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Milligan's Accordion:

The Distortion of Time and Space in The Goon Show

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- "SEAGOON:
...looking for the lost year has made me a weak old man.

BLUEBOTTLE:
Oh--you hear that, Eccles?

ECCLES:
What?

BLUEBOTTLE:
He's only a week old."

- Spike Milligan, "The Lost Year"

ABSTRACT

Spike Milligan has had an undisputable influence on English-language comedy in the past half-century. Monty Python's Terry Jones cites the "free-wheeling fantasy world" Milligan created for the surreal radio series *The Goon Show* as the chief inspiration for his own group's more internationally-famous work. However, Milligan's writing for *The Goon Show*, which first aired between 1951 and 1960 displays a depth beyond "the confidence to be silly" noted by Python's Michael Palin. Milligan's scripts reveal a deliberate, if not wholly conscious, rejection of the laws of causality and probability, through frequent and systematic distortions of time and space.

The fictional world revealed in *The Goon Show*'s corpus of half-hour stories is one in which concepts relating to time and space lack the fixed meanings that we attach to them in everyday life. Temporal and spatial relationships are fluid and indeterminate: boundaries between different times and different spaces can dissolve, allowing mutually inconsistent chronologies and scales of size and distance to coexist.

The world-view underlying this is governed by an inversion of the generally-agreed-upon relationship between observable phenomena and individual perception. Rather than using the outside world as a source of data from which to construct models of 'objective' reality, Milligan allows his characters' own words to modify the given conditions of any situation. This quasi-magical principle of storytelling mirrors cognitive strategies used by children in their primary-school years to grasp and describe the complexities of time and space.

Childlike and lighthearted as it often is, *The Goon Show*'s twisting of time and space has a parallel to some highly complex 'grown-up' thinking. Its implicit rejection of the self-evidence

of the fundamental laws of Newtonian physics recalls more than just the challenge to these laws provided by relativity and quantum mechanics. It also anticipates, by a full generation, the skeptical stance towards the self-evidence of immutable laws which forms the cornerstone of postmodern critiques of all fields of endeavour.

The Goon Show reveals Spike Milligan to be an unsung visionary: always striding into unknown conceptual territory, he let his scripts, rather than a body of theoretical work, articulate his vision. Milligan's comedic touch and his inimitable strangeness have led him to be appreciated, rather than studied. The ways in which *The Goon Show* turns time and space inward on themselves demonstrate, however, that the First Mover Unmoved in the mad universe of Goonery was an artistic and intellectual force to be reckoned with. Further study of Spike Milligan can only lead to a greater appreciation of how far ahead of his time he truly was.

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PRELUDE: A FEW WORDS OF EXPLANATION

This thesis contains more than its fair share of names in square brackets. In keeping with the free-form nature of Spike Milligan's comedy, scripts and transcriptions of episodes of *The Goon Show* display a disconcerting inconsistency when it comes to nomenclature. Each of Milligan's published collections of scripts renders character names in a slightly different fashion; the transcriptions to be found at *thegoonshow.net* and *hexmaster.com/goonscripts* contain a number of variations of their own. To eliminate the disorientation that would come from sorting through several names for the same character (and allowing the disorientation that will come from what they have to say to shine though as it should), I have standardized character names to reflect a best, most compact version of the ones I have used in the body of my text. The standardization is primarily derived from versions of character names used in *The Goon Show Scripts*, Milligan's first collection.

So...Neddy Seagoon appears as [SEAGOON] whenever the script or transcription renders his name as "Ned", "Neddie", or "Neddy";

Hercules Grytpype-Thynne appears as [GRYTPYPE-THYNNE] instead of "Grytpype" or "Thynne";

Henry Crun appears as [CRUN] instead of "Henry" or "Henry Crun";

Major Bloodnok appears as [BLOODNOK] instead of "Major Bloodnok", "Maj. Bloodnok", "Major", or any other variation using his rank;

Minnie Bannister appears as [MINNIE] rather than "Bannister", "Minnie Bannister" or "Min";

Jim Spriggs, a minor recurring character noted for a sing-songy nasal voice, appears as [JIM SPRIGGS] rather than “Jim” or “Spriggs”; and

Wallace Greenslade, whose function in *The Goon Show* combines his actual role as a BBC staff announcer with Milligan’s fictionalized version of his role as a BBC staff announcer, is called [GREENSLADE] whenever “Wallace”, “Wal”, or the inexplicable nickname “Bill” appears.

In quotes from scripts, you will also find the notations “Grams” and “FX”. These are both standard notation used in the series for sound effects: “Grams” refers to any pre-recorded effect (whether its source is a gramophone record or reel-to reel tape); “FX” indicates that the effect was made live during the recording.

Finally, a couple of notes on citations are in order. When referring to sound recordings, I have added a wrinkle to MLA style by including time-point references. These are meant to function in the same way as page references, to guide the listener to a precise point in the original recording (or, in the case of episodes downloaded from YouTube, my reconstruction of a recording uploaded in sections). Page references have been included for transcriptions of episodes downloaded from *hexmaster.com/goonscripts* as Word documents, but not for transcriptions from *thegoonshow.net*, where they are published as individual webpages with no page breaks. In my Works Cited list, I have included the names of transcribers of *Goon Show* episodes whenever they have been credited, with the exception of names which are obviously pseudonyms, such as “Yukka Tukka Indians” or “Stringy Flea”.

And now, without any further ado, this in-print version of a radio “continuity announcement” gives way to the main part of the program...

INTRODUCTION

“What time is it, Eccles?” (Milligan and Stephens, “The Mysterious Punch-Up-The-Conker”)

This question, asked in one episode of Spike Milligan’s radio comedy series *The Goon Show*, sums up nearly the entire essence of this bizarrely, often enigmatically humorous program, which first aired on the BBC between 1951 and 1960. Whatever else remains is summed up by the question’s answer, “I’ve got it written down on a piece of paper” (Milligan and Stephens, “The Mysterious Punch-Up-The-Conker”). This basic uncertainty about the existence of an objectively verifiable reality is revealed again and again in *The Goon Show*. Whether one listens to a recording of a *Goon Show* broadcast, or reads either a transcript of the broadcast or Milligan’s original script, what emerges through the forest of chaos, silly noises, and occasionally shopworn gags is a deliberate rejection of the laws of causality and probability, through frequent and systematic distortions of time and space.

The Goon Show’s free-ranging approach to time and space was the by-product of an equally free-ranging approach to humour. The bizarre situations and plot twists that Milligan created led to comparisons with the works of Beckett, Ionesco, and other staples of the absurdist canon. At the time of Milligan’s death in 2002, Peter Barnes, the author of such comic plays as *Red Noses*, eulogized *The Goon Show* as being “as bleak as *Waiting for Godot* and funnier” (206).

Contemporary views on *The Goon Show* were also quick to point out a connection between Milligan’s alogical stream of consciousness and a broader vein of English-language literary nonsense. Writing in *Books and Art* in 1957, Philip Oakes felt confident enough in the existence of this connection to say that “Critics have detected the influence of Lewis Carroll, [Edward] Lear, [and] Stephen Leacock” (qtd. In Milligan, *Scripts* 11) in *The Goon Show*.

In the best traditions of nonsense literature and absurdism, the comparisons are both apt and misleading. Certainly undertakings such as climbing the world's highest underwater mountain or rocketing an armed forces cafeteria to the Far East in order to dispose of surplus tea rival any of Beckett's or Ionesco's plots for strangeness, and add to them a picaresque, peripatetic element reminiscent of Lear's longer poems and Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. There is more at the heart of the fantasy, though, than just the "sense of bewilderment and mystery" (Esslin, *Reflections* 180) and "dreamlike modes of thought" (Esslin, *Absurd* 349) so often noted among absurdist works. By Milligan's own admission, *The Goon Show* is a direct challenge to the status quo, an act of comic civil disobedience which often takes the form of "one man shouting gibberish in the face of authority" (Milligan, *Scripts* 9).

Although they are generally held to be mutually exclusive, the concepts inherent in the terms "status quo" and "uncertainty" work hand in hand in *The Goon Show*. The program was the product of very uncertain times: the era of its original broadcast was one in which Britain was rapidly divesting itself of an Empire which in its recent heyday had bid fair to be eternal; it was also an era when the threat of nuclear war seemed likely to bring time, at least in the sense of time as measured by human history, to an abrupt stop. The prospect of imminent doom, and the hysteria that accompanies it, are never far from the surface of *The Goon Show*: in "The Fireball of Milton Street," a rustic village believes the entire human race to be threatened by the discovery that "the sun's on fire" (Milligan and Sykes, "Fireball" 4 and *passim*). Contemporary fears that the death sentence of nuclear annihilation might be commuted to a world takeover by the forces of international Communism are conflated with the fiendish schemes of Oriental masterminds in early twentieth-century British pulp fiction: Fred Fu-Manchu's most notable attempt to undermine Western civilization involves the destruction of all metal saxophones

(Milligan, *Book* 77-90); the eponymous and unpronounceably-named Emperor of the Universe sabotages eggs with “yellow greasepaint and...pigtails” (Milligan and Stephens, “Emperor of the Universe”) in order to turn Britain’s population Chinese by enlisting their own digestive systems as covert operatives.

Milligan’s transfer of the very real doomsday fears of the 1950s to more mundane and outlandishly fictional frames of reference may have been unconscious, but it was far from accidental. From it, a clear picture of how space and time are constituted in the fictional world of *The Goon Show* can be reconstructed. In *The Goon Show*, time and space are each conceptualized as a single, unified and integral perceptual field, consisting of an array of temporal or spatial indices. These indices represent both actual and imagined times and places, which sacrifice permanent connections to specific points within the array for the potential ability to connect with any given point at any given time.

The paradox inherent in this conceptualization of time and space has far-reaching effects on the models of causality, consequentiality and spatial organization which govern *The Goon Show*’s fictional world. Because events in this world appear not to be the predictable or foreseeable consequences of other events, time in *The Goon Show* is both plastic and elastic: it can be stretched, compressed, twisted, turned back upon itself, and otherwise distorted, depending on what is required of it at any given moment in a script. For *Goon Show* characters, time is literally what you make of it:

BLOODNOK. ...they wanted to know the time. I’m going to write and tell them,
you know.

SEAGOON. But, by the time they get it, it will be too late.

BLOODNOK. I shall give them tomorrow's time. (Milligan and Stephens,
"Regent's Park")

Granting time the qualities of plastic ineluctably compels Milligan to grant the same qualities to space as well. In *The Goon Show*, spaces are defined, not by immutable landmarks or barriers, but by the very mutability of the concept of space itself. Reversals of scale frequently turn these spaces into topsy-turvy funhouses whose various dimensions have little or no direct relation to one another. For example, the 1955 episode "Robin's Post" concludes with the discovery of the front door of a missing mansion "floating in the canal" (Milligan, *Book* 144). The door is transported to dry land and opened, to reveal the rest of the house, its contents, and its inhabitants, which include the guests at a formal dance that has been going on since the beginning of the story (Milligan, *Book* 144).

In addition to constructing a fictional world with a set of rules which foreground this world's mutability and instability, Milligan's continual manipulation and restructuring of time and space gives *The Goon Show* a dramaturgical framework which imbues the narrative with an awareness of its own status as a thing created, a thing which is possibly only in provisional form and therefore subject to further changes while in progress. While the overall narrative destination of an episode of *The Goon Show* tends to be clear, individual details have a way of detaching themselves from the story, forcing it to take brief detours, or to change course completely. The 1957 episode "King Solomon's Mines," for example, refers only tangentially to H. Rider Haggard's original story, and only begins to do so after roughly three minutes of introductory nonsense, a three-and-a-half minute scene set in a Monte Carlo casino, and a three-minute

musical interlude during which, as narration subsequently informs us, “a plot started to emerge” (Milligan and Stephens, “King Solomon’s Mines; “King Solomon’s Mines” recording 0:00-9:30).

There are distinct parallels between the moment-to-moment improvisations that act as *The Goon Show*’s catalysts and what developmental psychology has identified as children’s innate methods of conceptualizing, constructing and reproducing time and space in narrative. With a limited store of first-hand information, a child “assimilates, or tries to assimilate, all experience to such fixed action patterns (reflexes) as it has at the start” (von Glasersfeld, 188) of its life. The preoperational phase of cognitive development is thus marked by a high degree of literalism: Piaget notes that, up to around age eight, children experience “confusion between the sign and the thing signified” (71). Confusion between signs and signifiers leads to the concretization of abstract concepts such as time frames and spatial scales; as well, it tends to give utterances concerning these concepts both an absolute truth-value and the ability to alter whatever givens of time and space have already been established in the mind of the listener. This preoperational narrative style is very much in force in *The Goon Show*:

[GRYTPYPE-THYNNE]. (off) What are you doing up there on the ceiling?

[SEAGOON]. I’ve got news for you, Mr. Thynne. This room’s upside down.

MORIARTY. (off) Saprستي!

[GRYTPYPE-THYNNE]. (off) What?

MORIARTY. (off) You mean we’re ...

[GRYTPYPE-THYNNE] & MORIARTY. (coming on-mic.) Ahhhhhh!

FX. Two bodies falling to the floor (Milligan and Stephens, “Emperor of the Universe”)

The willingness of the listener—or the reader of a script or transcript—to take everything Milligan throws into *The Goon Show*, no matter how fantastic, at face value involves more than a simple childlike suspension of disbelief. It also calls for the ability to decipher and disentangle temporal and spatial arrangements that possess improbable combinations of mutually-exclusive attributes. Every one of the program’s full-episode-length adventures is played out in an unsettlingly sophisticated perceptual landscape: a highly linear mode of storytelling and a fragmented, scattershot approach to the passage of time take turns outflanking one another, within a spatial context in which all notions of size, location, and distance are merely temporary, and subject to revision. However, *The Goon Show*’s chaotic jumps, pauses, and sidesteps in time, and its quicksilver reorientation of spatial scales and relationships, never completely eradicate existing frames of reference. Instead, they disassemble these frames, and reconstruct new frames from their constituent parts. The reconstruction often possesses a recursive nature, as in the case of a ship in the 1954 episode “The Dreaded Batter-Pudding Hurler,” which “was disguised as a train—to make the train sea-worthy it was done up to look like a boat and painted to appear like a tram” (Milligan, *Scripts* 33).

The apparent randomness of such arrangements of information is far from illogical. A theory of a “theatre of chaos”, first proposed by William Demastes in 1998, argues that absurdist, surrealist and postmodern dramaturgies hinge on the deep structures and patterns which emerge from this randomness through “a dynamic blending of order and disorder” (Demastes xii) in a way which parallels the mechanisms posited by physicists studying the most basic constituents of matter. As in chaos theory, the free flow of dramaturgical elements whose interplay defies

traditional syllogistic analysis has a creative, rather than a destructive, function. In this view, entropy—the steady, linear decay of systems—is “a transitional phase, rather than an inevitable conclusion” (Demastes 15), and processes which appear at first to be chaotic, illogical, and disorderly actually function to arrest this decay, or at least to slow entropy’s progress. So it is as well with the world of *The Goon Show*: if things are about to get even farther out of hand than usual, Milligan’s characters have the option of pausing the proceedings, and running backstage for a brief restorative:

[JIM] SPRIGGS. [...] I have a message for you, Jim.

BLOODNOK. Play it on the gramophone.

GRAMS. *Typing*

BLOODNOK. Curse, it’s written in typewriter and I can’t speak a word of it.

What’s on the other side?

GRAMS. *Pre-recording of Ten Eccleses Singing ‘Good King Wenceslas’*

BLOODNOK. Oh, this is too much. Ellington, attack the hit parade with a melody divine. Brandy!!

GRAMS. *Great Running Away Of Boots—Screams etc.*

THE RAY ELLINGTON QUARTET. *Music* (Milligan, *Book* 102-3)

Metatheatrical moments such as this in *The Goon Show* serve as a reminder of the indeterminacy of the “playing space” and “scenic elements” in a performance text written for the medium of radio, as well as of the indeterminacy of the element of time in all forms of dramatic

performance. Anticipating the paradigm for postmodernism developed by Jean-Francois Lyotard, Milligan constantly uses the ambiguities of *The Goon Show*'s conditions of production "to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented" (Lyotard, *Condition* 81). Incoherent as Milligan's cacophony of allusions may sound at times, it is always cohesive: even though instability and indeterminacy feature prominently in *The Goon Show*'s world of time and space, they are anything but anomalies. Instability and indeterminacy are the very core and framework of Milligan's entire conception of the way that time and space operate as conceptual constructs.

CHAPTER 1

THE ACCORDION UNDER CONSTRUCTION: THE ORIGINS OF SPIKE MILLIGAN'S COMEDIC STYLE, AND OF *THE GOON SHOW*

Degrees of instability and indeterminacy tend to creep into an analysis of *The Goon Show*'s origins, style, and genre. Even with the help of analogies to schools of dramaturgy, categorizing *The Goon Show* poses a challenge. As with other examples of “popular and everyday humour” in which “everything is subordinate to the production of pleasure” (Palmer 178), *The Goon Show* has tended to be dismissed as ephemera, despite the preservation of a significant proportion of the program's original broadcast run. The theorist and scholar of communications Jerry Palmer has argued that the tendency of such humour to be “in accordance with the values of the initial receiving community” (182) rarely leads to it being considered as part of a canon whose works are assumed to “transcend historical and social change” (178). A perception of *The Goon Show* as merely the product of its time has tended to deny it status as a representative example of a recognized genre conferred by inclusion in a canon. To compound all this, Milligan's creation has a definite knack for defying categorical distinctions. Although *The Goon Show*'s basic structure takes the format of a comedy-variety show, it is an unusual example of the genre insofar as it showcases the talents of an ensemble cast rather than a solo performer. Onto the comedy-variety substructure, *The Goon Show* grafts sketch comedy's ability to shift rapidly between settings and locales and the continuing and consistent *dramatis personae* of the sitcom format. *The Goon Show* lets its central figures loose anywhere and everywhere during the course of any given episode. History, current events and literature (both the “classic” and “popular”

varieties) are all fair game: if someone had been there, was there at the moment, or could imagine being there, Milligan could, and would, place his *Goon Show* characters there as well.

1. Portrait of The Milligan as a Young Goon: Laying the Groundwork for a Personal Vision of Comedy

Another aspect of *The Goon Show* which confounds the detachment required for textual analysis is the degree of Milligan's involvement in the program on a personal as well as a creative level. Since Milligan gave numerous interviews in which he took pains to establish his own life history and beliefs as sources of major themes in his work, a quick examination of potential biographical influences on *The Goon Show* is a necessary prelude to the analysis of Milligan's conception and use of space and time.

At the outset of this examination, a somewhat vexing question of authorship and attribution must be confronted. The spirit of collective creation behind Goon humour and the loose, often improvised style of performance which can be heard in *Goon Show* broadcasts raise the issue of how to properly weight the individual contribution of each member of the program's creative team. While Milligan was *The Goon Show*'s principal writer, his was not the only name to receive writing credit on the program. One hundred and fifty-one episodes of *The Goon Show* have been identified from recordings and written materials as containing a single half-hour-length adventure: Milligan is the sole listed author of 76 of these; 42 are credited to Milligan and Larry Stephens; 26 to Milligan and Eric Sykes; 2 to Milligan and John Antrobus; 4 to Stephens and Maurice Wiltshire; and 1 to Stephens alone (Wilmot and Grafton 137-53). *Goon Show* scripts were clearly not the work of a one author, but they do share a consistency in tone and approach which marks them as the product of a single unifying guiding principle. Milligan's co-

writers quite willingly pointed to him as *The Goon Show*'s driving force. Eric Sykes "claims that the foundations laid by Milligan made writing Goon Shows a delight—all he had to do was copy Spike's style" (*The Story* 165). Although Goonism fought shy of Surrealism's "attempts to function as a formal organization" (Zinder 41) rife with rules, regulations, and manifestos, Spike Milligan can be seen to have served the same function for *The Goon Show* as Andre Breton did for the Surrealists, by providing what could have easily descended into forgettable "semi-drunken streams of consciousness...by delayed adolescents" (Lewis 194) with an articulate focal point and a dominant voice.

Delayed or not, Milligan's own adolescence may have proven crucial in forming his attitude of defiance towards the expectations of conventional logic concerning space and time. In 1933, after spending the first fifteen years of his life as a "child of the regiment" with a detachment of the British army stationed in India, Milligan returned with his family to live full-time in London. The entire Milligan family found the adjustment to civilian life in Depression-era Britain difficult: Spike's recollections highlight the culture shock he experienced from moving not only to a different part of the world, but to what seemed to be a completely different period of history from the one he had just left: "I couldn't understand how my life had become so terrible [...]" India was only a faraway dream and the idea of going back to it was inconceivable" (Scudamore, *Spike* 41, 45). Milligan's teenage years, and to some extent the rest of his life, were marked by an uncertainty which was the product of his being transplanted from a society whose attitudes were firmly and confidently rooted in Britain's colonial past to one which faced the future with little more than dread and doubt.

