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Richard K. Fenn focuses in this study on the significance of time in modern society, and on the question of why we take it so seriously. He traces contemporary Western attitudes toward time back to the doctrine and myth of purgatory, and makes a provocative case to the effect that, especially for Americans, the sense of the scarcity of time is a sign of social character which is shaped by a “purgatorial complex.” He demonstrates the impact of purgatory on Protestant preachers such as Richard Baxter and William Ellery Channing, but also argues that Locke’s views of religion, of education, and of the nature of the state can only be understood when placed within the context of a belief in purgatory and the life everlasting. Seriousness about time has become evidence of the good faith of the citizen. Novelists like Robbins, Mailer, Vonnegut, and Brautigan portray a society that oppresses the individual through time constraints. For Dickens America seemed a purgatorial wasteland: a place where time is always of the essence.

Like the authors of the recently published *Heaven: a history* by Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, the author of this stimulating interdisciplinary essay makes apposite connections between theological doctrine and a ubiquitous modern preoccupation. His book will appeal to scholars of American studies, to intellectual historians, and to sociologists of religion alike.

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For John Ordway,
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THE PERSISTENCE OF PURGATORY

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521568555

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First published 1995

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data applied for

ISBN 978-0-521-56855-5 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-55039-0 Paperback

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Acknowledgments

My debts in composing this book are far too many to be mentioned here. What I have begun to understand concerning the soul, and especially the ties binding the living to the dead, I owe to the psychoanalytic insight of John Ordway. In seeking to understand Anglo-American civilization and spiritual exchanges across the Atlantic one could not have better guides or friends than David and Bernice Martin. Besides making specific suggestions and offering support, they have helped me to understand American society as if it were theirs. I therefore dedicate this book to John Ordway and the Martins.

For introducing me to some of the literature on the subject of time in American society, and for his friendship I wish also to thank James Moorhead; his student, Tim Helfer, was also of real assistance in discussions of William Channing.

I am very grateful to several anonymous readers for the Press who made criticisms and suggestions on earlier versions of this work.

I wish to thank the following publishers for permission to reprint the work of several authors: Alfred A. Knopf, for excerpts from Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*; Beacon Press, for excerpts from John F. Wilson and Donald L. Drake-man, editors, *Church and State in American History*; International Universities Press, Inc., for excerpts from Jill Montgomery and Anne Greif, *Masochism: The Treatment of Self-Inflicted Suffering*.