tour. The orchestra is plagued by failures of tempo; performances won't seem to run to time. Sussken tries to phone home from the tour's last port of call, but he can't seem to connect. He arrives back in Glaund to find his wife has left him. His flat is empty, the phone disconnected. His parents are dead. Nearly two years seem to have passed in a few weeks. He has become a victim of the "gradual", the relativistic slippage of time between the islands.

Christopher Priest handles this complex material – and the layered metaphors he makes from it – with a satisfying realism and a quiet, sharp sense of humour. Affect is dampened. Rather than happening in front of us, encounters between people tend to be reported, from the distance of memory. Sussken is revealed as an awkward man, temperamental, obsessive, "quick to jealousy", turned inwards both by life in wartime and by a prevailing sense of his own destiny as a great composer. If the text seems to distance us from him, its twists and turns of time distance him from himself; but they also act as the index of his human development, the slow relaxing of his Glaundian views on life, music and composition. We always seem a step or two behind this process, as if we're adrift on the same relativistic dilations and contractions of Archipelago spacetime: the effect leaves us puzzled, wondering what has been left out, constantly expecting it to be revealed, and this tension provides one of the novel's most powerful narrative drivers.

Among the islands, time is the bureaucracy



constructed to manage it. Rules of entry and exit seem to change from port to port, office to office, visit to visit. For the ordinary tourist, time is in the gift of the state. A specialized caste of tour guides promises to cancel the discrepancies in your timeline: but its rituals are obsessive and paranoid, and its operatives, hanging around the ports and tourist bars, look like aged teenagers. The ships that serve the Archipelago – a territory Priest has visited before, most recently in *The Islanders* (2012) and *The Adjacent* (2013) – all have dual clocks, to record both Ship and Absolute time. If time is not objective, neither can it be allowed to remain subjective. "You cannot even cross a room in this town", someone warns Sussken, "without losing or gaining a few seconds. Even to move while you are asleep is dangerous."

Beautiful ideas like this underlie the little shifts and jumps and back-narrative revisions that emphasize the relativistic weirdness of Priest's world. The further Sussken travels, the further his difficulties increase. He stares into a mirror and realizes he's grown old. It's as if Sussken, though he tells a single story, is perpetually crossing from one autobiography into another; or as if he really is in a dream; or as if we're watching a dream narrative, with dream logics. *The Gradual* itself seems like the record of a deep struggle between rationalism and the imagination, given form in the struggle between the bureaucracy of travel and travel's freedoms; between the glum order of Glaund and the highly coloured, ever-changing phantasmagoria of the islands; between Sussken's initial sense that his life is prewritten and his discovery that the forces acting between the objective and subjective, social and private, allow him to write his music, live his life, for himself.

Compared to *The Gradual*, Luke Rhinehart's *Invasion* seems both hokey and infantile. Aliens, possibly from another dimension, arrive on Earth. Why they choose to appear to the ex-fisherman Billy Morton and his family, living the good life in Greenport, Long Island, isn't clear. Initially, the Proteans, who resemble hairy beachballs, spend their time "entertaining and interacting with children". In fact they've come for more serious LOLZ: to taunt and undermine the establishment. These interdimensional Merry Pranksters appear to have escaped from a 1960s underground comic; but while their outrages have been updated, they don't seem surprising, or even particularly outrageous. Instead what's exercised is a sort of literalistic situationism, and Rhinehart's targets are soft: international money, central government, the CIA, experts, wonks and technocrats. Tempers flare, atrocities are committed – or at least attempted – by the state; but due to the innate shape-shifting superiority of the Proteans, no one is much hurt. The resultant comedy would be fine if every joke wasn't explained.

"We'd been living in a Happy Family sitcom for more than a dozen years", bumbles Billy at one point, "and now found ourselves in a sci-fi thriller." But the author's satirical intrusions require a more sophisticated viewpoint, one in which these two ways of seeing play off against each other with greater friction. In *The Dice Man* (1971) – Rhinehart's hugely popular existential cult comedy – the author seemed able to pit two competing ideological narratives against each other in the space of a single sentence; his wit had a kind of needling recursion, an elusive self-sabotage. Here he reminds us, at his best, of Robert Sheckley, or very early Kurt Vonnegut; but most of the time he's still in the sitcom.