Perhaps, then, as Roger Lewis speculates, Milligan's "problems began when he realised he was born in the wrong era" (180). Whatever era he may have felt he truly belonged to, Milligan's service in the artillery during World War II led to an experience which accentuated his sense of being dislocated from the here and now. Caught under enemy fire in Italy in 1944, he escaped physical injury, but succumbed to the all-out psychological devastation known variously as shellshock, battle fatigue, and post-traumatic stress disorder. After a stint in hospital, he was reassigned to the Central Pool of Artists in Combined Services Entertainment. Along with his fellow servicemen-performers, Milligan was now *in* the war, but not *of* it. Having seen active duty, and now permanently detached from it, he was "thankful to be away from the shelling, from the appalling noise" (Scudamore, *Spike* 105), but also keenly aware that his daily life only superficially resembled that of most of his comrades-in-arms. Milligan's "war experiences were closely linked with his artistic and creative development" (Scudamore, *Spike* 114) not just for the opportunities they provided for career advancement, but for the chance it gave him to express his sense of disconnectedness from the world around him.

Milligan's sense of being out of step with his surroundings, fostered in his youth and reinforced by his wartime experiences, was transformed by a pivotal series of ongoing encounters after the war. Gravitating to the Grafton Arms, a pub in London's Victoria district, because "People who mattered congregated there: performers, writers, and producers" (Behan 133), Milligan found an atmosphere of openness that transcended the alehouse's simple appeal as a place to make show business contacts. Grafton's soon became a "home-from-home" (Wilmot and Grafton 17), where Milligan and other kindred spirits developed a "crazy, pun-dizzy, logic-smashing humour that doesn't despise your intelligence" (Hewitt 34) during late-night exchanges of badinage and tomfoolery which were the comedy equivalent of jazz

musicians' jam sessions. By 1949, four of the regulars of these after-hours sessions—Milligan, Peter Sellers, Harry Secombe and Michael Bentine—had begun to identify themselves as The Goons (Lewis 189). Even so, they had never appeared in public as a group outside the informal performance space of Grafton's when the first series of *The Goon Show*, entitled *Crazy People*, aired on 28 May 1951 (*The Story* 105).

2. “Well, that’s the end of that corny routine”¹: *The Goon Show*’s Sketchy Beginnings

A *Goon Show* by any other name was not *The Goon Show* its listeners would later come to recognize. Apart from using prototypes of Milligan's regular stable of characters, and having a certain predilection for offbeat situations, the *Crazy People* incarnation of *The Goon Show* bore very little resemblance to what the program would become, and “divulged more caution than innovation” (Lewis 198). Any flights of fancy tended to be quelled by the program's adherence to “the standard variety format of that time, a series of freestanding sketches and three or four musical items” (*The Story* 105). Possibly as a result of there being “rarely any continuity between sketches through an entire show” (*The Story* 107), and the sketches themselves being largely plotless “monologues, or spots” (Lewis 199), Milligan's mentor and original script editor Jimmy Grafton recalls that “the writing was somewhat uneven” (Wilmot and Grafton 41). This is understandable, given that Milligan was a novice scriptwriter faced with the task of keeping a fledgling program on the air. The threat of cancellation would have loomed over the entire first season, which was commissioned in blocks of “six shows...a further six, and then a further five”

¹ This line is spoken by Major Bloodnok in “The Internal Mountain,” one of the *later* episodes of *The Goon Show*'s fourth season (Milligan, “The Internal Mountain” 16). This was a period during which the program was making its final transition from a format based on stand-alone sketches to one featuring full-episode-length stories. Although Milligan never entirely discarded “corny routines” from his bag of tricks, this line may have been a way of venting his frustration at the dependence on them enforced by traditional sketch formats.

(Wilmot and Grafton 44). In any case, the tentative approach may have helped to ensure the renewal of what would henceforth be billed as *The Goon Show* for a second season: Peter Sellers' biographer Roger Lewis is of the opinion that "the fact that there had been so few novelties must have boded well for its future" (199).

3. New Producer, New Approach: Peter Eton and the Transformation of *The Goon Show*

1953 saw the beginnings of a shift in elements of *The Goon Show*'s textual structure and production practices which would transform the program from a traditional comedy/variety show (albeit one featuring a slightly bizarre brand of humour) to an exercise in no-holds-barred parodic deconstruction. Crucial to this development was the appointment of a new producer to the program for the start of its third series of broadcasts. Peter Eton's role in shaping the template to which *The Goon Show* would hew from its fifth through its tenth and final series went beyond his "reputation of being a hard man to make laugh" (Wilmot and Grafton 47), which in and of itself would have driven Milligan to be more scrupulous in both gag structure and proper contextualization of set-ups and pay-offs. The experience Eton gained during a decade of producing features and straight drama for BBC Radio (Wilmot and Grafton 47) would prove crucial as he eased the show towards a stronger standard of professionalism, while at the same time fostering a climate conducive to experimentation.

The first major change Eton instituted was to reduce the number of musical interludes from three to two, "one by [Ray] Ellington and one by [Max] Geldray" (Wilmot and Grafton 49), which served both to lessen the breaks to the momentum of the comedy segments, and to establish a consistent lineup of 'side acts' which would remain with the program through the rest of its run. The scripted portion of *The Goon Show* was also transformed, although a little more

slowly: the second and third sketches increasingly formed “a single story in two parts—Eton was trying to get Milligan to write longer stories” (Wilmot and Grafton 50). The exposure Eton had received to the BBC Drama Department’s more conventional, chronologically-ordered style of narrative and the Features Department’s tendency towards “fragmented narratives, centred on dialogue and internal monologue...forms typically associated with modernist writing” (Frattarola 453) was a likely influence on the tendency of these stories to sequence events chronologically within a framework marked by spatial and thematic disjunction. The reconfiguring of *The Goon Show*’s scripted segments from isolated comic turns to episodes in a condensed, but cohesive, plotline continued through the program’s fourth series. “It was not until the second half of the series that the shows had a continuous plot as a regular thing, but at last the dramatic format which Eton had been urging the Goons to adopt was working” (Wilmot and Grafton 52-3).

A comparison of two *Goon Shows* which handle a similar story idea helps to illustrate the effect the Peter Eton regime had on Milligan’s conception of the program. Episode 1 of *The Goon Show*’s second series (Wilmot and Grafton 133), broadcast January 22, 1952, and Episode 24 of the fifth series, broadcast March 8, 1955 (Wilmot and Grafton 140), take such radically opposed tacks to the search for the legendary yeti that they hardly seem the work of the same writer. The 1952 version of the yeti story is the last of its show’s three comedy segments, and takes a straightforward approach to subject matter and narrative form. An announcement by *The Goon Show*’s resident narrator at the time, Andrew Timothy, informs listeners, without a trace of irony, that what follows is “an adventure of that extraordinary creation of Peter Sellers, Major Bloodnok, in the Quest for the Abonimable [sic] Snowman” (Milligan and Stephens, “Crazy People” 10).

The quest falls somewhat short of the promised adventure, and the implied promise of comedy, advertised in the buildup to the sketch. To take an example which concerns itself with spatial relationships, roughly two pages of the script are concerned with nothing more significant, or comic, than one character after another going out in and of the same door for the purpose of reporting that something *isn't* on the other side of it. The payoff to the entire sketch is similarly perfunctory and predictable, serving as a clue to the sort of writer Milligan might have become without further nurturing and guidance. The Abominable Snowman is captured, but the subsequent discovery that “He’s melted!” (Milligan and Stephens, “Crazy People” 15) plays on the literal meaning of the ‘snowman’ part of the creature’s name in a way too obvious for it to stand alone and expect to get a laugh. However, since it displays no attempt in its structure to distract the listener from the task of waiting for the inevitable visually-based pun, it only stands as an example of how a joke which relies solely on the element of surprise can fail.

Three years later, under Peter Eton’s guiding hand, *The Goon Show* and Milligan are scarcely recognizable for the changes both have undergone. This time around, the protagonist of the story entitled “The Yehti” is Neddie Seagoon, who is by now firmly ensconced in his role as *The Goon Show*’s all-purpose walking parody of heroism. Seagoon’s quest in “The Yehti” quickly becomes a search, not for the eponymous monster, but for places to begin the process of searching for it, in a house full of never-ending subterranean corridors. The activity which constitutes this search involves opening a series of doors, behind which are found (among other things) an inexhaustible supply of trains, equally innumerable flocks of sheep, and “[*Goon Show* announcer Wallace] Greenslade having a bath” (Milligan and Sykes, “Yehti” 16). Through elaboration, a single gag of the type encountered in the previous attempt at a yeti tale becomes a rondo of variations on the theme that anything at all could lie behind a newly-encountered door.

The payoff to the quest is likewise a better piece of comedy craftsmanship than its predecessor. Finding a door with ‘The Yehti’ marked on it, Seagoon elects not to open it, but to “lock the door...and take the room to London” (“Milligan and Sykes, “Yehti” 18). The episode’s climactic scene finds Seagoon preparing to display his capture, in much the same way as Bloodnok uncrated his melted Abominable Snowman. This time, however, the opening of the door with ‘The Yehti’ on it reveals something more substantial than water:

SEAGOON. Right. Well, here it is. Now stand well back gentlemen, he may be armed.

FX. [Key turns in lock]

SEAGOON. Now when I fling this door open be ready to grab him. Right!

FX. [Door slams open]

GRAMS. [Train whistle]

SEAGOON. Aaaaaaah! (Milligan and Sykes, “Yehti” 18)

The return to a running gag to close out the episode provides a comic finish which balances elements of the expected and the unexpected; the manner in which it does so recalls “the unvarying rhythm of a spring that coils and releases” characteristic of a rhetorical device labeled ‘the Jack-in-the-Box’ by Henri Bergson in his essay entitled “Laughter” (741). Although by this point in the script the act of opening a door has become a trigger mechanism for a payoff based on reversal of expectation, the result of opening this specific door is never as much of a foregone conclusion as the discovery of a melted ‘snowman’. Based on the precedent set during previous

instances of the door-opening gag, the occupant of the room could just as easily have been more sheep, or Wallace Greenslade, in or out of his bath. The contrast between “The Yehti” of 1955 and its 1952 counterpart is emblematic of the great leap made by Milligan from the conventional (if sometimes anarchic) approach of *The Goon Show*’s first two series to Peter Eton’s conception of the program as “a bold and melodramatic rearrangement of all life” with “a nightmare landscape of its own [peopled with] men, beasts and machines terribly at variance with the observable universe” (10).

4. *The Goon Show*’s “Classic” Format: Dramatic Structures Mature in the Service of Comedic Immaturity

The new format of *The Goon Show* brought to the program an integrated fictional world, but one which requires a little subtlety to parse. The necessary presence of a station identifier, along the lines of “This is the BBC” to open each episode, and end credits at the conclusion of the broadcast, mark it off as a self-contained entity from the programming which precedes and follows it. However, for a first-time listener, the exact nature of this programming is not made immediately clear. The beginning of a *Goon Show* in its classic format is not essentially different from the beginning of a *Goon Show* in its embryonic form. With station identification out of the way, the proceedings do not move on directly to the story proper, but elide into a preamble which generally has little if any direct relevance to the forthcoming action. Instead, the performers introduce themselves, as well as the idea that they will be portraying multiple roles, while easing the audience into a state of attentive receptiveness for comedy by stringing together unrelated quips, nonsense language, and metalinguistic mouth-sounds. As in an evening of variety entertainment, the presentational style employs direct address, and uses a more informal

tone than that of the main plot; performers often speak in their ‘natural’ offstage voices, rather than adopting a character. Each one of these preambles is something of an entity unto itself, but at least some of their more recognizable common features can be gleaned from the following example:

[GREENSLADE]. This is the BBC Home Service.

GRAMS. OUTBREAK OF PEOPLE SIGHING.

[GREENSLADE]. Oh come, come, dear listeners, it’s not that bad—

HARRY [SECOMBE, as himself]. Of course not—come, Mr. Greenslade, tell them the good news.

[GREENSLADE]. Ladies and gentlemen, we now have the extraordinary talking-type wireless ‘Goon Show’.

GRAMS. SCREAMS OF ANGUISH. PEOPLE RUNNING AWAY.

HARRY [SECOMBE, as himself]. Mmmm—is the popularity waning? Ahem.

(Milligan, *Scripts* 99)

The end of the preamble and the beginning of the adventure which will take up the balance of the episode is clearly signaled by either the staff announcer or one of the cast, in a manner which, insofar as it can be said to follow a pattern of any kind, follows this one:

SPIKE. Ho ho ho, fear not Neddie lad—we’ll jolly them up with a merry laughing-type joke show. Stand prepared for the story of ‘Napoleon’s Piano’.

(Milligan, *Scripts* 99)

Although straightforward enough in its intent to separate ‘show’ from ‘pre-show’, such an introduction does not establish a strict boundary between the mimetic and diegetic elements of the narrative which follows. Characters in a *Goon Show* adventure frequently step outside their place in the script to give narrative asides in direct address. Milligan’s scripting of these asides often plays with the ambiguity of their presumed setting, specifically the incongruity of a character firmly located in a distant past recapitulating events from the perspective of the here and now:

SEAGOON. Yes, it's me folks. Where's my muffled speaking trumpet? Hello folks, haaaallo folks. I'm speaking through my muffled speaking trumpet from directly outside the main gate of the Red Fort. (Milligan and Stephens, “Red Fort”)

The ambiguity created by the fact that Seagoon is apparently speaking from a setting which has been specifically referred to as “India, 1857” (Milligan and Stephens, “Red Fort”), to a studio audience located in Britain in 1957, is left deliberately unresolved. The net effect of a performance whose preliminaries are a calculated non sequitur, and whose text enforces the simultaneous enactment of a role itself, the role of its performer, and the role of a performer in a role, is to create the impression that *The Goon Show* in its mature format is less a radio adventure serial framed by elements of a variety show than an adventure serial and a variety show stirred into a loose emulsion which is in constant flux. This mode of presentation requires the listener to be constantly on the alert for shifts in tone which temporarily reorient the balance between ‘adventure’ and ‘variety show’ elements in the narrative.

5. Little Cardboard-and-String Heroes²: *The Goon Show's* Regular Cast of Characters

The dramaturgical flexibility of the collection of little sagas which forms the corpus of *The Goon Show* from 1954 onwards owes a great deal to the flexibility of its *dramatis personae*. For example, *The Goon Show's* main protagonist, Neddie Seagoon, is an oddly nuanced amalgam of melodramatic heroism and craven cowardice. In “The Spy or Who is Pink Oboe,” Seagoon at first willingly accepts a counter-espionage mission, laughing at the prospect of certain death in front of a firing squad; upon talking himself through the details of his execution, he has a panic attack of epic proportions, running all the way to Glasgow in a matter of seconds before being brought back to do his duty (Milligan, *More Scripts* 63-4). However dangerous the task he may be faced with, Seagoon’s qualms are quickly overcome by an appeal to one or both of his sense of duty and his need for money. “Need” is the operative word here, rather than “desire,” since Seagoon is often portrayed in straitened circumstances; even in stories where he occupies a position among the social elite, he is either an aristocrat *manqué* or the scion of a noble house that sits one misfortune away from financial ruin. Seagoon’s position at the core of *The Goon Show's* world can be likened to a gyroscope in the guidance system of an airplane or an oceangoing vessel: by establishing a centre of gravity with a relatively free range of motion, it functions best when placed within a system whose other elements have a similar ability to shift position as the occasion demands.

The shift of Neddie Seagoon to the centre of *The Goon Show's* new world of full-episode-length stories called for a corresponding drift into supporting roles by two characters who had

² This description is applied exclusively to one *Goon Show* character, Bluebottle, but seems a good way of hinting at the resemblance between Milligan’s characters and puppets created by children to amuse each other.

featured as protagonists in sketch-length adventures. A character originally designated “Sanders” to denote the source of Peter Sellers’ vocal impersonation was originally cast in roles similar to the avenging knight-errant figures portrayed by character actor George Sanders in films of the 1940s. Acquiring the name “Hercules Grytpype-Thynne”, this character took on a new persona, based on the duplicitous, urbane villains Sanders was also known for. For the bulk of *The Goon Show*’s episode-length stories, Grytpype-Thynne acts as an antagonist, compounding the sheer absurdity of Seagoon’s entrusted missions with fiendish schemes of his own, which are calculated to bring him considerable benefits while exposing Seagoon to considerable danger.

On the road to villainy, Grytpype-Thynne appropriated an accomplice in the form of a character who had often assumed the main villain’s mantle: Count “Jim” Moriarty. Moriarty’s degradation from a criminal mastermind who has “thought of everything” (Milligan, “Great Bank of England Robbery 1954”) in 1954’s “The Great Bank of England Robbery” to the “bald, daft, deaf, and worthless” (Milligan, *Scripts* 19) stooge of Grytpype-Thynne marks a character shift every bit as significant as Grytpype-Thynne’s shift from hero to villain, in the process creating a dual antagonist for Seagoon to contend with.

Rounding out *The Goon Show*’s regular cast of characters is a quintet of supporting figures whose function appears to be equally divided between helper and comic blocker, and who generally supply a fair degree of hindrance even when trying to help. The first of these is a character who functioned originally as the hero of one of the three-segmented *Goon Show*’s regular features. Major Denis Bloodnok, “Military idiot, coward and bar” (Milligan, *Scripts* 20) was first conceived as an aging, blustery, but largely competent regimental commander. The Bloodnok familiar to listeners from full-length *Goon Show* adventures has the same vocal

characterization and rank (although at times its legitimacy is called into question), but much less of his earlier self's fitness for command. Faced with danger, duty, or any situation not involving easy money and even easier women, his first impulse is to hide, unless an opportunity for flight presents itself. The one quality which Bloodnok still possesses in ample reserve is braggadocio. This, combined with his pusillanimity and deviousness, places the "mature" conception of Bloodnok in the company of stock comic military braggarts such as Il Capitano and Miles Gloriosus, while placing him squarely in Seagoon's shadow.

Two more Goon characters with similar links to the realm of comedy archetypes are a duo of "shambling, crumbling dotards" (Eton 10) by the names of Minnie Bannister and Henry Crun. Minnie and Henry have by far the most complex ongoing relationship of any pair of *Goon Show* characters. Although their disagreements have a tone and tenor which point to their being an old married couple, the exact nature of their relationship is never made entirely clear. Much of their discourse consists of misunderstandings and talking at cross-purposes which rival anything by Beckett or Pinter, while retaining the flavor of a vaudeville routine. Witness the way they attempt to save Seagoon from drowning in "The Canal":

SEAGOON. Helpp, bbbb, I'm going down.

[CRUN]. Don't do that, sir, or you'll drown yourself. Oh dear, dear, this fog - I can't see a thing in the fog, you know.

[MINNIE]. Where are you, sir?

SEAGOON. In the canal!

[MINNIE]. He's in the canal.

[CRUN]. Oh. Mr. Seagoon, follow these instructions and you'll be safe. Hand me the Life-Saving Manual Minnie.

[MINNIE]. There you are.

[CRUN]. Ready?

[MINNIE]. Yes.

[CRUN]. Hurry up then.

SEAGOON. Yes, hurry up!

[CRUN]. Mr. Seagoon, take three dozen eggs and break into a bowl.

SEAGOON. Yes.

[CRUN]. Mix in eight ounces of castor sugar. Add four pounds of millet flour and bring the mixture to - Minnie? This isn't the Swimming Manual.

[MINNIE]. (calls) We've got the wrong book, Mr. Seagoon.

SEAGOON. What'll I do with all this mixture?

[MINNIE]. We'd better go in, Henry, it's a shame to waste all that food. Coming, hupppp! (Milligan, "The Canal" 12)

Played against one another, Minnie and Henry generate a sort of self-sustaining inertia in the form of perpetual non-motion; set against the progress of a *Goon Show* plot, they can bring it so decisively to a halt that only divine intervention or a musical interlude can get it going again.

The final pair of regular supporting characters in *The Goon Show* can be considered the most truly clown-like in a world of admittedly broad clownish figures. Bluebottle and Eccles are paired so frequently that they operate as a double act consisting of mirror images of extended naiveté. Bluebottle's innocence is in the process of being rather easily corrupted: his head can be turned by anything from a contemporary film starlet to any one of a number of his female schoolmates. Placing his age precisely is a little tricky, since he often turns up as the legitimate holder of jobs for which the age of majority would seem to be a minimum requirement. Whatever his occupation and sex drive say about his age, Bluebottle's attitudes and behaviours are, on the whole, unsophisticated and childlike. His chief motivation in taking on a job is a desire for glory which extends beyond the narrative frame of any given *Goon Show* episode. Bluebottle habitually signals his entrance by soliciting applause, as in the following example:

BLUEBOTTLE. ... Help me, I'm drowning! I... Ohh. Sees audience. Hello everybody.

GRAMS. Massive cheering from enormous crowd.

BLUEBOTTLE. Oh, ta. Now back to my dramatic drowning scene. (Milligan, "Bushey Spon")

Valuing praise above all other forms of reward, Bluebottle is generally loath to sell his loyalty for money; however, a bag of candy or a pin-up photo is all it takes to convince him to rent it out.

If Bluebottle constantly attempts to recast the world to fit his image of himself as one of its born heroes, his most frequent scene-partner, Eccles, is in a world all his own. There seems to be a common view that Eccles is an author-substitute for Milligan, or at the very least, a distillation

of his personality. Jimmy Grafton maintained that “Eccles...is the real Milligan” (Wilmut and Grafton, 28). *Goon Show* castmate Harry Secombe held a similar opinion, stating that “Eccles lurks behind Spike’s every move” (Milligan, *Scripts* 190). Still, there is a degree of complexity to Eccles that vexes any easy description of him. The assertion, for example, that Eccles “Has never been employed” (Milligan, *Scripts* 19) is quite flatly contradicted by his ability to hold whatever job is called for in any given *Goon Show*’s script. This is not to say that Eccles performs the tasks set for him with any great degree of competence or reliability. Quite often, Eccles’ inability to carry out even the simplest instructions without getting them confused is used to comment on not only his own incompetence, but the incompetence of whoever gave the instructions in the first place. The common sense of anyone who would entrust any responsibility to someone like Eccles, who “*knows* he’s an idiot, and never pretends otherwise” (Wilmut and Grafton 93) is certainly suspect at best. In light of this, there may be a degree of wisdom, or at least low cunning, lurking behind Eccles’ “village idiot” (Wilmut and Grafton 93) façade. Since “being an idiot absolves him from any form of responsibility” (Wilmut and Grafton 93), Eccles is well aware of who is ultimately accountable when his actions lead inevitably to disaster. It is, quite simply, anyone who expected things to turn out otherwise.

6. “This is the BBC”³: *The Goon Show* Vis-à-Vis Mainstream Practices in Contemporary Radio Drama

One area in which Eccles and Milligan seem very much to parallel one another is their marginalized status among the community of their peers. Despite *The Goon Show*’s popularity both with contemporary audiences and new generations of fans, it figures as a footnote when the story of BBC Radio is told, when it even figures at all. Some of this may be due to interdepartmental rivalries at the BBC which still play a role in determining the worthiness of material for inclusion into official and outside histories of the Corporation. Although the designation between the Radio Drama and Features departments has long since ceased to exist, the prevailing slant in scholarship valorizes the output of Radio Drama, with an occasional nod to specific programming produced by Features. In both cases, there is a decided bias in favour of contributions from writers whose work features in the literary canon. For example, the reputations of Dylan Thomas and Louis MacNiece as radio writers benefited greatly from their already well-established reputations as critically-acclaimed poets; the radio plays of Samuel Beckett and Tom Stoppard are studied not so much for their merits as radio plays as for their connections to these writers’ stage plays.

British radio culture’s reluctance to grant legitimacy to its more populist elements dates back to its earliest days. The newness of the medium of radio, combined with a perceived need to justify the broadcast of texts and formats derived from live theatre, led to radio dramaturgy

³ These are the first words spoken (with minor variations, such as “This is the BBC Home Service” and “This is the BBC Light Programme”) in every extant broadcast of *The Goon Show*. The next thing listeners heard (whether it was a sound effect or piece of back-talking dialogue) was meant to undercut the air of dignity and gravitas which the broadcaster strove to maintain, and turned a simple station identifier into the set-up for one of the program’s most familiar running jokes.

receiving an almost Aristotelian examination from first principles. Some of the first efforts to describe and categorize the art of radio drama are surprisingly cogent, given the degree to which radio programming as a whole was still in a state of flux and experimentation. The most thorough of these early investigations took the form of a series of articles published in the *Radio Times* in 1929 by Val Gielgud, who as head of BBC Radio Drama had a vested interest in establishing the ground rules of the new genre for both listeners and prospective writers.

Gielgud's notes on the subject of radio dramaturgy are worth examining for the way they anticipate textual and production challenges addressed in *The Goon Show*. *The Goon Show*'s extensive use of a third-person semi-omniscient narrator whose main function is to provide exposition is itself a dramaturgical device favoured by Gielgud: "It is not a fact that narrative is always boring or an inartistic excrescence upon the form of radio drama. Particularly is this the case when a radio play is founded upon a novel" (cited in Crook, "Val Gielgud"). On other key points, however, *The Goon Show* veers sharply away from Gielgud's prescribed norms. If Gielgud saw "little room for caricature in radio" (cited in Crook, "Val Gielgud"), Milligan saw little room for anything else. Peter Sellers' recollection that Goon characters were "caricatures of real people" (qtd. in Lewis 189), delineated with "serpentine, brittle, scratchy lines" which Roger Lewis compares to those of English cartoonist Ronald Searle (204), would seem to put the lie to the assumption that verisimilitude is any more a litmus test for characterization on radio than it is for any other art form. The rapid-fire delivery of many Goon characters appears to flout Gielgud's suggestion that "Speed of dialogue in the radio is slightly slower than that taken in the theatre" (cited in Crook, "Val Gielgud"). On a general note, the decision to bring as much as possible of both the BBC's arsenal of technical effects and the cast's repertoire of character voices to bear on any given episode of *the Goon Show* seems to be an overt violation of the

diktat not to “use as much complication in its production as possible” for its own sake (cited in Crook, “Val Gielgud”).

It can be argued that Gielgud’s initial vision still affects how British radio drama practitioners view their craft. Recent writings on radio dramaturgical technique often seem to rely on Gielgud’s paradigms rather than the medium’s inherent possibilities. The statement that a “need for simplification...influences the kinds of narratives used by...radio dramas” (Shingler and Weiringa 82) may as well have come from Val Gielgud himself; in fact, it dates from 1998. In his 2001 *Writing for Radio*, Vincent McInerney cautions aspiring radio dramatists against writing “Very short speeches” due to the confusion created by “the speed of the dialogue and its shortness” (135). Statements like these do nothing to alter the fact that the following complicated stretch of narrative featuring short, quick, and ambiguous speeches, aired on the BBC in 1958:

[GRYTPYPE-THYNNE]. ...Taxi!

[JIM SPRIGGS]. Where to, Jim, where to, Jimmmm?

[GRYTPYPE-THYNNE]. Drive me up the wall.

[JIM SPRIGGS]. Wo, wo wo wo wo wo wo wo.

[GRYTPYPE-THYNNE]. Thank you. How much?

[JIM SPRIGGS]. That’s four and six, pronounced—

Grams. [*Jim Spriggs*] (*Pre-Recorded*) Saying ‘Tennnnn Bob’

[GRYTPYPE-THYNNE]. Right, take it out of this.

FX: Pistol Shot

[JIM SPRIGGS]. Thank you, Jim. (Milligan, *Book* 117)

In spite of the ongoing challenge to many of its strictures represented by *The Goon Show*, the overall effect of the prescriptive, even proscriptive, outlook of Val Gielgud was that “Radio Drama tended to be hidebound by the conventions and codes of conventional theatre and dramatic narrative” (Crook, “Case History”) . However, through its very reliance on these conventions, the “house style” Gielgud established for BBC Radio Drama also offered a rich source of parody. *The Goon Show* took frequent aim at this easy target, but there was more behind the program than simply Milligan’s admitted penchant for sending up canons, received opinion, and unquestioned authority of all forms. Stylistic influences which reveal Milligan’s admiration of certain performers and avenues of creative expression abound in *The Goon Show*, and are integral to the conceptualization of time and space in its fictional world.

7. “Who are you, Ben Lyon?”⁴: *The Goon Show*’s Thematic Links to Popular Culture between the Two World Wars

Milligan was a relative latecomer to comedy writing and performance, but had already amassed a great deal of onstage experience as a working musician. Stints with dance bands in London during the 1930s, and in North Africa and Italy during World War II, then in small combos touring Europe after the war, infused Milligan’s sensibilities with the eccentric rhythms

⁴ This is a question asked of guest star Groucho Marx in *The Goon Show*’s first go at a send-up of George Orwell entitled “1985”. The sequence of dialogue surrounding the question contains an array of pop-culture references. The principal targets of the guying are Ben Lyon and his wife and co-star Bebe Daniels, two American film actors with pedigrees extending back to the silent era who had become staples of British radio comedy; Groucho himself is not referred to in name, his voice alone (as it still is today) being introduction enough (Milligan and Sykes, “1985” 5).

and syncopated cadences of swing-era jazz. Musicians' jokes abound in *The Goon Show*: the 1959 episode "The Tay Bridge Disaster" features a three-minute sequence in which rival architects sing their plans for the title structure ("Tay Bridge" recording 13:15-16:02).

Occasionally, material like this even dominates an episode, as it does in 1958's "Ten Snowballs That Shook the World," where the value of the British pound has "dropped from F sharp to E flat," and the solution devised to save the currency from collapse is "to raffle the equator in the key of E flat" (Milligan, "Ten Snowballs").

The chaotic, yet still-controlled, forces that music can unleash had their effect as well on Milligan's choice of sobriquet for his professional career. As dubious as the chronology of his own remembrance may be, Milligan's statement that he replaced his prosaic given name of "Terence" with "Spike" as a tribute to drummer and comedian Spike Jones, the leader of "one of the zaniest, noisiest bands anybody ever heard" (Behan 75) makes the decision almost appear to be a mission statement for his eventual career path.

While no hard-and-fast rules apply to the work of those who shift from music to comedy, it is interesting to note the affinity between Milligan's outlook and that of an erstwhile musical act much better known for the anarchy and absurdity underlying its approach to humour (and life in general). Milligan frequently made it clear that the Marx Brothers provided him with both a stylistic influence and a target to reach, if not surpass. In an authorized biography by Dominic Behan, Milligan recalls showing one of his earliest attempts at comedy writing to friend and mentor Anthony Goldsmith during his service days, and receiving the following reaction: "This is mad. It's very like the Marx Brothers but it's very funny" (Behan 93). The assessment may be apocryphal; more important than this, however, is Milligan's retention of the memory that such a

favourable comparison was made by someone whose approval he was seeking at the time. Similarly, Milligan's statement that "Not even the Marx Brothers" (*The Story* 54) were quite like *The Goon Show* sets up the stars of *Duck Soup* and other films as the creators of something worth admiring, and worth outdoing. Others have noticed a definite congruence in style, if not content: attempting to place the humour of *The Goon Show* in an historical context, Neil Cornwell notes in his book *The Absurd in Literature* that "the one analogue that comes to mind would be the Marx Brothers" (299).

It is hard to imagine how The Marx Brothers could *not* have influenced Milligan, given the thematic parallels between their body of work and *The Goon Show*. Milligan created a rogues' gallery of transparent grifters, scroungers, and buffoons, whose behaviour appears to have implicit or explicit sanction from the corridors of power in a world where "Caddishness, cowardice and ignorance replace virtue and heroism" (Lewis 176). This inversion of values bears a definite resemblance to the ways in which Groucho, Chico and Harpo (sometimes with the help of Zeppo) use society's most cherished institutions as so many maypoles to cavort around. Groucho himself figured highly enough in Milligan's estimation to have been included in one episode of *The Goon Show*, in a pre-recorded cameo appearance ("1985" recording, 6:40-6:48).

Milligan complemented a disregard for social conventions appropriated from The Marx Brothers with a disregard for the conventions of the physical world appropriated from another area of popular culture. Milligan's distortions of time, space, and causality are similar enough to those perpetrated in much of the output of American animation studios during the 1930s and 40s that a direct line of influence can be inferred from this similarity. In this respect, there is a

particularly striking resemblance between *The Goon Show* and two specific bodies of work in the field of the American cinematic cartoon.

The first of these corpora is the Fleischer Brothers' cartoons released by Paramount from the early-to-mid-1930s, which were marked by a free-spirited approach and "relied heavily on surrealism for their effect" (Fleischer 73). The early Paramount sound cartoons often have an "a hallucinatory quality" (Barrier 181), one in which continuity appears to be an accidental by-product rather than a desired end. Narrative gaps and jumps, and variations in the size, scale, and proportions of characters between scenes (or within the same scene) are a testament to the laissez-faire style of Dave Fleischer, the studio's principal director during this period. Generally speaking, Fleischer's animators were handed a certain amount of footage, told roughly where their assigned scenes fit into some loose overall storyline, and left very much to their own devices after that:

Each animator was assigned a sequence, with a vague notion of its leading to a particular point, another animator was to pick up the action at that juncture. In doing the scene, an animator might think of new ideas or be inspired to pursue a particular gag. This informal procedure accounts for the odd transitions—and frequent *lack* of transitions—from one scene to the next. (Maltin 88).

The second potential source for Milligan's bending of temporal and spatial parameters is the work of director Tex Avery, particularly work which dates from his years at MGM. Like Milligan, Avery resisted any and all demands that creativity "should strive for the Illusion of Life" (Kenner 27). Avery's directorial method can be described as a distillation of a semi-improvisational process similar to the one used at the Fleischer Brothers' Studio, one with which

Avery was familiar with from his own days as an assistant animator (Barrier 328). Avery's approach to narrative and situation parallels and prefigures Milligan's even more strongly than the Fleischers' does, in three key aspects. Like *The Goon Show*, Avery's cartoons often move at breakneck pace, forging complex chains of extrapolations from apparently simple situations with a speed that can be hard to follow. Also like Milligan, Avery's exaggerations of scale and scope often showed very little in the way of restraint, or logic. Referring to Avery's working method as "the relentless working out of a foolish idea" (343), animation historian Michael Barrier also notes that "Avery demonstrated that a silly idea could become a funny idea if a director pursued it with disarming vigor and single-mindedness" (333). Finally, just as Milligan had distilled the collective-creation process of the late-night sessions at The Grafton Arms into a personal working method, Avery both condensed and circumvented the collaborative writing process common to the cartoon studios of his time. No matter how many directions they rode off madly in, his apparent improvisations were the product of one mind, as opposed to many. A workaholic who, by his own admission, "attempted to do everything," Avery "was intensely involved in every detail of his cartoons" (Barrier 430, 431).

Milligan's identification with Americans such as Spike Jones, The Marx Brothers, the Fleischer Brothers and Tex Avery reinforces the public image he crafted for himself as an outsider in British society. As revelatory as this is, it is also somewhat surprising. Even though *The Goon Show* has a great deal in common with the slam-bang antics of Spike Jones' City Slickers or the Marxes, Milligan's writing also "reaches back to the English nineteenth century [sic] nonsense tradition of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll" (de Rijke 233). *The Goon Show* appears to be set in a Wonderland without an Alice, a world whose constant shifts in perspective are governed by a logic which defies rational explanation, marked as it is by the "Pointlessness

and arbitrariness [which] are singled out as building blocks of both nonsense and the absurd” (Cornwell 22). Despite the wealth of ludic, alogical material which has accumulated in English literature (particularly from the nineteenth century onwards), the conflicting timelines in Spike Milligan’s statements about the relationship between literary genres and his own style make it difficult to establish a clear genealogy of influence. Milligan often fostered an impression of himself as a late-blooming literary naïf by taking pains to stress that the homes he lived in during his childhood were hardly havens for literature of any kind, let alone the nonsense variety. Behan relates Milligan’s recollection that “only two novels, *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Swiss Family Robinson*” (45) graced the shelves of his family abode. By way of contrast, it is difficult to know how to contextualize his later statement that he “liked Lear” (*The Story* 54), since no time period is specified for the development of this preference. As well, Milligan’s admission to author and poet Robert Graves that “not until I was 35 did I become aware of literature” (Scudamore, *Dear Robert* 119), is difficult to place in a proper context. If true, this would have placed his great awakening somewhere in 1953 or early 1954, and made the question of literary influence on *The Goon Show* moot, since by that time the style of his writing for the program was already well-established. This particular version of events, however, is hard to reconcile with the one that Milligan allowed Pauline Scudamore to publish in an authorized biography. In this account, Milligan began to familiarize himself with literature 1940, when, while billeted with his artillery unit at an abandoned girls’ school at Bexhill-on-Sea, he received permission to reorganize and catalogue the school’s library (Scudamore 67).

Just as Spike Milligan’s own accounts of the genesis of his personal style are full of contradictions, the threads of cultural influence which manifest themselves throughout *The Goon Show* display few overt links or connections with each other. Because of its hybrid nature, the

program has an uneasy relationship with strict boundaries of genre, no matter what Andrew Crisell holds to be true about the way it “neatly typified [one of] the two main strands of radio comedy which had developed in the medium’s short history” (*Introductory History* 76)⁵. In *The Goon Show*, one encounters something which is not exactly many things at once: not exactly a comedy-variety program, not exactly a sitcom, not exactly pure absurdist nonsense, not exactly a stock-figure-populated radio cartoon. When entering an investigation of *The Goon Show* along any dimension, therefore, one has to be aware of the internal inconsistencies which abound in both the program and its creator. This in turn, however, provides a vital insight which adds immeasurably in understanding how and why the distortion of time and space are so crucial to *The Goon Show*’s style of humour. If Milligan presents things that are not exactly as they seem, it is because they were never that way in the first place; at the same time, these same things *are* exactly as they seem, are nothing else at all, and are unavoidably so.

⁵ Questions of interpretation aside, the main trouble with this statement is that Crisell never essentially identifies or defines the strand of comedy which *The Goon Show* is supposed to typify. Although he finds in *The Goon Show* “the essence of all great clowning” (*Introductory History* 76), he offers no examples of earlier British or American radio programs which may have been tinged with that same essence.

CHAPTER 2

THE ACCORDION BEATING TIME: TEMPORAL DISTORTIONS IN *THE GOON SHOW*

1. Looking Backward to Look Forward Again: *The Goon Show*'s Narrative Framework

Being one thing and not being it at the same time is at the heart of the presentational mode used by Spike Milligan to introduce his audience to a temporal and spatial framework whose construction is not as inchoate as it may appear. Although many of the specifics concerning contemporaneity, simultaneity, and the passage of time in an episode of *The Goon Show* are complex, recondite, and deliberately disorienting, they function as details of an overall picture which is remarkably simple. The onset of events in a *Goon Show*'s main plot is clearly demarcated, and the temporal flow of the narrative is straightforward and unambiguous. In its essence, a *Goon Show*'s story is told entirely in flashback: some indication is always given in an episode's exordium-cum-audience-warmup that what follows should be taken as a re-enactment of events that have already come to pass. Milligan's most commonly-used means of separating "show" from "pre-show" divides the job of doing this between members of the main cast and the staff announcer, following a readily discernible pattern:

SEAGOON. Welcome to the Goon Show!

GRAMS. [*Various moans and wailings...*]

SEAGOON. Thank you listeners! And a Merry Christmas to all our readers. For the Christmas festival, we present on the new curved speaker radio set: A Bandit Of Sherwood Forest!

OMNES. Olé!

ORCHESTRA. [*Grand opening fanfare*]

GREENSLADE. Doncaster late in the 12th century, 'tis December and the snow covered coaching yard of the Bowman's Inn is thronged with travellers each awaiting to go his journey. (Milligan and Sykes, "Ye Bandit" 1)

By introducing both an adventure's title and a verbal description of its initial setting, Milligan is hewing to a well-established form of narrative shorthand, one which even by the 1950s had become a cliché of radio dramaturgy. However, he is also calling attention to the status of what follows this introduction as a *story*, an act of imaginative reconstruction rather than a set of incidents occurring in the here and now. As such, he is also calling attention to the potential for inconsistencies, biases and outright errors to creep into this particular version of events, even as it unfolds. The technique of announcing-the-story-as-a-story became enough of a routine with Milligan that he came to use it on occasion as a means of creating, then subverting, an audience's expectations as to subject matter. The 1957 episode "The Missing Boa Constrictor" features Neddie Seagoon constantly asking all and sundry to "hold this boa constrictor" (Milligan and Stephens, "Boa Constrictor") as a running gag; the reptile mentioned in the title has no other bearing whatsoever on the flow of events. "The Sleeping Prince", also from 1957, pulls an even more audacious bait-and-switch routine. After a story featuring nothing resembling a prince at all, Wallace Greenslade concludes the episode by awakening a previously-unnamed snorer with the words "Come on Prince. Time to go home" (Milligan and Stephens, "The Sleeping Prince").

Whether or not its stated title is featured in its story, the narrative in an episode of *The Goon Show* moves in one direction, and one direction only: forward. Events are portrayed in the order in which they are assumed to have occurred: temporal disjuncts and prolepses are generally not employed. Analepsis is Milligan's preferred method of leaving the time frame of the performance to establish the time frame of the narrative; rather than embedding it in the narrative itself, he generally utilizes direct address, in the form of a character's remembrances which elucidate the given conditions before the enactment of any particular scene gets underway. As the hero of most *Goon Show* adventures, Neddie Seagoon is well accustomed to receiving this privilege:

SEAGOON. I had retired from the Army and was on a goodwill tour of North Africa teaching Morris Dancing to the Arabs. They didn't seem to be quite getting the hang of it. (Giggles) Ha hum. However one night, out of curiosity, I entered a curiosity shop. (Milligan, "Rommel's Treasure")

This practice in and of itself calls into question the stability of the main narrative's time frame, since it requires a character to step out of this frame and move forward in time to address the audience, while appearing otherwise unaltered by the passage of time implied by the shift from enacted past to narrating present. Milligan minimizes the attendant confusion that may result from characters continually bouncing forwards and backwards by restricting each of his narratives to a single, easily traceable plotline whose events are presented in sequence. An episode of *The Goon Show* may contain many irrelevancies, detours, instances of padding, and exercises in time-killing, but it never contains a subplot. When characters fill time for the sake of filling time (as the Eccles-Bluebottle and Minnie-Henry tandems often do) they do so secure in

the knowledge that their relevance to upcoming action has already been made clear, or will be made clear before long.

There is a compelling reason for Milligan's straight-ahead approach to narrative, one which has more to do with pragmatic concerns than with any dramaturgical theory. *The Goon Show*, no matter how disorienting it can get, is designed to get laughs. As such, its comedic impact depends not just on its content but on the order in which that content is selectively presented. Receptor models which focus on the mechanisms through which the mind encodes information as humour stress the importance of the sequence of the presentation of this information as a vital cue to its encoding. One of the chief influences on the present generation of study in the field of receptor models of humour, Jerry Suls, holds that "the reader or listener uses the preceding text of a joke to structure what will appear next by formulating a narrative schema [...] Next, predictions about forthcoming text are formulated from the schema. These predictions are then compared with the most recent text input" (86). Seen in this light, the linear time structure of a *Goon Show* episode's narrative is far easier to reconcile with its often absurd content. In order to have their desired effects, elements of this narrative need not follow one another logically, but they absolutely have to follow one another *chronologically*. By adopting a simple, unidirectional time vector as the road down which an episode of *The Goon Show* travels, Milligan affords himself considerable scope for creating and subsequently demolishing audience expectations concerning content and information in ways calculated to produce laughter.

2. One Narrative, Many Narrators: *The Goon Show's* Democracy of Diegesis

Milligan uses *The Goon Show's* presentational format to signal the possibility of encountering distorted and disrupted time frames and scales along this linear narrative road. Like many another comedy-variety program, *The Goon Show* comes equipped with a ready-made source of general information on the narrative and on other subjects, in the form of a staff announcer. For the entirety of the program's single-story-per-episode format, this function was filled—to overflowing, if a pattern of *Goon Show* jibes about his bulk can be borrowed for the occasion—by Wallace Greenslade. An episode of *The Goon Show* establishes Greenslade's voice as its first source of information, creating both the expectation that this voice will be the primary source of narration, and the impression that its owner's version of events is likely to be the definitive or “legitimate” one. Both expectation and impression are quickly revealed to be illusions. Greenslade often gets not much further than intoning the words “This is the BBC” with respectful solemnity before being interrupted by noisy gibberish or disrespectful backtalk. Seagoon is a frequent heckler, goading Greenslade with variations on a general theme of “Go on there now Wal, give us the old posh wireless talking there Wal” (Milligan, “Pam's Paper”), and going as far on one occasion as to shoot him for the temerity of limbering up his singing voice (Milligan, *Book* 108).

This instance of disposing of *The Goon Show's* “official” narrator reveals a vested interest: Seagoon is far and away *The Goon Show's* most persistent (and, apart from Bluebottle, its most shameless) appropriator of the narratorial function, often resorting to a megaphone through

which he shouts “hello folks” to get the audience’s attention as he does so⁶. However, if Seagoon’s insistence on telling his own story cancels out Greenslade’s presumed monopoly on the narratorial function, incursions by other characters likewise explode the notion of a Greenslade-Seagoon cartel. At any time other than its opening few seconds, just about anyone is likely to be serving as the interim narrator of a *Goon Show* episode. As a *Goon Show* story unfolds, every character who takes up the task of narration adds details which modify, but do not deny, what has previously been narrated. By doing so, Milligan’s characters can be seen to be replicating his own creative process, as encapsulated in an exercise Milligan engaged in during the early years of his association with the other members of *The Goon Show*’s cast:

Goon-sequences is played with a home [audio] recorder. Each Goon tells part of a story and passes only the last word on to the next speaker. When half-a-dozen Goons have goon to town [sic] with the English language, the recording is played back and they hear for the first time what the others have said, shrieked, chirruped or mumbled. (*The Story* 20)

Two equally important features of language in *The Goon Show* allow this method of narration to be conditioned by consequentiality and accumulation rather than by negation. One is the absolute truth-value of all statements of a primarily diegetic nature in an episode of *The Goon Show*. Utterances made in direct address to the audience by *Goon Show* characters are always entirely reliable, and objectively verifiable, albeit within the unusual context for verification that

⁶ Based on visual evidence provided in BBC Television’s 1972 special *The Last Goon Show of All*, an acoustic megaphone wielded by Harry Secombe in the vocal guise of Seagoon, rather than any form of control-room-based electronic manipulation of the signal from Secombe’s microphone, was used to produce this effect (*Last Goon Show* video).

the program's fictional world presents. Because of this, the narrative baton can be passed from one character to another, and to the half-character, half-disinterested-observer-figure of Wallace Greenslade, without any fear of personal agendas distorting the narrative. One of the side-effects of this is that any character can enter a *Goon Show* story at any time, and be certain of a faithful recapitulation of events up to that point. Hired to sabotage the eponymous drag-racing pipe organ of "The Mighty Wurlitzer", Major Bloodnok himself is quickly brought up to speed:

MORIARTY. [...] Bloodnok, remember, loosen all the nuts and bolts so that
when he is travelling at speed the whole organ falls to pieces.

BLOODNOK. Thank you for telling me the plot. (Milligan, *Scripts* 146)

The second feature of language in *The Goon Show* which allows for the presentation of an entirely reliable, if changeable, narrative is the transformative nature of language itself. Milligan's propensity for word-play means that his characters need to be aware of the potential effects of double meanings before they speak:

SEAGOON. [...] Moriarty?

MORIARTY. Yes?

SEAGOON. I've just made myself a peer.

MORIARTY. Good, I'll get down the end of it and start a concert party.

SEAGOON. Come back here... It's not that kind of peer.

MORIARTY. What?

SEAGOON. 'P' double-'E' 'R' not 'P' 'I' 'E' 'R'!

FX. splash!

MORIARTY. (far off) Oh you swine you... (Milligan, "Tales of Old Dartmoor")

A pier that appears when confused with an honorific, then disappears when the confusion is cleared up, is just one of the dangers that can befall characters in a fictional world which can be changed by whoever has the last word. One *Goon Show* episode in particular stands as a case study of the perils that constantly-changing narrators present to one another. In contrast with its Pirandellian title, the 1956 episode “Six Charlies in Search of an Author” casts a minor member of *The Goon Show*’s stable of intermittently recurring characters, Jim Spriggs, as a writer who is both familiar with and in control of his characters from the outset of the narrative. This control is quickly lost, when Henry Crun skips ahead “a couple of pages” to reach a destination first, and is cautioned by Seagoon that “I’ve a good mind to tell the author” (Milligan and Stephens, “Six Charlies”). The rest of the characters soon get wind of the possibilities inherent to this premise, and form a sort of fifth column against the “official” narrative. One by one, they uncouple individual links from the chain of events, reshaping them to suit their own purposes. Overwhelmed by force of numbers, Spriggs abandons his creations to their fate, and opts “to go to the country for a long rest” (Milligan and Stephens, “Six Charlies”). This open invitation to take license with the plot leads to a game of “hot potato” with the authorial function, which even sees the rightful author Spriggs temporarily written out of his own work. Restored by means unknown to his seat of power behind the typewriter, Spriggs re-establishes order by writing “a happy ending” which lasts long enough for Seagoon to wed, then lose his new bride to the charms of “a certain handsome virile youth” on the steps of the church after the wedding (Milligan and Stephens, “Six Charlies”). The youth in question is none other than Bluebottle, who has snuck into the author’s chair to provide himself with a little long-awaited satisfaction, and prospective writers with a case in point about the dangers of allowing one’s work to be revised by too many hands.

3. The Fragmentation of Time-Frames in *The Goon Show* and Its Effects On Narrative

Challenging to follow as they are, the changes of narrators in *The Goon Show* can still be seen to operate within a unidirectional conceptualization of time. Even so, diegetic statements made by *Goon Show* characters reveal this conceptualization of time to be far from one-dimensional. Milligan's writing has a tendency to fragment time into a series of independently-operating frames of reference, each one moving forward, but at its own rate of speed. Any two characters (or more) can interact effectively in the same scene, while operating under radically different conceptions of temporal flow. Reporting to a Boer War outpost in "The Battle of Spion Kop", recruit Seagoon is asked by Major Blooknok "what's the time back in England?" (Milligan, *More Scripts* 23). Both Seagoon's reply of "Twenty to four" and Bloodnok's counter-response that "it's nice to hear the old time again" (Milligan, *More Scripts* 23) give rise to the notion that more than just the two-hour difference between the United Kingdom and South Africa is at play in the minds of both men. Even if Seagoon subscribes to Bloodnok's vision of an England in suspended animation at twenty minutes to four, it becomes clear that his view of temporal succession is very much his own. Later on in the episode, he is confronted with a threat which he instantly recognizes as "a genuine hand operated 1914 tiger" (Milligan, *More Scripts* 31). This would seem to be less a case of recognition than precognition, though, since the entire episode takes place in "the year 1907" (Milligan, *More Scripts* 21), and Seagoon's specification of a model year for the tiger would appear to indicate that he, for one, regards it as already possessing a certain degree of vintage. Furthermore, as far as those in this particular story are concerned, 1907 is the "second year" (Milligan, *More Scripts* 21) of the Boer War, which in fact ended in 1902. Taken as a whole, such an array of inconsistent views of time comes across as totally consistent with a fictional world governed by temporal inconstancy.

Milligan often takes the premise of temporal inconstancy to even greater extremes by throwing conflicting accounts of temporality on a collision course with one another. “Shangri-La Again” from 1955 is a primer in how time as experienced by *Goon Show* characters can become detached from time as measured by more objective methods of chronometry. Fleeing Peking by air, Seagoon and a party of British nationals crash-land soon after “Dawn, December the twenty-fifth” (Milligan, “Shangri-La Again”). As they wait for the plane’s radio to be fixed, “Three weeks went by” (Milligan, “Shangri-La Again”). Discovered by Bluebottle, who offers to lead them to Shangri-La, they walk through the mountains of China for another “Three weeks”. “Then on the second of January - a miracle!” (Milligan, “Shangri-La Again”). Strangely, the miracle has nothing to do with six weeks elapsing in the eight days which separate Christmas and January 2nd.

Most of the time, Milligan is content to leave to the listener the task of sorting out his tangle of roughly-linked time frames. On occasion, however, a *Goon Show* script will pause to clear up potential misunderstandings about relative rates of temporal flow. The 1955 episode “The Greenslade Story” takes pains to mention that “six weeks went by” for Seagoon and Greenslade as they waited outside the London Palladium during a performance there by Eccles, and that “At the same time, inside the London Palladium, six weeks had also passed at the same speed” (Milligan, “The Greenslade Story” 14). In typical Milligan fashion, what is not made clear is whether Seagoon and Greenslade ever left the spot they were waiting at, or whether Eccles left the theatre (or, for that matter, the stage) during the six weeks which passed. Given the circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that, in the absence of outside forces acting upon them, all concerned carried on with their current activity (or lack thereof) until directed by narration to do otherwise.

4. That Sabrina Sure Gets Around⁷: The Free Flow of Anachronisms in *The Goon Show*

A fictional world in which the same six-week period passes concurrently for different people only if so specified, and in which six weeks may go by in the story while only eight days go by on the calendar, implies a conceptual model of time in which no moment or event in the past, present or future can be seen as entirely completed or self-contained. In *The Goon Show*, all moments, no matter how widely separated in time, are potentially accessible to all others. A useful way of comprehending Milligan's overall schema for historical time is to view any episode of *The Goon Show* that does not take place in the "present day" of the 1950s or a "recent past" extending roughly to the turn of the twentieth century as occurring in a roughly-conceived historical era which has no firm chronology, and within which all moments in time are equally accessible to one another. Thus, for instance, when constructing the narrative for "The Histories of Pliny the Elder," Milligan conflates the last decades of Rome's republic with the first century of its empire. Landing Julius Caesar in Britain "in the year ex-el-one-one-one [43] B.C." (a year after his assassination), he moves narrative and integers forward while moving time backwards to "49 BC," casts Bloodnok as Spartacus (dead since 71 BC), and ends the episode on Mount Vesuvius, presumably in 79 AD, during the "The Last Days of Pompei [sic]" (Milligan and Stephens, "Pliny"). This schema can lead not only to absurd chronologies, but to readings of history which suggest alternative realities: "The Nadger Plague" takes place in a 1656 England ruled by a king, rather than by Oliver Cromwell (Milligan and Stephens, "Nadger").

⁷ "Sabrina" in this case is neither a teenage witch nor the title character of an Audrey Hepburn film, but a bosomy 1950s British pin-up girl who is one of Bluebottle's favourite sources of daydream material. In all his travels throughout history in *Goon Show* adventures, Bluebottle never fantasizes about famous women who belong to the historical period he finds himself in. Instead, he concentrates his thoughts on sirens whose names would resonate with the studio audience he continually solicits for applause.

One of the additional implications of investing narrative time with such a quality of porosity is that topical references from the present can pass backwards into this narrated past with great regularity. Taking the example of “The Nadger Plague” once again, a magical solution to the horrors of this episode’s eponymous malady (which affects only those wearing pants) involves a potion which turns whoever swallows it into “any object you want” (Milligan and Stephens, “Nadger”), to obviate the need for clothing. Why Eccles should want to turn into a gas stove, and Seagoon “an eight day, all weather clock, with device for waking you up with a cup of tea” (Milligan and Stephens, “The Nadger Plague”), and how Grytpype-Thynne and Moriarty should recognize both objects as common ones, begs a question that is unanswerable using any form of logic, other than that involved in putting a joke across to a mid-twentieth century audience.

The free flow of individual anachronisms in *The Goon Show* inevitably means that, on occasion, entire time periods may seep through and emulsify with one another. Nowhere is this more apparent than in a 1957 episode entitled “The Treasure in the Tower.” The episode’s first main plot complication introduces one of Milligan’s rare uses of prolepsis, as the narrative jumps forward from the year 1600 to 1957 to explain why The Ministry of Works is digging in vain for buried treasure under the Tower of London. From there on in, Milligan’s script makes periodic leaps back and forth between the two time periods, suggesting an intention to create suspense by selectively including or withholding expository information in each leap. The separation of time frames is soon revealed to be an illusion, and the resulting proleptic/analeptic jumps a false device, as characters from 1957 and 1600 begin to interact with one another. Eccles and Bluebottle carry on one of their music-hall-inspired patter routines across three centuries as easily as two neighbours might talk across a backyard fence. Even when Eccles admits the inherent impossibility of the situation, since “if this is nineteen fifty-seven, I’m dead”

(Milligan and Stephens, “Treasure”), the conversation goes on unabated. It is evident from the rest of the episode that those involved in and affected by the narrative see no need to explain, or even question, the temporal paradox that lies at its heart. Rather than delve into the theoretical and practical aspects of how bits of the years 1600 and 1957 have become detached from their moorings, and now sit side by side, Goon characters accept the situation as a given, and get on with the business at hand. This business culminates in a causal impasse of the sort which forms the crux of many a work of science fiction: the reason that “in nineteen fifty-seven they didn’t find the treasure that was buried in sixteen hundred” (Milligan and Stephens, “Treasure”) is that the people from 1600 who buried it waited for the fine folks from 1957 to dig an empty hole for them to bury it in.

5. Musical Interludes in *The Goon Show*: Interruptions in Narrative Flow and Opportunities for Temporal Distortion

On the face of it, approaching time from all directions at once would seem to be a violation of the linearity of *The Goon Show*’s overall narrative framework. However, the program’s structure contains a built-in pretext for temporal distortion. Each episode incorporates two musical interludes lasting between two and four minutes apiece, one featuring a jazz harmonica solo by Max Geldray with the studio orchestra, the other an up-tempo rhythm combo number by the Ray Ellington Quartet. Holdovers from *The Goon Show*’s origins as a sketch-based variety show, these interludes serve as a gateway to the manipulation and distortion of time frames which are features of the program’s mature format. By parceling out the dramatic action of an episode into three discrete subsections clearly separated by intervals which have no bearing on the action, they introduce the concept that the performance time of a *Goon Show* script may not be

altogether the same as the performance time experienced by its audience. This discrepancy in the time frames of performance and reception is further complicated by the variability of Milligan's use of the musical interludes as time-markers. Milligan's tendency is to use the music to bring the action to a full, if temporary, stop: only on rare occasions, as in 1954's "Dishonoured,"⁸ when Ray Ellington and his quartet provide cabaret entertainment at "the Burrapow Sewer Club" (Milligan and Sykes, "Dishonoured" 9) in an unspecified part of India, does he choose to incorporate it into the story. Instead, he generally acknowledges the music as an entity unto itself, and uses one of two basic methods to introduce it. The first is a variation on the standard variety-show introduction by a staff announcer or master of ceremonies. In this role, Wallace Greenslade is charged with the dual task of notifying the audience of the change from dialogue to music, and of providing at least the semblance of a referent for the dialogue's resumption at the conclusion of the song:

GREENSLADE. Astute listeners will no doubt be puzzled at a horse sounding like a taxi and a train. The truth is the animal was also a brilliant impressionist. And here now is his impression of Ray Ellington. (Milligan, "The Lost Emperor")

Far more often, however, Milligan dispenses with the services of an announcer, and instead has one of his characters introduce the music as an abrupt *non sequitur* in the midst of what may be a string of other *non sequiturs*:

⁸ The story was reworked in 1959 under the title "Dishonoured—Again," and used the same device to introduce the Ray Ellington number.

BLUEBOTTLE. Then I will go! Sprin-ges on to ladder. Effect is ruined as trousers fall down. Oh! Short vest! Tee-hee! Max Geldray, cover up my short bits!

MAX GELDRA Y *[Musical interlude]* (Milligan and Sykes, “Fireball” 10)

This method, particularly on the frequent occasions when Ray Ellington has been called upon to voice a role in the preceding dialogue, forces the listener to consider whether the elapsed time of the music should be taken to be part of the elapsed time of the story proper. The answer to this question varies from episode to episode: a *Goon Show* timeline may resume at the point where it paused for the music, it may jump ahead to a point well after that, or it may pick up exactly when the music stops. When incorporated into an episode’s dramatic timeline, the duration of a musical interlude has unpredictable, and highly discrepant, effects on events in the ongoing, but interrupted, scene. If dramatic action continues during the music, it may be sped up to a rate that stretches credulity no more than any other occurrence during the episode: once one is willing to believe, for instance, that an entire bank can be hoisted into a hovering zeppelin, then it is equally plausible that the deed can be done within the roughly two minutes it takes to play “a recording of a piece of cardboard highly amplified by Ray Ellington” (Milligan and Stephens, “Great Bank Robbery”; “Great Bank Robbery” recording 18:15-20:10). The music can also be used to compress the time required to complete actions on an even grander scale than that: in “Under Two Floorboards,” for example, Max Geldray is asked by Grytpypye-Thynne to “Play Neddie’s journey to Marseille” (Milligan and Sykes, “Under Two Floorboards”) from England to join the French Foreign Legion, a trip that even in the age of supersonic jet travel takes rather longer than the two minutes Geldray spends playing “Happy Days and Lonely Nights” (Milligan

and Sykes, “Under Two Floorboards” 5) to cover it (“Under Two Floorboards” recording, 7:38-9:39).

6. The Ageless Aging Process of *The Goon Show*’s Characters

This dilation and contraction of time and action relative to one another is not restricted to *The Goon Show*’s musical interludes. Milligan’s entire conception of the passage of time in his ongoing fictional world appears to be related less to observable changes in the physical universe than to the subjective experiences of his characters. At one point in “Shangri-La Again,” Milligan has Minnie Bannister explain the title locale’s hold on its inhabitants: “The air in this valley keeps one young” eternally (Milligan, “Shangri-La Again”). He need not have made the stipulation. Characters in all episodes of *The Goon Show* are almost entirely immune to the effects of aging. Each one is fixed, if not at a specific age, then at a clearly-identifiable stage of the life cycle. Bluebottle is perpetually prepubescent; Seagoon, Grytpype-Thynne, and Eccles are in an energetic, vital phase of full adulthood; Moriarty shows the wear and tear of late middle age; Bloodnok is nearing or just past retirement; Henry and Minnie are so far beyond senescence that carbon-dating may be necessary to determine their dates of birth. The key difference between *Goon Show* characters and other kinds of stock figures whose ages remain fixed through diverse retellings of their exploits is that Milligan often lets his creations loose on adventures with expansive time spans. One of the most expansive of these, “The Spanish Suitcase,” sees Seagoon “sentenced to 94 years in jail,” 93 of which he serves before the episode ends (Milligan and Sykes, “Spanish Suitcase” 4, 20). In the meantime, neither he nor the rest of *The Goon Show*’s regular male characters, who have all joined him in his cell, appear to have aged at all.

In addition, extraordinary lengths of time can pass in an episode of *The Goon Show* without either its characters aging or the narrative time frame moving forward appreciably. The “Whistling Spy Enigma”, from 1954, sees Seagoon and Moriarty locked in a standoff of epic temporal proportions:

SEAGOON. ... I was all for attacking him right away, but Bloodnok stopped me.

BLOODNOK. No, wait ‘til he gets older.

SEAGOON. Finally, on his ninety-third birthday, we sprang. (Milligan, “Whistling Spy”)

To have full impact, this joke depends on the audience’s assumption, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, that Moriarty is nowhere near the age of ninety-two at the outset of the standoff. In any case, the struggle that ensues, in which the combatants “grappled for three hours” (Milligan, “Whistling Spy ”), shows all participants, regardless of their chronological age, to possess a vim and vigour not normally found in senior citizens. The exact date at which the action picks up again after the fight cannot be pinpointed, but it is meant to be understood as occurring between the November 1953 defeat of England’s football team by Hungary, which forms the background of the episode, and the May 23, 1954 rematch between the two countries in Budapest, three weeks after the original broadcast date of this episode of *The Goon Show*.

If anything approaching a rational explanation can be offered for *Goon Show* characters’ relative immunity to the aging process, perhaps it has something to do with their relative immunity to physical deterioration of all kinds. *Goon Show* characters, as Roger Lewis puts it, “travel gaily towards death and dismemberment” (176), with an uncanny faith in their own

essential indestructibility. This faith is not altogether misplaced: their creator Milligan may have spoken freely of his willingness to have his characters “struck, beaten, burnt, boiled, drowned, clubbed, nailed to a cross” (qtd. in Lewis 177) for comic effect, but he also brought them back week after week for more of the same treatment.

The cartoon-like resilience of *Goon Show* characters and their ability to survive a wide variety of assaults upon their persons defy the passage and effects of time in two important respects. In the first place, most threats to the corporeal integrity of characters in *The Goon Show* occur independently of the time-consuming process of recuperation. The damage from whatever degree of physical punishment any of them undergoes generally lasts no longer than the time it takes to remark on it. Following the *Goon Show*’s narrative principle that saying something makes it so, injury and dismemberment can only occur so long as they are acknowledged. Eccles’ ongoing experiences with high explosives are a prime example of this: in a running gag which crops up in several *Goon Show* episodes, he mistakes lit sticks of dynamite for cigars, in one case musing “what brand are they now? TNT brand. Hmmm, must be a new make” (Milligan, “Greatest Mountain 1954”) as he puts one in his mouth just in time for the inevitable explosion. The worst he ever suffers for this mistake is a little charring, of the kind that “wipes off” (Milligan, “Greatest Mountain 1954”) easily.

Even when violence produces more lasting and tangible effects on a *Goon Show* character, these changes come without pain, shock, blood loss, or any of the usual concomitants of trauma. Legs are forever being knocked off their owners, whose reactions tend to be chiefly concerned with the indignity and inconvenience of the loss. Milligan gives the idea that legs are a particularly disposable feature of the human anatomy its fullest expression in a 1959 episode

entitled (appropriately enough) “Ned’s Chinese Legs”. In this adventure, due to an accident of history (not to mention geography), Seagoon was “born astride the Chinese-India border” (Milligan, “Ned’s Chinese Legs”), making his legs the rightful property of the Chinese government. Unscrewed from Seagoon’s body, the legs become the subject of an international incident which leads to warfare. The question of whether Seagoon’s legs are restored to him is never entirely resolved: promises offered by the Chinese “As soon as you give up your legs to us” (Milligan, “Ned’s Chinese Legs”) seem to indicate that these lower limbs, if no other part of him, are occupied by forces friendly to Seagoon.

7. “I’m for the dreaded deading this week alright”⁹: The Impermanence of Death in *The Goon Show*

The lack of a clear-cut answer to the question of what becomes of the owner of legs caught in a crossfire while under siege points to the second way in which *Goon Show* characters deny the time factors involved with threats to physical integrity. Partly due to its nature as an ongoing series with recurring characters, *The Goon Show* tends to skirt the concept of death. *Goon Show* characters can be killed, but never permanently. If an explosion is the only way to ensure the “death of the well-known BBC tenor Webster Snogpule” (Milligan, “Greatest Mountain 1954”), a minor character who disrupts several episodes with an enervating habit of breaking into song (he has to break in because he can’t find the key), the explosion is only fatal to the extent that it silences him for the moment. *The Goon Show*’s resident advocate for resurrection through the power of positive thinking, Bluebottle, generally refuses to stay dead through the next line of

⁹ When not turning his attention to thoughts of Sabrina and other pin-up girls, Bluebottle was wont to kvetch about Milligan’s constant use of him as a sacrificial victim. This particular intimation of mortality comes from the 1956 episode “The Hastings Flyer” (Milligan, *Scripts* 169).

dialogue. Bluebottle's penchant for interpolating his own stage directions and interior monologue into the text may have given Milligan the idea that here was a character who might refuse to play along when Death came calling. Whatever the case, Bluebottle's acknowledgement of the situation brings with it no acceptance of its implications:

BLUEBOTTLE. Oyyyyy! I'm drowned in the deaded water. Look! All the silver paper's come off my cardboard cutlass. My best trousers is wetted. This means I'll have to wear Mum's old drawers while they dry. Heeheeheee! Exits left to hear Ray Ellington's Quinten [sic]. (Milligan, "White Box" 12)

Like a child who gets up again after being "shot" in a game of "cops and robbers", Bluebottle refuses to give Death, and therefore Time, a full and unequivocal victory over him. His "posthumous" asides to the studio audience make it clear that, even if this week's script has pronounced him gone for good, he is still very much alive, well, and ready to be "deaded" over and over again.

The unreality of death in *The Goon Show* may very well have had its genesis in Milligan's wartime experiences. The incident which led to Milligan's hospitalization for shell-shock found him "wounded in the left leg and badly shaken as he lay unattended with shells falling all around him" (Behan 115). Having been to all intents and purposes a sitting duck under heavy bombardment, Milligan would have had good reason to wonder why Death passed up such an easy chance to claim him, when it took so many of his comrades. His frequent statements that "I should have died" (Scudamore, *Dear Robert* xlv) immediately after the end of World War II represent an attempt to redress this imbalance and impose a sense of cosmic justice on a state of affairs that still bewildered him. They also represent an attempt by Milligan to lock his life

forever into a period he considered to be its most definitive one, in the same way as he did for his *Goon Show* characters.

8. The Passage of Time and the Completion of Tasks: Two Sides of the Same Coin

Subjective experience as a determinant of the flow of time affects not only the aging process in *The Goon Show*, but also the elapsed time associated with the completion of actions and tasks. In a fictional world intended to mimic reality, the correlation between time and task would be simple enough for an outsider to intuit: elapsed time would tend to vary directly with the perceived difficulty of the task. In *The Goon Show*, however, Milligan frequently inverts this ratio, in a way that disrupts an audience's expectations concerning the relationship between time and task. *Goon Show* characters often take inordinate amounts of time to do the simplest things, while doing near-impossible ones in seemingly no time at all.

When they undertake a task, one of the main difficulties *Goon Show* characters face is the sometimes insurmountable problem of simply getting things started. The proverbial journey of a thousand miles may begin with a single step, but the first step can often be more time-consuming than all the rest combined:

FX. [Horse hooves running, Crun crying, Neddy shouting as they go]

CRUN. Captain, Captain Seagoon!

SEAGOON. What? What, what what?

CRUN. Tell me, is it very far to Hungary?

SEAGOON. Yes!

CRUN. Then why do we keep galloping round and round this blasted room?

(Milligan, “Whistling Spy”)

Travelling a long way and getting nowhere is a common experience for Neddy Seagoon. The 1956 episode entitled “The Fear of Wages” prolongs anxiety similar to that faced by the protagonists of the film *The Wages of Fear*, by requiring him to drive truckloads of high explosives all the way back to Britain from Burma. The title of the source material is not the only thing in this episode which appears to have been thrown into reverse gear: “Five weeks of travel saw the lorries well on their way” (Milligan and Stevens, “The Fear of Wages” 10) but apparently no closer to their destination than when they started.

However difficult it often may be for Milligan’s characters to get beyond Square One, the reversal of expectations concerning the length of time it takes to complete a task receives its fullest expression in *The Goon Show* when the task in question is nearing completion. As soon as a specific concluding phase of a task is marked off by dialogue or narration, then the length of time it will take to complete the task begins to vary inversely with its difficulty, regardless of how long the task has taken hitherto. For example, anyone undertaking to solve the mystery of the abandoned ship *Mary Celeste* using a roundabout two-stage plan to “build and man a second Marie Celeste”, then “re-sail the ill-fated voyage and reconstruct the mystery” (Milligan and Sykes, “Marie Celeste”) knows that the difficult bit of Stage One of the plan is the part at the end that involves building the ship. Not so Neddie Seagoon—this time around, he knows the precise words to throw the process into overdrive:

[SEAGOON]. When will the boat be finished?

[CRUN]. Mmmmmm, after dinner.

[SEAGOON]. You'll have the whole ship completed after dinner?

[CRUN]. Yes.

[SEAGOON]. What's the delay?

[CRUN]. The wood, you can't get the wood you know.

[SEAGOON]. All right, I'll just have to be patient. After dinner then. (Milligan and Sykes, "Marie Celeste" 10)

The key to Seagoon's success in this instance is that his inquiry made no reference to any portion of the task of shipbuilding other than its desired end result. By asking when the ship would be "finished", rather than when it would be "started", or when "work would be underway" on it, he invoked an assumption concerning the inevitability of the task's completion which hastened the fulfillment of his request.

Words have the power to accelerate more than the end of a task in an episode of *The Goon Show*; they have the power to accelerate the end of the episode itself. Many an episode of *The Goon Show* wrapped up more or less as follows:

[GREENSLADE]. And that, we fear, is the end of our story except, of course, for the end—we invite listeners to submit what they think should be the classic ending, Should Seagoon eat the Batter Pudding and live or leave it and in the cause of justice—die? Meantime, for those of you cretins who would like a happy ending—here it is.

GRAMS. SWEET BACKGROUND MUSIC, VERY, VERY SOFT.

HARRY [SECOMBE, as himself]. Darling—darling—will you marry me?

BLOODNOK. Of course I will—darling.

[GREENSLADE]. Thank you—good night. (Milligan, *Scripts* 37)

This sort of speedy conclusion, once a conclusion is announced as imminent, can be as much a matter of necessity as anything else. The amount of time that *Goon Show* episodes spend elaborating their plots, then systematically detouring from them, frequently makes rapid action essential once matters finally come to a head. As events roll on towards the final payoff, Milligan's writing often appears to be in a race against time to combine climax, conclusion and dénouement before the program has to sign off. In "The Nasty Affair at the Burami Oasis" from 1956, Milligan (aided and abetted by Larry Stephens) gets so wrapped up with the business of emptying the title oasis, filling it up again, emptying it, and re-filling it with gin, that he forgets that the reason everyone was at the oasis to begin with was that "the Burami garrison [of the British Army] is to play football" (Milligan and Stephens, "Burami Oasis") against the local Arabs. As a consequence of his obsession with this Sisyphean sidetrack, Milligan is compelled to dismiss his original plot, and send it home brusquely:

SEAGOON. ...The result of the match was a forgone [sic] conclusion.

GREENSLADE. British garrison, twelve; drunken Arabs, sixty-eight. Which, erm, just goes to prove, that gin is a dashed good drink. Goodnight. (Milligan and Stephens, "Burami Oasis")

Sometimes, however, conclusions which appear foregone seem to take forever to resolve themselves. A good example of this occurs in the deliberately anticlimactic ending of "The

Internal Mountain”. Having finished elaborate preparations for the easiest ascent of Mount Everest on record by installing an elevator in the mountain, Seagoon and company have little to do but step in, press a button, and rise to the peak. Milligan could easily have omitted the uneventful elevator journey itself, but instead he plays with the Bergsonian *durée* associated with this mode of travel by deliberately drawing out the ennui well beyond the point of awkwardness:

BLOODNOK. Here we are: The first men to go up Everest from the inside.

[JIM] SPRIGGS. 3000 feet Jim, 3000 feet.

ALL. [*Whistling, singing*]

[JIM] SPRIGGS. 4000 feet, Jim

ALL. [*More whistling, singing...*]

SEAGOON. This must be terribly boring for the listeners.

BLOODNOK. I know, I know, but what can one do in a lift? (Milligan, “Internal Mountain” 17)

When all is said and done, the entire trip takes up one minute and eleven seconds of air time (“Internal Mountain” recording 26:02-27:14). The broadcast recording of the sequence also contains a full ten seconds during which the only sound heard is the whine of the elevator’s motor (“Internal Mountain” recording 26:15-26:25).

9. Sounds and Their Effects on Temporality

Sequences like the one just cited illustrate the power of sound effects in *The Goon Show* to generate temporal context. Milligan's *Goon Show* sounds incorporate three characteristic types of time-scale alteration. The first two involve a compression of time which can be heard in the increased or increasing speed of the sound effect in question. Milligan is particularly fond of one specific pre-recorded sound effect to demonstrate improbably quick movement through great distances, motivated principally by fear or cupidity. Referred to in scripts and transcripts as a "whoosh", this stock effect lasts between one-half and three-quarters of a second. When used, for example to whisk Seagoon across the Shanghai dockyards when Grytpype-Thynne says "something that had him at my side – money" (Milligan and Sykes, "China Story"), it conveys both the comedy inherent in such a precipitous exaggeration of speed and the strong emotions motivating it.

In addition to playing entire pre-recorded effects back at an increased rate of speed, *The Goon Show* also compresses time through the progressive speeding up of recorded effects during playback, by altering the speed of either a turntable or a reel-to-reel tape player. This form of acceleration frequently brings with it the side-effect of functioning as a parody of the convention of improbable speed *per se* as a source of comedy. Thus, when Milligan makes a transition from one scene to another in "The Terrible Revenge of Fred Fu-Manchu" by having a horse and cart play for 2.65 seconds at its normal rate, then sped up for a further 4.46 seconds while fading out under narration ("Fred Fu-Manchu" recording, 14:28-14:35), he calls attention to the mechanics behind the effect as well as to the effect itself, passing oblique comment in the process on how

such a simple form of incongruity can reduce writer and audience alike to the level of giggling schoolchildren.

At the other end of the scale, when Milligan chooses to expand apparent or perceived time using sound, he generally refrains from slowing pre-recorded effects down. Instead, he takes single effects or chains of them, and plays them at their normal speed, but for much longer than would seem necessary to delineate a desired action and still keep the story moving along. The suspense created by these deliberate sonic *longeurs* functions both as set-up and payoff within its own self-contained gag structure. Milligan was using this type of drawn-out frustration of audience expectations in the earliest single-adventure episodes of *The Goon Show*: “The Great Bank of England Robbery”, from near the end of the program’s fourth season, features a forty-one second stretch where dialogue gives way to the “Sound of postman singing lightly as he walks, opening pillar box, gathering letters, closing pillar box, and walking off” (Milligan, “Great Bank of England Robbery 1954”) without noticing that Seagoon, Eccles, and Bloodnok are trapped inside the pillar box, much less rescuing them (“Great Bank of England Robbery 1954” recording 13:52-14:33).

What goes on inside that pillar box will not require another postman to open a door on the discussion of the manipulation of spatial frames in *The Goon Show* which forms the chapter that follows this one. The latitude which Milligan grants his simple one-way narrative flow by damming it up and diverting it as often as he does imposes restrictions of its own, which have their parallels in the restrictions imposed on his spatial landscape by his distortions of it. A narrative which is allowed to spread itself freely over time, forming undercurrents and tributaries, each flowing at its own rate, can very easily lose a focal point from which an audience

can gauge its overall progress. Instead, it can appear from the distance of the radio listener to be static, less a moving aural picture than a snapshot of a moment in time during which other moments in time are delineated rather than replicated.

To review then, here is another snapshot—one outlining Milligan’s strategies for distorting time frames and scales in *The Goon Show*. These distortions depend first and foremost upon each episode’s linear narrative framework, which presents events in the sequence in which they are presumed to have occurred. Each scene in a *Goon Show* episode follows not only sequentially, but consequentially, from the one immediately preceding it; the actions in each scene are meant to be understood as the outcomes of actions which have just been enacted, or have been referred to in dialogue or narration.

The narrative framework itself supports a metanarrative superstructure: a *Goon Show* adventure is as much *told* as it is *enacted*. Narration both frames and intrudes upon the action: not only is a separate narratorial function instantiated, in the form of a foregrounded staff announcer, but characters also periodically step outside their roles within the story to deliver narration directly to the audience. Milligan’s use of multiple narrators, however, still constitutes a unified narratorial perspective: each successive voice which offers narration elaborates on, but does not contradict, information supplied by its predecessor.

The overall reliability of *The Goon Show*’s many narrators and the chain of causality implied by its linear approach to narrative form a stable background against which Milligan’s distortions of time occur. Although time moves forward in the telling of each story, it may do so at different rates for different characters. Even when measured by more objective means than individual

experience, time often flows simultaneously at different rates: scenes whose action encompasses weeks, even months, are frequently bracketed by calendar readings which are only days apart.

The Goon Show's format offers the listener a clue that fragmentation and distortion of time frames are a key element of the program. Breaking up the program into five distinct segments through the insertion of two musical interludes first of all serves as a reminder to the listener that the forward motion of time in a *Goon Show* may be subject to disruption. In addition, since the time frame of the interludes is not consistently integrated into that of the story as a whole, the interludes themselves remind the listener of the indeterminacy of time as a concept in Milligan's fictional world.

Further complications to the listener's conception of temporality in *The Goon Show* are created by the stubborn refusal of Milligan's characters to submit to the ravages of time. In the first place, Neddie Seagoon and his cohorts appear immune to the aging process, frozen as each one of them is in a distinct phase of the life-cycle, regardless of how many years may pass during the course of a given episode. Beyond that, they display a marked disregard for the role of time in processes involving physical deterioration, recuperating instantly not only from serious injury, but from death itself.

In *The Goon Show*, time and action can easily become dislocated from one another, rendering it difficult for the listener to gauge how long any activity Milligan sets for his characters is likely to take. Often, an inverse ratio of time-to-task is in force, making nearly impossible tasks easy to accomplish and easy tasks nearly impossible. Confounding this even further is a tendency for the action in *Goon Show* episodes to accelerate and compress as the end of the program's allotted half-hour of air time approaches. Acceleration can also be noted in a number of the aural effects

brought into play by Milligan and *The Goon Show*'s production team. Sped-up sounds are frequently used to indicate time scales under compression, just as slowed-down sounds and extended periods of silence are used to denote time scales expanding.

It is important to note, as a means of bridging the gap between a discussion of Milligan's distortions of time and an investigation of his distortions of space, the relative weight given to words and sound as generators of meaning in *The Goon Show*. Despite its reputation as an exercise in furious noise and "improbable sound effects" (de Rijke 242), *The Goon Show*'s fictional world reveals itself to be one where these sounds take their cue from the spoken word. Even though no perceptual cues in particular are required to indicate the passage of time, Milligan still leans far more heavily on spoken rather than sonically-conceived descriptions of the constant modifications he makes to time's flow. When instituting changes to the spatial landscape, Milligan is even more dependent on the power of the spoken word as "the primary code of radio...since [in the absence of visual feedback] words are required to contextualize all the other codes" (Crisell, *Understanding Radio* 54) used to indicate these changes.

INTERRUPTION 1: MILLIGAN'S LAWS OF TIME

Spike Milligan frequently allowed his own voice to interrupt the flow of a *Goon Show* recording, in order to admit to his audience that what they were hearing was “all rather confusing, really.” Unlike Spike’s confession, this interruption is in the interest of reducing confusion. It is meant to serve as a rough guide to the tendencies which have just been noted in Milligan’s distortion of time in *The Goon Show*. For ease of reference, these tendencies have been given the label “Milligan’s Laws”; this is not, however, meant to imply that they can be tested and proven by rigorous experimental designs. The term “law” is being used in the same way as it is in the folkloric corpus of “Murphy’s Laws”, which denote phenomena (usually disastrous) whose descriptive value comes not from their regularity or predictability, but from their noteworthiness.

In the previous chapter, the following “Milligan’s Laws of Time” have been noted:

-Milligan’s General Law of Narrative Time: Once a *Goon Show* story has begun, narrative time, as with time in the real world, can only move forward. Flashbacks and flash-forwards almost never occur.

-Milligan’s Special Law of Narrative Time: All of this, of course, takes place with the understanding that every episode of *The Goon Show* begins with a narrative flashback to the point in time when the story begins.

-Milligan’s Law of Temporal Fragmentation: Even while time is moving forward, the rate of flow of time within specific frames of reference can vary significantly. The most noticeable

effect of this is that two or more characters may interact in the same scene, while displaying evidence that each one is experiencing the passage of time at a slightly different rate.

-Milligan's Law of Free Association of Anachronisms: This is a corollary to the General Law of Temporal Fragmentation; since time flows at different rates in different frames of reference, frames of references from distant historical eras can overlap with the present day. This allows for the frequent appearance of references and objects from 1950s Britain in *Goon Show* stories set far in the past.

-Milligan's Three Laws of Aging:

1. Unless forced to do so by the requirements of the plot, characters in *The Goon Show* do not age. Regardless of the length of time which passes during a *Goon Show* story, each of its characters will remain at the same age, or stage of the life cycle, from beginning to end.
2. *Goon Show* characters' astonishing rate of recuperation not only grants them immunity from age-related physical deterioration, but also allows them to recover instantaneously from most forms of injury.
3. The ability to instantaneously recover from physical injury means that death is not necessarily a permanent state. Characters can die and return to life, even while passing comment on the fact that they are, for the moment at least, dead.

-Milligan's Law of Task-Related Time: The length of time to accomplish a task, or any phase of a task, tends to vary inversely with the difficulty of the task. The acceleration or deceleration of time is most noticeable when the task (or phase of a task) is nearing completion.

With the task of sorting out Milligan's Laws of Time now completed, the task of describing the distortion of space in *The Goon Show* can now begin. There will be another brief interruption after the upcoming chapter, to provide a thumbnail sketch of Milligan's Laws of Space.

CHAPTER 3

THE ACCORDION STRETCHING IN ALL DIRECTIONS: SPATIAL DISTORTIONS IN *THE GOON SHOW*

1. Setting the Scene: A Few Words on the “Landscape” of Radio Theatre

The previous chapter concluded with the idea that Spike Milligan’s distortions of time and space in *The Goon Show* have a common dependence on the spoken word. It is perhaps not surprising that Milligan’s conceptualizations of time and space are linked in this way, since the representation of space on radio involves a constant and active presentation of scenic elements. In contrast with its live in-person counterpart, where relatively static scenic elements are presented to be actively perceived by the spectator, radio theatre calls for a steady flow of manufactured sounds and spoken cues to remind the listener of existing and changing conditions in the implied scenic landscape. As Frances Gray and Janet Bray point out in their analysis of the subject, “The mind is not a fixed stage waiting to be peopled, a permanent spatial code. A radio play does not exist in space, but in time” (295). Moreover, in the case of *The Goon Show* (not to mention a host of other radio programs), this stipulation is confounded by two additional factors: the presence of a live studio audience who are able to view the cast in everyday dress behind microphones, the studio orchestra, and any special areas set aside on the soundstage for live and pre-recorded sound effects equipment; and the listening audience’s awareness of whatever approximation of these conditions best represents its understanding of the recording process.

Even in the absence of a “site or space of performance into which we direct our gaze” (Stanton 96), the listener imputes elements drawn from his or her array of schemata for organizing the spatial elements of the physical world into the purely conceptual space which defines a form of scenography for radio theatre. The notion that this purely imagined world has

an empirically verifiable analogue is crucial to an understanding of how a radio audience constructs the equivalent of a “stage set” for what it hears: when, for example, Alan Beck chooses to “refer to ‘mise en scène’—the locations, spaces and perspectives created in radio’s sound pictures” (5), his comparison to theatrical praxis is informed by the expectation that radio’s own praxis will draw on ideations of space and perspective already familiar to the listener.

2. Mise en Scène as Mise sans Scène: *The Goon Show* as “Black Box” Theatre for Radio

When writing for *The Goon Show*, Milligan was not working within any specifically-articulated theoretical framework, but the product of his work sets itself in direct opposition to any model of spatial arrangement which has reference to the sense-experience of his audience. In order to establish a conceptual “staging area” which is plausible yet significantly discrepant from everyday experience, Milligan exploits the tendency of the listener to assume “that the represented world, unless otherwise indicated, will obey the logical and physical laws of his own world” (Elam 93), in the absence of information to the contrary. In addition to this, his manner of releasing information concerning the divergence between *The Goon Show*’s world and the world of the everyday sets up a time-lag in the perception of this divergence, and fosters a sense of indeterminacy about the matrix of spatial relationships which constitute and govern this world. To return to the example which concluded the previous chapter, the difficulties encountered by Seagoon, Bloodnok, and Eccles in “The Great Bank of England Robbery” of 1954 go beyond the predicament of being trapped in a pillar box; in fact, they originate in the sheer violation of practicable models of spatial scale that this predicament implies. Milligan forestalls the question of how one full-grown man, let alone three, could wind up stuck in a mailbox by presenting the situation as a *fait accompli*: Bloodnok fails to see Seagoon at first

during a midnight rendez-vous with crime because Seagoon is already “inside the pillar box” (Milligan, “Great Bank of England Robbery 1954”). Seagoon’s incontestably self-sufficient answer to the question of how he managed to enter the pillar box at all is that he is “in a brown paper parcel” (Milligan, “Great Bank of England Robbery 1954”). The pillar box’s internal dimensions are soon put to a further test by the entry of Eccles, who, even though armed with a key, takes less time to get himself locked in than it takes to read this description of it (“Great Bank of England Robbery 1954” recording 10:13-10:21). The idea that a pillar box could possess internal dimensions of hitherto-unimagined vastness is given still more emphasis by the appearance inside it, first of an unnamed woman who suggestively greets Eccles with the words “hello sailor” (Milligan, “Great Bank of England Robbery 1954”), then of Bloodnok. The accident which traps Bloodnok inside the pillar box illustrates, but does not explain, a potential method for gaining entry to such a structure: trying to pull Seagoon and Eccles out using a rope he has thrown through the mail slot, he is instead pulled in himself, to the sound of an inhaled bilabial fricative, followed by a cork popping and two sharp thuds (“Great Bank of England Robbery 1954” recording 13:10-13:15).

3. Contents Not Necessarily to Scale: The Variability of Container Capacity in *The Goon*

Show

The case study of man-versus-postal-system just referred to is one of a host of similar instances in the *Goon Show* corpus which make it clear that, despite Crisell’s assertion that “Radio allows the Goons to assume Protean form” (*Understanding Radio* 172), Milligan’s characters cannot be assumed to have undergone the significant changes of size which he imagines to be the necessary condition of their entering a space presumed too small to hold

them. Rather, containers should be seen as defining two spaces—one formed by the boundaries of the container itself as seen from the outside, the other a space whose actual dimensions are indeterminate until the container is entered. *The Goon Show*'s tendency to reconfigure containers from within depends upon a realignment of categorization within the perceptual landscape. Instead of being grouped based on their position in space, objects are temporarily reassigned to one of two categories: containers and objects to be contained. By disregarding any distinctions within these categories based on size, a simplified view of location based on function is brought into force: anything classed as a “container” can perforce hold anything classed as an “object to be contained.”

When Milligan designates an object as a container, it is therefore safe to assume that he is doing so for the express purpose of testing an audience's suspension of disbelief regarding its capacity. Even something as roomy as a passenger airliner (albeit one of 1930s vintage) is no match for the scope of his imagination:

Seagoon. Yes. The weight of our baggage became too much. In a moment of desperation we ditched the following vital equipment; eighteen hundred weight of rusty iron piping with fittings...

Milligan. Twenty four lead budgerigar perches...

Bloodnok. One long thin object with no fixed abode...

Seagoon. One bronze bicycle with cement parachute ejector seat...

Milligan. One ...(Singing) Ooooooo ooooooo oooooooo!

Bloodnok. One bus...

Lalkaka. Thirty six cardboard replicas of Nelson's Column from the inside....

Bloodnok. One rubber Mosque with detachable beard. (Milligan, “Shangri-La Again”)

Even assuming that the replicas of the interior of Nelson’s Column are less than full-scale, and that the rubber mosque can be bent to fit into an available corner, the bus alone would have strained the ability of the aircraft to take off—not to mention potentially obviating it as a means of transport.

The overall schema of container variability, however, functions as a variable-size container in its own right by accommodating a significant conceptual anomaly. The variability of a container’s capacity in *The Goon Show* appears to obtain only when materials are placed inside the container, or taken out of it. If the container itself is removed or opened from the outside, its contents may still retain the shape of the container, regardless of what their actual physical properties dictate they should do. This amendment to the laws of physics is given free rein throughout a 1955 episode of *The Goon Show* entitled “The White Box of Great Bardfield”. Cozened into transporting “one hundred tons of snow to the Sudan” (Milligan and Sykes, “White Box” 7) in a cardboard box, Seagoon is horrified to find that “The box is full of water” (Milligan and Sykes, “White Box” 13) when he opens it. In all other respects, however, his cargo remains intact: it has not soaked through the cardboard or seeped away through crevices in the box, as one might expect. Carrying on with what is now a box-load of water, Seagoon suffers a further reversal of fortune, thanks to the heat of the Sahara Desert. “Only steam” (Milligan and Sykes, “White Box” 16) remains when the box is opened a second time.

Both of these contretemps immediately beg the question of whether the box was pre-treated to make all this possible. It is just about plausible that a sufficiently waterproofed and hermetically-sealed cardboard box could be made to retain any quantity of snow, water, and

even steam over long distances. An undertaking like this, which would take ridiculous lengths to avoid finding more apt material for the container in the first place, is worthy of the plot of an entire *Goon Show* in itself. However, part of the humour behind Seagoon's escalating misfortune lies in the fact that there is no evidence in the script that any such preparations were undertaken. Instead, the contents of the box have stayed put, waiting to be discovered through two successive changes in their state of matter, simply because it has not occurred to anyone that they could go anywhere else.

4. "My Lord, a piece of junk being found on the King's Highway, it is declared treasure trove"¹⁰: The Appearance of Objects Exactly When, and Exactly Where, They Are Needed

A spatial framework which allows for a substance to remain in the same state of matter regardless of the prevailing conditions of its immediate environment would seem to invest space with a number of unusual, if not singular, qualities. One of these qualities can best be described as a porosity which calls into question the entire concept of object permanence in *The Goon Show*'s fictional world. As far as Milligan is concerned, the question of whether an object exists is immaterial in two senses of the word. Nothing in Milligan's world has to be anywhere in particular, or even *be* anything in particular, unless called into being for a specific purpose. Frances Gray is quite correct in stating that "Objects appear when needed for a quick laugh" (qtd. in Crisell, *Understanding Radio* 170) in *The Goon Show*, but the significance of their spontaneous appearance goes beyond their utilitarian function as generators of simple comedic effects. Indeed, the full impact of an object's sudden and unheralded appearance in a *Goon Show*

¹⁰ This statement, made in court during the 1957 episode "The Junk Affair", sets a *Goon Show* legal precedent by establishing the inherent value of all found objects, as well as their inherent usefulness. The fact that the episode never specifies what exactly the piece of junk *is* also goes a long way towards establishing the inherent equality of the value and usefulness of found objects (Milligan and Stephens, "Junk Affair").

storyline depends not so much on the unexpectedness of the appearance as the incongruity and inappropriateness of the location in which the object appears.

A quick comparison of three instances of the spontaneous appearance of objects illustrates the differences between Gray's characterization and the actual mechanics of Milligan's method. In "The Africa Ship Canal," Grytpype-Thynne has Moriarty set out a fire bucket to catch a falling Neddie Seagoon (Milligan and Stephens, "Africa Ship Canal" 14). Although the idea of a fire bucket lying around handy out of doors—and at the exact spot in the entire continent of Africa where it is needed—is a little odd, it violates no concepts of relative scale. Similarly, Seagoon menacing Grytpype-Thynne in "The Junk Affair" by threatening to "set this wardrobe on you" (Milligan and Stephens, "Junk Affair") may strike the listener as a highly idiosyncratic understanding of the distinction between pieces of furniture and guard dogs, nothing in the dialogue before that line indicated that a wardrobe was *not* standing by, poised to attack, somewhere "on the pavement"¹¹ (Milligan and Stephens, "Junk Affair") at the never-actually-specified locale of the scene in question. Notwithstanding the strangeness of the previous two examples, occurrences such as the one which begins the 1959 episode "The Sahara Desert Statue" come closer to expressing the full implications of Milligan's conceptualization of space as a highly permeable and not necessarily discrete dimension. Unwrapping a "brown paper parcel", the show's cast discovers "a life-sized Goon Show in imitation plastic", complete with "a set of spare glass jokes", one of which obligingly crashes to the studio floor (Milligan, "Sahara Desert Statue"). In other words, the ephemerality of an entire event has become fully concretized, and a number of smaller events associated with it have been detached from it and

¹¹ In North American English, this would be rendered "on the sidewalk".

duplicated, in case their counterparts malfunction and need to be replaced. Not only that, but this event, whose spatial scope must be thought of as encompassing the whole of the recording studio, including the soundstage, auditorium, and control booth, has been enclosed in a package of sufficiently manageable size for its unwieldiness not to become a source of comment.

5. The Conundrum of Self-Duplication and Rapid Spatial Displacement, or, Being in Two Places at Once Is Easier When You Don't Know It Can't Be Done

The notion that objects essential to the advancement of plot and story can be concretized on demand, in spite of the impossibility of their existing within a given space as previously conceptualized, gives rise to an interesting chain of corollaries. If something that cannot or should not be somewhere happens to be in that very place, then it can just as easily be somewhere else at the same time. It also follows, then, that the ability to be in two places at once can be ascribed not just to objects, but to people as well. Eccles takes a particular, almost perverse joy in availing himself of this faculty. In the pillar box where we left him looking for Seagoon, Eccles not only has a heated dispute with his own echo on the subject of who is “the real Eccles”, but discovers that the echo has a sufficient physical presence to warrant hand-to-hand combat as a means of settling the issue (“Great Bank of England Robbery 1954” recording 10:37-11:31). At other times during *Goon Show* adventures, Eccles is heard forming squad-fours all by himself (Milligan, *Book* 86), and bedeviling Bloodnok with a relentlessly wassailing one-man choir (“String Robberies” recording, 14:24-16:25).

Closely related to the concept of being in two (or more) places at once is the concept of disappearing from one place and reappearing almost instantly in another one far away. Admittedly, this is where the lines between spatial and temporal frames begins to blur, since this

involves a violation of all conventional notions of the limitations of the speed of travel by three-dimensional bodies through distances of any size. The “whoosh” sound effect referred to in the previous chapter on time distortion in *the Goon Show* is a frequent auditory cue that highly improbable instantaneous spatial displacement is taking place:

GRAMS. WHOOSH

FX. DOOR SLAMS

COLONEL JIM. I say stop him before he gets to the bus stop.

GRAMS. WHOOSH

(pause).

FX. DOOR OPENS

(struggle)

SEAGOON. (over above) Let me go, I’m a professional coward I tell you I
don’t want to go to war.

JYMPTON. I caught him in Glasgow sir [...]. (Milligan, “The Spy”)

Rapid spatial displacement can happen towards as well as away from the current frame of reference. Sometimes, this brings unexpected results:

MORIARTY. Here, Ned, put this bomb in their E flat organ pipe.

SEAGOON. I’m too fat to get in that.

MORIARTY. Let me see now, who’s thin enough...Mmm—

BLUEBOTTLE. Can I go home now, capatain, I got my...

SEAGOON. Yes you...

GRAMS. WHOOSH AWAY.

BLUEBOTTLE. (*miles away*) Goodbye.

SEAGOON. Bluebottle, come down off that Mount Everest.

BLUEBOTTLE. (*miles off-affrighted*) No, no, you will dead me – ‘blange’ you will go, and I will be blanged.

SEAGOON. Here’s a picture of Sabrina.

GRAMS. WHOOSH.

BLOODNOK. Where where??? (Milligan, *Scripts* 149)

Further complications arise from this example. First of all, the Everest that Bluebottle has scaled may not be the original, but an incredible simulation which, obeying Milligan’s principle of spontaneous object appearance, hove into view when the occasion demanded. However, given that Seagoon is all the while at the foot of this highly mobile Himalayan mountain, Bluebottle’s post-ascent position is several miles away, and presumably well out of earshot. In spite of this, Seagoon and Bluebottle are still quite able to carry on a conversation with each other (“The Mighty Wurlitzer” recording, 24:51-25:03). What is in force in this instance, as is so often the case in *The Goon Show*, is a spatial frame which expands with reference to one activity but remains constant with reference to another. For the purposes of avoiding perceived danger, Bluebottle needs to be a long way away, and so can climb a mountain as easily as he might shinny up a stepladder; however, in order to keep talking to Seagoon, and thus remain part of the action of the episode, he has to be close at hand. Meanwhile, Bloodnok, who has not been heard

from in just over eight minutes of airtime (“The Mighty Wurlitzer” recording, 16:44 and 25:04), and can be assumed to be nowhere near the scene of the action (and certainly out of earshot), is conjured up out of the ether by the mere mention of a pin-up of a contemporary “sweater girl”. The ability to be in two places at once, in Milligan’s world at least, therefore appears to involve at least as many conceptual issues as purely physical ones.

Milligan allows his spatial frame to stretch far beyond the bounds of the example just provided, while keeping it intact as far as discourse between his characters is concerned.

“African Incident,” from 1957, features this exchange:

ECCLES. (Sings rubbish) I can’t stand this singing. I wish I’d escaped with

Lieutenant Seagoon. I wonder if he got back to the base.

SEAGOON. Yes I did.

ECCLES. Oh. Where are you den?

SEAGOON. I’m a mere six hundred miles away.

ECCLES. Oh goodie. I won’t tell anybody.

BLOODNOK. Seagoon you fool. Stop talking to that man six hundred miles away. (Milligan and Stephens, “African Incident”)

Telecommunications, of course, makes a mockery of distances far greater than this in order to facilitate conversation: Milligan could have just as easily chosen to have workmen trek across Africa to install a telephone, as he did for a 1956 episode entitled “The Telephone”. His decision not to do so was conditioned by the focus, and the needs, of the situation. Seagoon’s and Milligan’s needs at that moment were one and the same: to answer Eccles’ question, and in so doing supply the latest development in the plot. The need to convey this information, as well as

the punchline to a joke, as quickly and with as few distractions as possible meant that both the effort of installing a telephone (or telegraph), and laying six hundred miles of cable so that it would work, were superfluous.

All of the examples just cited share a common trait which can be found in operation time and again throughout the *Goon Show* corpus. In order to accept the situation as a set of given circumstances which operates as a context of normalcy within which incongruities can be introduced to create humour, the listener must process the playing space implied by Milligan as one comprising distances and scales which extend in scope beyond those which can actually be encompassed with human perceptual fields. As well, the listener must conceptualize space in a way that allows several of these scales to be in operation simultaneously, often in competition with one another.

6. Perceptual Fields Forever: Milligan's Use of Simultaneous Multiple Perspectives within the Same Scene

6a. The Perception of Doors

The Goon Show's organization of space into multiple frames of reference with incompatible scales takes on a special set of meanings when those frames are used to separate and define "inside" and "outside". Milligan's use of doors displays a distinct lack of faith in the efficacy of buildings and the rooms therein as either containers or barriers. As dividers between "inside" and "outside", doors in *The Goon Show's* fictional world have all the stability and permanence of beaded curtains: that is how Goon characters understand them to function, at any rate:

MINNIE. How did you get into our blung--bungalow?

SEAGOON. Through the bead curtain.

MINNIE. We haven't got any.

SEAGOON. I carry my own. (Milligan and Sykes, "The Secret Escritoire")

To rearrange the words of William Blake a little, the perception of doors reveals things to be as they are in Goonland, infinite. Milligan's writing frequently takes advantage of radio's lack of early sensory cues to indicate the impending presence of a door, instinctively creating meta-theatrical moments such as the following:

FX. *[Knocks on door]*

[SEAGOON]. Come in.

FX. *[Knocks on door]*

[SEAGOON]. Come in!

[BLOODNOK]. It's you that's knocking!

[SEAGOON]. Oh, then I'll come in! (Milligan and Sykes, "Marie Celeste" 4)

The line of reasoning that can be inferred from Milligan's joke in this particular case appears to be that, if the presence of door can only be announced at the last possible moment by someone knocking on a door, then the positioning of people in relationship to that door need not be announced any earlier, and can even be announced later if need be. An additional aspect of this joke's construction is a reminder that a number of the comic effects in the fictional world of *The Goon Show* depend on two mutually exclusive forms of implied visual perspective. For the listener, space is meant to have something resembling the depth of field and three-dimensionality of the non-fictional "real" world; for *Goon Show* characters, space can be made two-dimensional

by any given sensory cue that has apparent relevance to the situation at hand. A knock on a door certainly indicates that a door exists: it does not in and of itself indicate that the door is part of any greater structure, or functions as an entranceway at all. It may, for all Seagoon and Major Bloodnok are concerned, be a prop door in a free-standing frame, which has been set down any old place for reasons best known to whoever set it there.

Milligan's choice to use doors as self-sufficient barriers across an implied two-dimensional perceptual field is the product of active visualization rather than a radio scriptwriter's unconscious omission of extraneous detail. In his play *The Bedsitting Room*, Milligan gave physical form to the mental gymnastics that *Goon Show* characters' uncertainty with doors put radio audiences through:

Enter PONTIUS KAK pushing a door. The door is portable and on wheels [...]

He rings the bell on the door. Door opens. [...]

MATE. Yers?

KAK. Is this Number 29 Cul-de-Sac Place?

MATE. No, mate, that's next door.

MATE closes door. KAK wheels door along to the right, leaving MATE standing like an idiot... (Milligan and Antrobus 42)

This joke has an antecedent in a 1955 episode of *The Goon Show* entitled "The International Christmas Pudding". The absence of visual cues gives the all-too-necessary explanation of the situation an extra layer of surrealism:

FX. Knocking.

SEAGOON. Heavens, it's two men carrying a door. Come in. (Milligan,
"Christmas Pudding")

Milligan is also not above blurring the distinctions between doors and other means of inflicting one's presence on a space, if it means he can inflict a little disorientation in the name of humour on his audience:

FX. KNOCKING AT DOOR.

SEAGOON. Eccles for heaven's sake answer that phone.

FX. DOOR OPENED WITH MUCH RATTLING OF DOOR KNOB.

ECCLES. Hulllooo.

[...]

[GRYTPYPE-THYNNE]. (distort) Doctor Seagoon?

ECCLES. (quietly) It's for you.

SEAGOON. Give it to me.

[...]

SEAGOON. Hullo, hullo?

FX. RATTLE.

SEAGOON. Hullo, ullo, ullo?

FX. RATTLE.

SEAGOON. Curse! He's hung up.

FX. DOOR SLAMMED. (Milligan and Stephens, "The Choking Horror")

As well as bringing the concepts of spontaneous object substitution and the indeterminacy of doors as spatial dividers into play, this sequence constitutes an elaborate and implied play on

words. By deliberately confounding two vastly different concepts of “calling on someone”, Milligan also gives an indication of the power of the telephone to act as a conceptual stand-in for a door, and thus to have the same ability as a door to establish and segment spatial frames of reference.

6b. Getting That Long-Distance Feeling—Telephones as Disruptors of Spatial Integrity

Milligan makes the parallel between telephones and doors even more explicit in the conclusion of the sequence just referred to:

FX. RING OF TELEPHONE.

SEAGOON. Come in.

FX. PHONE BEING GRABBED OFF HANDSET.

MORIARTY. Ah, now then what’s this we hear about hair? (Milligan and Stephens, “The Choking Horror”)

In the world of *The Goon Show*, the scope of the telephone to carry sound as an indicator of a physical presence is extended to encompass the power to carry a physical presence itself. For Milligan’s narrative purposes, anything that can be heard over the telephone can travel by telephone as well. The beginning of the routine which follows, from 1954’s “The Kipperd Herring Gang”, is an old chestnut familiar to viewers of animated cartoons, centring on the idea that a gun fired into the mouthpiece of one telephone will send a bullet directly through to the earpiece at the other end of the conversation. Milligan, however, pays the gag off in a fashion no cartoon director had thought of attempting:

OPERATOR. Well there’s a call for you, go ahead, you’re through dear...

GUNMAN. Hello!?

SEAGOON. Yes?

GUNMAN. Is that Inspector Seagoon?

[...]

GUNMAN. Hands up! [...] I'm gonna kill you!

SEAGOON. You do and I'll, I, I'll reverse the charges.

OPERATOR. Hello, have you two finished your...

[...]

FX. *[Bang bang bang]*

OPERATOR. Owww!

SEAGOON. Fool! You shot the operator!

GUNMAN. Right! And now I'll get you, take that!

FX. *[Phone being slammed down]*

GUNMAN. Oh me finger!

SEAGOON. Before he could shoot again, I hung up. (Milligan, "The Kipperd Herring Gang" 6-8)

The logic which generates the sequence's conclusion is inescapable, given its initial premise. If picking up the phone makes something appear "here" as well as "there", hanging it up makes it go back there, and stay there.

6c. The Use of Pre-Recorded Voices and Effects to Establish Additional Spatial Frames

For Milligan, however, “here” and “there” is not a simple binary distinction: as a radio program, *The Goon Show* enjoys a physical presence which is understood by its audience to be concurrently occupying multiple, and distinct, locations. On its most basic level, it is quite evidently the product of events which were recorded at a specific time in a specific soundstage environment, which are meant to represent occurrences reported to have taken place elsewhere. Beyond that, there is the clear and present fact that for the purposes of the listener, all of this occurs as an event within the listener’s immediate physical surroundings, as the program is being broadcast or replayed from a recording. Milligan often toys with the concept that his show is simultaneously taking place “right here”, in some other “real” locale, and in any number of fictional locales, by stretching the capacities of sound recording and reproduction techniques. In doing so, Milligan nests spatial frames within one another. Pre-recorded snippets of dialogue are often embedded within “live” in-studio passages of dialogue by characters, as with the following example from 1958’s “The Spon Plague”:

MORIARTY. Owwww, we’re ruined. R-U-I-N-E-D, pronounced –

GRAMS: *Moriarty (Pre-Recorded) Saying ‘Ruinedddddddd’* (Milligan, *Book* 117)

Milligan frequently extends this technique to include embedding of pre-recorded sound effects within the apparent spatial frames created by other pre-recorded sound effects, relentlessly toying with the audience’s expectations concerning which of the effects were meant to be processed as legitimate parts of a scene, and which were meant to be understood as mere

recordings. As well as leaving the listener temporarily befuddled, this can lead to a form of recursion which is the aural equivalent of a drawing by M.C. Escher, as demonstrated by the following rapid-fire passage from “Shangri-La Again”:

BLOODNOK. [...] Shhh! There’s someone outside the window. Look-out!

GRAMS. Pane of glass smashing.

SEAGOON. What is it?

BLOODNOK. It’s a gramophone record.

SEAGOON. Quick, put it on.

BLOODNOK. Right!

GRAMS. (Recording [Slightly faster]) Pane of glass smashing.

SEAGOON. What is it?

BLOODNOK. It’s a gramophone record. (Milligan, “Shangri-La Again”)

This sequence of dialogue and effects repeats itself four more times, sped up on each repeat, and lasting a grand total of thirty seconds (“Shangri-La Again” recording 5:46-6:16). The method behind this madness is soon thereafter revealed to be “a Japanese mirror trick” (Milligan, “Shangri-La Again”), which somehow alters perception across the normally-constituted boundaries between visual and aural perception.

Trickery with mirrors offers a useful metaphor for grasping an additional concept which is crucial to an understanding of how a multiplicity of spatial perspectives can create an integrated perceptual landscape in *The Goon Show*. Regardless of how they interlock with or contradict one another, all spatial frames of reference in *The Goon Show*’s fictional world, like the mirrors in a funhouse or a magician’s act, are essentially static. The sound recording technology at the heart

of every *Goon Show* episode is not used to manufacture changes in the relationships between characters and landmarks in the scenic background implied either through sound effects or dialogue. Although technical facilities existed for multiple microphone set-ups mixed at different relative levels to create a filmic montage of sonic “close-ups” “long shots”, “pans” and “zooms”, *The Goon Show* instead chose to move its actors and leave its lone vocal recording microphone stationary. This practice gave the program scope “to create remarkably vivid impressions of their imaginary locales” (Wilmot and Grafton 49), without recourse to more sophisticated and time-consuming methods of mediatization.

7. All the World’s a Soundstage: The Recording Studio as Determinant of Spatial Frameworks

The use of a static frame of reference for recording imposes a single, static frame of reference on both *The Goon Show*’s live in-studio audience and its listeners. Because this perspective remains largely independent from the perspective of any individual character in the story, the audience is granted an overview from which it can construct its own coherent picture of the story’s setting at any given time. This in turn gives the audience a basis from which to judge the congruity of any newly-introduced element with the rest of the previously-constituted fictional world. Having been prepared to receive such elements as components in the construction of a comic effect, the audience reads the incongruities in perspective as part of a theatricalized mode of staging intended to fashion an epic structure to induce detachment, rather than as inconsistency or sloppiness on the part of the scriptwriter. Thus, even while events are taking place within one spatial framework, another framework with a conflicting set of parameters can be inserted into the first one without any alteration of the overall narratorial point of view.

The multilayered role played by *The Goon Show*'s announcer Wallace Greenslade in a 1954 episode entitled "The Spanish Suitcase" is a study in this kind of spatial and temporal kaleidoscoping at its most recursively byzantine. Greenslade's first appearance is as himself, a BBC staff announcer addressing the studio and home audiences as the "Ladies and Gentlemen" they no doubt are (Milligan and Sykes, "The Spanish Suitcase" 2). No sooner have The Goons interrupted his announcement to announce that their story takes place in "the summer of 1902... in Madrid" than Greenslade reappears in the scene itself, stating that "My name is Wallace Greenslade, I was in Spain at the time" (The Spanish Suitcase" recording, 3:00-3:04). At this point, it is still an open question whether he should be understood to be in the Madrid of Alfonso XIII's reign, or still in the studio in London in 1954.

The question is closed before long, as Greenslade begins to take an active role as a semi-embedded narrator, observing events from within the scene itself, rather than from his usual lofty perch behind a studio microphone: "I watched the hurrying figure of Moriarty with my binoculars as he sped towards the Congress De Los Dipotalos. There he was met by a man heavily disguised as Ned Seagoon" (Milligan and Sykes, "The Spanish Suitcase" 11). Shortly thereafter, with the words "Let us now re-cap", Greenslade re-ascends to his accustomed perch long enough to remind the audience of the key events in the story so far, as well as "reminding listeners to post early for Christmas" (Milligan and Sykes, "The Spanish Suitcase" 12-13). Back in 1902 Madrid, and being referred to by Bloodnok as "Mr. Greenslade the porter" at the hotel around which the story's action revolves, Greenslade narrates himself back into the story while "sitting outside the Hotel Fred reading the Radio Times" (Milligan and Sykes, "The Spanish Suitcase" 15), which he has presumably brought with him from 1954 London. From there on in, Greenslade stays with the story as a character, until its bitter end, "93 years" (Milligan and

Sykes, “The Spanish Suitcase” 20) later. No reference is made to the fact that the end of the story would therefore be in 1995—thirty-nine years in the future, from the audience’s perspective¹².

The addition of rotating time frames to the constantly-shifting spatial perspectives in “The Spanish Suitcase” makes a near-Herculean challenge out of the job of ascertaining how many places and times Wallace Greenslade, or anyone else, may be able to occupy at once in any given *Goon Show* episode. It also calls to mind a later use of frames-within-frames by Milligan in *The Bedsitting Room*:

...a large television set on legs is moved onstage. Inside it are three men...They are in the set visible from chest up, as in a medium long shot. Therefore they are dressed in evening dress from the waist up, below the screen level they are still in underwear.
(Milligan and Antrobus 47)

The three men in the television then proceed to present the BBC Ten O’Clock News, complete with a feature report and an end-of-transmission sign-off. At no time during this is any attempt made to clarify whether this is a staged representation of a broadcast coming from a distant studio (or studios), or whether the oversized TV set goes door-to-door giving nightly news reports. A reasonable educated guess is that the audience is free to imagine that both scenarios run concurrently, that each is valid within its own frame of reference, and that these frames overlap one another.

¹² Neither is any reference made to the possibility that the upheaval caused by the Spanish Civil War may have affected the outcome of the episode’s narrative. The Spain of 1995 in “The Spanish Suitcase” is, to all intents and purposes, the Spain of 1902 (as imagined by Milligan) transposed ninety-three years into the future.

There is an irony in Milligan's continual use of overlapping and competing frames of spatial reference when spatial conventions derived either from live theatre or the broadcast media dictate one or more of the frames involved. Although Milligan habitually calls attention to *The Goon Show's* status as a radio program, and makes winking references to some of the technologies used in its creation, he never does so in a way that questions the program's status as a live performance, recorded for posterity, but otherwise unmediated. Given that *The Goon Show* was recorded on tape for broadcast from its fourth series on, it seems strange that Milligan never chose to exploit the weaknesses of this particular technology in the name of humour. Anyone who has ever worked with reel-to-reel audio tape knows that its propensity for permanently distorting (or destroying) sound by becoming scratched, distressed, demagnetized, stretched or broken brings as many comic possibilities as it causes headaches.

Milligan's unwillingness to exploit the comic potential of audio tape may be as much as anything the result of his having relatively little to do with the process of editing tape after a recording, busy as he was with the preparation of scripts for upcoming shows. His use of gramophone records as portals to alternate (and competing) realities certainly makes it plausible to suggest that he would have used tape in the same way, had he been more familiar with it at the time. An exchange of roughly twenty lines (plus effects) in 1957's "The Missing Boa Constrictor" displays Milligan's full range of reality bending through the judicious use of grooved black vinyl. Bloodnok begins it by rejecting the assertion that a record was made by Frederic Chopin, on the simple grounds that since "Chopin's dead. It can't be him" (Milligan and Stephens, "Boa Constrictor"), but not on the more reasonable grounds that Chopin died before the invention of the phonograph. Seagoon's solution to this case of identity is to "put the record on and ask him" (Milligan and Stephens, "Boa Constrictor"), stopping the pre-recorded

music as if it were being played live on a bandstand. The soi-disant Chopin produces his *bona fides*, or at least tells Seagoon where to find them, by stating that “my birth certificate...is on the other side” (Milligan and Stephens, “Boa Constrictor”) of the record, which indeed it is. At no time does anyone call into question the double anachronism that the music Chopin is playing is “bad dance hall jazz”, and that the record has earlier been referred to as “a rare recording of Grieg’s A minor piano concerto” (Milligan and Stephens, “Boa Constrictor”). It would have to be rare indeed, since Chopin died when Grieg was six years old, likely well before the concerto in question existed even in first-draft form.

8. When Mental Maps Suffer Breakdowns: Around the World (and back again) with *The Goon Show*

One of the discrepancies of scale which drives many a *Goon Show* plot involves the size of the world itself. The Goon projection of the world map employs a double distortion that would put Mercator to shame. In the first place, the entire world can, whenever necessary, be encompassed within the confines of Great Britain, or when more convenient, within the confines of the city of London. This extreme skewing of perspective gives rise to a secondary effect which shrinks all geographical locations in direct proportion to their distance from London.

Milligan shows a particular propensity for using this world-view to change the size of Africa to suit his current narrative purposes. In the 1956 episode “The Telephone”, Henry Crun lives at “17A, Africa” (Milligan and Stephens, “The Telephone”), a street address which can be reached by going “down the Finchley Road” (Milligan and Stephens, “The Telephone”) through London’s East End. Seagoon’s first attempt to locate Crun lead him to the wrong address, and the discovery that addresses in Africa with “Odd numbers are right over on the other side” of the

continent (Milligan and Stephens, “The Telephone”). The spatial scale undergoes a further significant distortion in this episode. Although Crun’s house at “17A, Africa” is on the “Finchley telephone exchange” (Milligan and Stephens, “The Telephone”), there are long distances involved in laying the local line to connect it to the London GPO telephone system. Seagoon’s assistant lineman, Willium, complains that the job has led him into an endless routine of commuting: “as soon as I gets back I has to turn ‘round and cycle back here in the morning” (Milligan and Stephens, “The Telephone”). Milligan’s sense of distances varies greatly throughout this episode: even with the detour to the even-numbered side of Africa, the “forty-eight thousand miles of cable” (Milligan and Stephens, “The Telephone”) used to go from London to a house which turns out to be closer to the Sahara Desert than the heart of the continent (Milligan and Stephens, “The Telephone”) would wrap roughly twice around the earth’s circumference, and suggests a route which, at best, is circuitous and inefficient.

The ability to make local telephone calls to London is far from the only municipal service which Milligan extends to far-flung parts of the world. The 1959 episode “Tales of Men’s Shirts” sees Seagoon and his group escaping from a German prisoner-of-war camp thanks to the appearance of Willium, who in this episode is working for the London sanitation department and “does the sewers” (Milligan, *Book* 131) on a route which apparently extends under the North Sea. 1955’s “Foiled by President Fred” shows London’s service infrastructure to have reached clear across the Atlantic, thanks to the gas board of the suburb of South Balham, which has the presidential residence at “Casa Rosa, Avenida Varest, Buenos Aires, Argentina” on its list of delinquent accounts (Milligan, *Scripts* 117).

On the face of it, there is a certain naïve chauvinism, even imperialism, behind a world-view which underpins the city of London with infinitely-spreading catacombs of subway tunnels and sewer mains, while allowing a handful of men to “surround Africa” (Milligan, “Christmas Pudding”) when the need arises. There is a little more to it than that, however. Milligan’s frequent reversals can also be seen to be the product of personal experiences which were common to young men of his generation. Although military service in World War Two had taken Milligan to North Africa, then to Italy, he would hardly have been in charge of either his itineraries or his destinations. As an enlisted man, he was likely to have known neither where he was going, nor when he was going there, until he received the order to pack up and go. Furthermore, while travelling long distances to unknown locales without much in the way of explanation might have been new to many of his fellow soldiers, for Milligan it was merely a continuation of a well-established way of living. By the age of fifteen, he had been taken around the Cape of Good Hope five times on the long sea journey between India and Britain. Each time, he was accompanied by at least one of his parents, who were responsible for the travel arrangements. Likewise, after the war, the details of his tours around Europe with variety acts were planned by others for him. Despite his numerous sojourns abroad, it is well within the realm of possibility that the Spike Milligan who began work on *The Goon Show* in 1951 saw himself less as a seasoned world traveler than as a well-travelled piece of luggage.

Milligan’s experience as a traveler, combined with his inexperience as a travel planner, led him to set great store in the ability of boats to go anywhere with relative ease:

[CRUN]. With the closing of the canal our ships have been forced to travel
around the Cape.

POLITICIAN. Ahhhhhh, just a minute, couldn't they travel overland?

[CRUN]. Yes, we've tried that, but it ruins the bottoms of the ships! (Milligan and Stephens, "Africa Ship Canal" 2)

The issue at hand in the above exchange had nothing to do with whether such a thing could or should be attempted, or even if it had been. It was simply a question of how much wear and tear might be acceptable under the circumstances. The distances involved in detouring around the Suez via an overland route seem not to have been a consideration, either for the speakers or the man who created them. Another thing Milligan's travels may have given him, therefore, was an unwarranted confidence in his knowledge of world geography, as well as an apparent disdain for consulting maps. *The Goon Show* takes place in a world where, at any given time, the most direct route "to make your way to Hungary" is "via Budapest" (Milligan, "Whistling Spy"), thus requiring the traveler to go deep into the heart of the country as a prerequisite to entering it in the first place. For those who prefer entering countries from the outside, the quickest way to get to Guatemala from England is to "book a ticket to South America" (Milligan, *Scripts* 63), some 1500 miles at least from Guatemala's actual location. At journey's end, the traveler (in this case as in most others, Neddie Seagoon) will arrive at "the Port of Guatemala" (Milligan, *Scripts* 65), which, since the events which immediately follow his arrival take place at the British Embassy, is quite probably meant to be Guatemala's distinctly landlocked capital Guatemala City. On the other side of this world (presumably) there can also be a "Singapore-China frontier" (Milligan, "Lost Emperor"), replacing the current border between Singapore and Malaysia.

With geography as jumbled as it often is in their world, it is small wonder that *Goon Show* characters often resort to verifying distances the hard way:

SEAGOON. Kowloon? That's six hundred miles from here.

BLOODNOK. Is it?

GRAMS. FOOTSTEPS RUNNING AWAY INTO THE DISTANCE, SILENCE,
FOOTSTEPS RUNNING BACK TOWARDS MICROPHONE.

SEAGOON. (panting) Yes. It's exactly six hundred miles.

BLOODNOK. That's too far to travel... (Milligan and Sykes, "China Story")

Milligan's naïve sense of geography does more than make one wish that the BBC had placed a copy of an up-to-date world atlas at his disposal. It also delineates a surprisingly stable and consistent set of boundaries for his fictional world. *The Goon Show* places London not so much in the centre of the universe as in the foreground of a picture plane with highly forced perspective, analogous to this one:



Milligan's mental map of the world, like Saul Steinberg's famous *New Yorker* magazine cover, has a boundary beyond which the degree of detail radically decreases; where Steinberg used the Hudson River, Milligan employs the English coastline to divide the world into two spaces which can be broadly conceptualized as "Home" and "Everywhere Else". Similar to Alfred Jarry's use of portable signs as the sole delineating scenic elements between various countries in *Ubu Roi*, Milligan effectively stages the entire world within a single performance space, making all locales equally accessible from each other. In this world, the distance between "here" and "not here" is never any greater than the word "not". Milligan's solution is a Gordian feat of word-play: remove the "not", and you are "here"...wherever "here" happens to be. Seen from this perspective (or lack thereof) *The Goon Show*'s fictional world map reveals itself as "not geographical but graphic in nature" (Leslie 19, qtd. in Telotte 80). It occupies a firmament with no stable, permanent existence beyond the moment of its creation and, in its essence, is "a world of flatness" (Leslie 19, qtd. in Telotte 80), a blank canvas on which only the most relevant details are sketched in, then erased, and where the shortest distance between two points is a punch line.

Regardless of where he places them on the map, or whether he subsequently moves them, Milligan's locales are almost always "real" in the sense that their names can be found elsewhere, either in the atlas or in an extant work of fiction. The only notable exception to this is the 1957 episode "The Sleeping Prince", whose main action takes place in a fictional country with the self-evidently Goonish name of "Yukkabukkoo" (Milligan and Stephens, "Sleeping Prince"). This island nation, so impoverished that it hires its presidents from "the Battersea labour exchange", and has the same man as "leader of both sides" of its permanent revolution (Milligan and Stephens, "Sleeping Prince"), is located somewhere in the South Pacific, but otherwise has

all the earmarks of a fictionalized Latin American republic. Its revolutionary (and counter-revolutionary) leader speaks with a stereotypically sleepy Hispanic peon's accent, using the word "señor" as a frequent form of address to remove all remaining doubt as to how the audience is meant to interpret his ethnicity ("Sleeping Prince" recording, 10m 19s-11m 27s). The 1957 air date of the episode makes it impossible to mistake this for a satire on the exported revolutions of the post-Castro era. "Yukkabukkoo" should not be taken in retrospect for Angola, or anywhere else that Cuban military advisors were dispatched to: it is quite simply a caricature of a "banana republic", exported lock, stock, and barrel to the South Pacific, for reasons Milligan himself may have been at a loss to explain.

Overall, the liberties that Spike Milligan takes with conceptual matters concerning world geography in *The Goon Show* serve to disrupt an audience's expectations far less than the liberties he takes with spatial scales which are implied by sound to lie within the scope of immediate sense-experience. No matter how many liberties Milligan takes with the ways in which time and space are conventionally understood, however, neither time nor space ever suffers anything worse than distortion in a full-episode-length *Goon Show* story. Neither is wholly obliterated, nor is it eliminated as a relevant factor in either the narrative or the text as a whole. There is one notable exception to this during *The Goon Show*'s era of full-length stories. A 1957 episode entitled "What's My Line?" offers a glimpse at a direction the program might have taken without Peter Eton's insistence on an overarching plot structure to which Milligan could attach his storytelling tangents. The *Goon Show* take on "What's My Line?" uses its namesake, a television panel show of the 1950s in which mystery guests sign in on a blackboard, as a jumping-off point, a framing device rather than an engine of plot. Signing in on a blackboard becomes a running gag, as each familiar member of *The Goon Show*'s repertory

company of characters enters the proceedings, and proceeds to take it in a fresh direction. What emerges from this is not a single story, but an olio of sketches and comic turns, held together only by whatever degree of continuity the framing device of blackboard-signing can provide. This continuity has a looseness bordering on laxity: as each new character signs in, a fresh story begins, one whose reference to its predecessor in terms of time period, locale, event, and incident is scant at best.

The headlong impetus that is characteristic of *The Goon Show*'s narrative style slows noticeably when forced into a series of stops and restarts by such a framework, as it becomes apparent that the Milligan imagination requires as much time and space as any particular presentational format affords in order to operate effectively. Characters' statements about when and where their stories in "What's My Line" are taking place appear to be immaterial: the format of reportage inherent to its source material makes the *Goon Show* version's implied panel-show studio the dominant reality of the episode. One clue to how it leaves this impression lies in Milligan's employment of Neddie Seagoon as something other than the protagonist for the entire episode. Although he features as the central character in one segment, he also crops up afterwards, as the same character but fulfilling functions which have little or nothing to do with one another. Perhaps more than any single *Goon Show* episode, "What's My Line" reveals the vital difference between Milligan's corpus of half-hour comic mini-epics and the program's sketch-show origins. Any framing device which can bring a galloping *non sequitur* to a dead stop simply by moving on to (while stealing a catchphrase from a group of Milligan's spiritual descendants) something completely different, robs *The Goon Show* of a certain magical quality, by making it stay rooted in one "here and now" at a time. On the other hand, when Milligan places his characters in a situation from which there is no escape until the closing music begins,

he and they are forced to commit to the idea that frames of time and space with drastically different implications can exist simultaneously, side by side, and must all be taken equally seriously.

INTERRUPTION 2: MILLIGAN'S LAWS OF SPACE

Just as tendencies can be observed in Spike Milligan's distortion of time in *The Goon Show*, a number of rules of thumb can be observed in his distortion of space. In the previous chapter, the following "Milligan's Laws of Space" have been noted:

-Milligan's Laws of Containers and Contents:

1. All things with a physical form can be grouped into one of two categories: containers; and things to be put in containers. Anything designated as a container can hold anything designated to be put into a container, regardless of their relative sizes.
2. The interior and exterior of a container constitute two independent spatial frames of reference. Therefore, the actual capacity of a container cannot be assumed based on the apparent size of the container when viewed from the outside.

-Milligan's Laws of Object Impermanence:

1. Any object can be called spontaneously into existence at any point in space. The probability of this happening increases with the improbability of such an object ever being found in such a location.
2. As a corollary to the above, abstract concepts, and non-dimensional representations such as sound recordings, can be given physical form, and called spontaneously into existence at any point in space.
3. If any object can be called spontaneously into existence at any point in space, it is also possible that it can be called spontaneously into existence in more than one place

at the same time. When the object in question is a *Goon Show* character named “Eccles”, the word “possible” should be replaced with the phrase “altogether likely”.

-Milligan’s Laws of Spatial Frames:

1. (The Special Law of Spatial Elasticity) Spatial frames of reference can simultaneously expand, contract, and remain constant in size depending on the needs of each activity going on within them. Two activities involving the same object can also cause the spatial frame to simultaneously expand and contract in scale with reference to that object.
2. Objects which function as conceptual links between spaces can bring unrelated spatial frames together. Free-standing doors can open into previously unseen buildings; telephones facilitate not only conversation, but physical contact.

-Milligan’s Laws of Geography:

1. The entire known world consists of two places, which can broadly be defined as “England” and “Everywhere Else”.
2. The relative positions of geographical locations in the “Everywhere Else” part of *The Goon Show*’s world are subject to constant, but not predictable, change. This has a corresponding effect on distances and boundaries.
3. No matter how far from England someplace in the “Everywhere Else” part of this world is, it might still be attached to England by some part of the infrastructure of the city of London.

CHAPTER 4

CHILDREN TEACH LESSONS ON THE ACCORDION: PREOPERATIONAL COGNITIVE STRATEGIES IN *THE GOON SHOW*

The constant shuffling and reshuffling of temporal and spatial frames in *The Goon Show*, gratuitous as they may often appear, form part of a clear pattern of dramaturgy which operates towards a consistent goal. As with much of the rest of what he does in *The Goon Show*, Milligan distorts time and space for the purpose of creating laughter: the mechanisms he uses for turning temporal and spatial manipulation into comic payoffs demonstrate an understanding of both human psychology and the semiotic codes of radio which is no less profound for being intuitive. Specifically, Milligan plays off the primacy of the spoken word as a generator of meaning in radio theatre, using it to guide the listener towards accepting his bending of the laws of the universe. As we shall see, the terms of reference which aid the most in meeting *The Goon Show*'s universe on its own terms belong most properly to the later stages of a phase of cognitive development which can be broadly defined as taking place in children between the ages of six and eight; this phase was first labeled by Jean Piaget as "preoperational".

1. "Hello, folks, this is Neddy Seagoon speaking, folks": The Spoken Word as Stage Manager of Radio Theatre

Before embarking on a journey through Goonland with a child's point of view as our guide, it will be useful to review a few of the basic principles concerning the place of the spoken word as the chief locus of meaning and context for radio theatre. Despite differences of opinion concerning the semiotics of radio, there appears to be a general consensus among scholars of English-language radio on a hierarchy of the medium's signifying systems. Primacy is accorded

to the spoken word as a *primum mobile* which establishes, organizes, and initiates the interplay of all potential signifying elements in the radio soundscape. Crisell's analysis is the most cogent distillation of the argument for the spoken word as the foundation for radio's aesthetics and sign-systems:

How...does radio set about surmounting its limitations and create something analogous to conventional drama? Partly by a process of 'transcodification'—the replacement of one code or set of codes, in this case visual cues, by another, in this case auditory, the code of speech. (*Understanding Radio* 146)

Implicit in the idea that meaning is principally carried by the spoken word in radio is the idea that radio is a conversation—albeit largely a one-sided one. Shingler and Wieringa postulate that because “there appears to be little in the way of equipment or technology mediating this relationship” between the speaker and the person spoken to, listeners are therefore “able to establish more intimate relationships with radio programmes and personalities” (80).

The intimacy that radio can create with its audiences has frequently led theoreticians to fix their attention on a borderland that radio appears to share with humanity's most basic oral storytelling traditions. Theoretician and practitioner Dermot Rattigan feels that

(t)he aural appeal of the spoken word, the good story and the dramatically imaginative event is a primal response in most humans regardless of age, social standing, education or cultural background. Radio drama [...] can provide an aural literature of immense richness in its diversity (106).

Radio's parallels to storytelling do not rest entirely in orality, however. Angela Frattarola notes a tendency among "(t)heorists and writers of radio drama" writing during the 1920s and 1930s to "liken listening to a 'microphone play' to reading a novel because both ask us to imagine an unfolding narrative, bringing us into an intimate relationship with voices and characters" (451). More recent theorists also liken radio to written literature: Crisell notes that "Words on the radio could be regarded as the application of oral language to a situation which normally calls for writing, that is, where what is referred to is not simultaneously apparent to sender and receiver since they are separated" (*Understanding Radio* 55). At the same time, Crisell stresses that "to avoid creating this impression of absence and impersonality much radio talk which is actually scripted [...] is delivered as if it were unscripted and impromptu" (*Understanding Radio* 56).

The idea of radio as a form of mediated storytelling serves well to inform the relationship between Milligan and the listener which is mediated by *The Goon Show*. As stated earlier, the changes which Milligan wreaks upon space and time take the bulk of their cues from the spoken word; now is the appropriate moment to add that, for all its impressive array of sonic, musical, and other extra-dialogical effects, *The Goon Show* is as akin to pure storytelling as it is to drama. Milligan's preferred method for opening the program, with Wallace Greenslade saying "This is the BBC" followed by anywhere up to two minutes of jocular by-play involving Greenslade and the cast, all without a signature tune, introduces the listener to the idea that what will follow is more informal, and essentially more conversational, than standard radio drama or variety fare. The continual use of characters as narrators in their own ongoing story further establishes a bond of intimacy between character and listener. As well, it reinforces the idea that the story is being *told* as much as it is *enacted* while it unfolds. Milligan was sufficiently aware of the need for

storytelling to fill in what Alan Beck refers to as the “absent content” (7) of radio that he was already sending up this dramaturgical technique in *The Goon Show*’s first season of full-episode-length stories. 1954’s “The Silent Bugler” features the following less-than-helpful plot synopsis:

GREENSLADE. For listeners who have been asleep, of whom I am one, here is a short resume of what’s gone on before.

PETER SELLERS (as a posh lady). Helen Lovejoy, beautiful heiress to the Halibut millions, has been jilted at the altar by Villion de Paprikon, the legitimate son of Louis the...ex-one-vee [XIV]. Peter, Villion’s Eton boating friend, has heard this, but being in Tibet has embarrassed...Mary, his fiancée, who, being the only cousin of Sir Raymond Ellington, has passed the title on to Baron Geldray, also heir to the Halibut millions. Now read on. (“Silent Bugler 1954” recording, 22:14-22:50)

Earlier in the same episode, what is announced as “a rapid synopsis” “for listeners who have just tuned in” turns out to be Milligan doing a rather convincing live-on-mic impersonation of a sped-up tape recorder (“Silent Bugler 1954” recording, 11:09-11:16). Milligan’s predilection for using narration to introduce and contextualize the subsequent enactment of a story becomes apparent from his writing for other performance modes with visual components. His lone stage play, *The Bedsitting Room*, supplies the bulk of the initial information necessary for the understanding of its plot and setting in one go, in a radio news bulletin (Milligan and Antrobus 13-14).

Milligan never explained why he put the narratorial function in the driver’s seat, but his rationale for doing so articulates itself throughout *The Goon Show*. By granting narration the

position of authoritative voice in the creation of a fictional world, then granting it the further authority to instigate changes in this world, Milligan sets up a paradox which continually puts the laws of probability to the test. This paradox in turn requires the listener to reorient his or her conventional methods for suspending disbelief. Adults have learned that merely saying something does not necessarily make it so. For *The Goon Show* to work as narrative as well as humour, Milligan must have his audience believe that it is only on the strength of someone saying so that things come into being at all. Not only must words have the power to create things, they must also be equated *with* things. In the process, the bridge of abstract thought between words and things not seen must be removed: once this is accomplished, all utterances, simply by virtue of being uttered, become concrete.

2. Suffer Little Children to Come unto Metonymy: The Preoperational Substitution of Words for Things

Concretizing words, and thereby conferring on them equal status with the things they represent, requires us to learn no new or special strategies of cognition. All it asks is that we temporarily unlearn, or disregard, cognitive strategies that most of us have had in place since the latter years of primary school. During his researches into childhood cognitive development, Jean Piaget discovered that “(up to the age of seven or eight), the children [in the group then being studied] made no distinctions between the word and the thing, and failed to understand the problem” (72). This confusion concerning the substitution of *logos* for phenomenon is recorded by Piaget, in passages which sometimes read like first drafts for routines in *The Goon Show*. In this example, the italics are the child’s responses to the researcher’s questions:

Is a word strong?

No, it can't do anything at all.

Are any words strong?

Some words are strong.

Which?

The word "strong" because you are saying it's strong.

Is the word "elephant" strong?

Yes, because an elephant can carry people.

An elephant can, but simply the word?

No, it isn't strong.

Why not?

Because it doesn't do anything.

What?

The word. (Piaget, 73-4)

Compare this to Eccles and Bluebottle's difficulties with chronometry in a routine which begins with a reprise of the first line of this thesis:

BLUEBOTTLE. What time is it Eccles?

ECCLES. Err, just a minute. I've got it written down on a piece of paper. A nice man wrote the time down for me this morning.

BLUEBOTTLE. Ooooh, then why do you carry it around with you Eccles?

ECCLES. Welll, um, if a [sic] anybody asks me the time, I can show it to dem.

BLUEBOTTLE. Wait a minute Eccles, my good man.

ECCLES. What is it fellow?

BLUEBOTTLE. It's writted on this bit of paper, what is eight o'clock, is writted.

ECCLES. I know that my good fellow. That's right, um, when I asked the fella to write it down, it was eight o'clock.

BLUEBOTTLE. Well then. Supposing when somebody asks you the time, it isn't eight o'clock?

ECCLES. Well den, I don't show it to 'em.

[...]

BLUEBOTTLE.. Well how do you know when it's eight o'clock?

ECCLES. I've got it written down on a piece of paper. (Milligan and Stephens, "Punch-Up-The-Conker")

It should be noted that the first line of this routine is actually a punch line, set up by twenty-eight seconds of ticking, striking, and cuckooing clocks ("Punch-Up-The-Conker" recording, 24:26-24:54). In the midst of numerous objects, any one of which could be used to form an educated guess, Eccles and Bluebottle instead choose to rely on two words on a piece of paper to tell the time.

The child whom Piaget questioned about elephants and Milligan's childlike characters (including, but by no means limited to, Eccles and Bluebottle) share a naïve realism in which "thoughts, images, and words, though distinguished to a certain degree from things, are none the less situated in the things" (Piaget 151-2). Through its tendency to give physical substance to the

abstract, this realism incorporates a transformative component: “There is *magic participation between thought and things* when the child is under the impression that reality can be modified by a word” (Piaget 158).

3. A Child’s Garden of Goon-sense: Milligan as Children’s Author and Perpetual Child

Milligan’s body of work leaves little doubt that he was a writer familiar with the child’s perspective on the world. He “produced the daftest nonsense plays, stories, poems, and drawings for children available in the United Kingdom” (de Rijke 227), a corpus which extends from nursery rhymes to fairy tales to Goonish reimaginings of staples of family literature such as *Black Beauty* and *Treasure Island*. British educator Victoria de Rijke argues that the asides, non sequiturs and quicksilver slips of lateral thinking that define Milligan’s style are far from being beyond the grasp of children. Indeed, these features of style furnish a great deal of his work’s appeal: “Children devour the detail in Spike’s sketches and relate directly to his literal humour” (de Rijke 233).

It is not going too far to suggest that Milligan was more comfortable viewing life from a child’s perspective than from an adult’s. Milligan’s amanuensis Pauline Scudamore offers the observation that

(h)e has undoubtedly spent many of his most rewarding hours with children. He can re-enter the child’s world, by his writing, by his unstinted clowning and by his capacity for losing himself utterly in a child’s mind. This rare ability probably springs from a genuine childish curiosity and interest which has somehow never grown up. (*Spike* 180)

Scudamore also relates that Milligan began to seek out the world of childhood as a refuge from the adult world, even as he was poised between one world and the other. In his late teen years, Milligan continued to retreat to the attic of the family home with his brother Desmond, seven years his junior, to enact adventures in an imaginary country peopled with figurines, small toys and other bric-a-brac: “The ease with which [Milligan] left the unappealing world of his contemporaries to lose himself in childhood imaginings with his younger brother is interesting” (Scudamore, *Spike* 44), to say the least.

The idea that Milligan looked upon the idea of growing up as somehow “unappealing” is more than a bit of parlour psychology by a friend. Milligan frequently referred to the adult world as something to be approached with caution, and avoided whenever possible. In a letter to another friend, the author and poet Robert Graves, Milligan sounded off on the effects of the regimentation devised by adults for children in the education system:

I’m not sure that adults should be putting such ‘measures’ on, as yet, immature young people, we impose adult measures on children, and of course they grow up like us—is that a good thing? (Scudamore, *Dear Robert* 112)

Marked as it is by a dearth of these “adult measures,” *The Goon Show* starts with a childlike outlook as a kind of “default setting.” Seagoon’s strangulated cries for help are reminiscent of a lost boy calling for his mother. Bluebottle is forever referring to his current endeavour, regardless of the degree of responsibility it entails, as a “game”. His protestations and refusals to play the game in question are often overcome with the sorts of bribes reserved for children:

SEAGOON. Come, come, little two-stone Hercules—tell me if you saw two men and you can have this quarter of dolly mixture.

BLUEBOTTLE. Cor, dolly mixture—thinks—with those-type sweets I could influence certain girls at playtime—that Brenda Pugh might be another Rita Hayworth. (Milligan, *Scripts* 166)

In *The Goon Show*, childishness takes on an infectious quality. Although not a fictional creation, Wallace Greenslade is frequently given lines to read which display as much sulky pettishness as any of Milligan's characters. For example, in the 1955 episode "The Six Ingots of Leadenhall Street", Greenslade discards his professional tone, replacing it with petulant disdain for the story he is forced to introduce:

[GREENSLADE]. The Six Ingots of Leadenhall Street Part 2, or the Two Ingots of Leadenhall Street Part 6, whatever you like, I don't care. Mr. Grytpype-Thynne has sent Herr Moriarty with the six gold bars to a smelting shop. And now they are about to be melted down. Good-bye. (Milligan and Sykes, "Ingots" 7)

Later on, his disdain turns to a contempt apparently bred by familiarity: "Why, if it isn't The Six Gold Ingots of Leadenhall Street part 4, or The Four Ingots of Leadenhall Street part 6, whichever you like, I don't care" (Milligan and Sykes, "Ingots"). The episode concludes with an exasperated "Oh, I don't care at all!" from Greenslade, after Bluebottle has accidentally "deaded the cast" and thus short-circuited the ending of the story (Milligan and Sykes, "Ingots" 13).

The plots of more than a few entire *Goon Show* episodes rely on the audience adopting a child's viewpoint in order to understand the central premise. 1955's "The Fireball of Milton Street" presents the series' most outstanding example of this. Three related childlike ideas drive the narrative: 1) the discovery that "the sun is on fire"; 2) the supposition that the fire can be

extinguished with “a barrel of water”; and 3) the hope (against hope) that water taken up in “a wooden rocket” to douse the flame would neither dissipate in the vacuum of space nor be consumed (along with the rocket and its crew) in the intense heat of the sun (Milligan and Sykes, “Fireball” 5, 6, 8, 12, 14).

What identifies the use of each of these ideas as childish is the combination of its validity within a specific frame of reference and its application to a different frame of reference than the one in which it is valid. First of all, the type of combustion referred to by the word “fire” has nothing to do with the process by which the sun produces heat and light. Second, if the sun were nothing more than some sort of campfire in the sky, and moreover one small enough to be extinguished with a bucket of water, it would have to be very close indeed to illuminate the earth and keep it warm. In that case, however, it is hardly likely that a rocket would be required to reach it. Seen from this perspective, Bluebottle’s plan to “prove that the sun is not on fire” by climbing a ladder and holding out a piece of bread to see if it toasts (Milligan and Sykes, “Fireball” 9) makes as much sense as any plan involving rockets made of wood. Sensible or not, it turns out, for the purposes of this one *Goon Show* episode at least, that one can indeed “put out the sun” (Milligan and Sykes, “Fireball” 14) with water carried in a wooden rocket.

4. Putting Together Pieces from Different Puzzles: Children, Goons and Cognitive Constructivism

Faulty though it may be, a form of logic underlies this cosmology. Moreover, it is a logic which bears a strong resemblance to processes of world-building identified by cognitive scientists. Ernst von Glasersfeld has proposed a mechanism which he labels “re-creation” to explain how the mind integrates memories of direct experience and second-hand information

into models for assimilating new phenomena. As von Glasersfeld states in “Abstraction, Representation, and Reflection,” “Focused attention picks a chunk of experience, isolates it from what came before and from what follows, and treats it as a closed entity” (180). All such entities become entries in a mental catalogue which can be called up on demand: “Any element in the present stream of experience may bring forth the re-presentation of a past situation, state, activity or other construct” (von Glasersfeld 185). Working with these raw data, the process of re-presentation then “coordinates them as ‘content’ into a new ‘form’ or ‘structure’...the resulting new products can be taken as initial ‘givens’ by a future process of structuring, relative to which they then become ‘content’ ” (von Glasersfeld 187).

The process of re-creation offers a flexible toolbox for organizing phenomena into stable, yet flexible schemata for ordering experience. Through this process, new data can be incorporated into an existing schema, or can be used to modify that schema to produce a paradigm applicable to a different set of circumstances. Even granted this flexibility, cognitive schemata are not constructed at random: cognitive development is marked by an increasing ability to assess the relevance of data to schemata, as well as to one another. With a nod to Piaget, Von Glasersfeld goes on to say that

(t)he child’s cognitive career has an unquestionable beginning, a first stage during which the infant assimilates, or tries to assimilate, all experience to such fixed action patterns (reflexes) as it has at the start...Except for their initial fixedness, these action patterns function like the schemes which the child a little later begins to coordinate on the basis of experience. (188)

The cognition displayed in *The Goon Show* is still in the trial-and-error phase of its career. It takes the first “chunks of experience” it can find with relevance to the “present stream of experience” and coordinates them into a new structure, with little regard for its soundness. To take just one of many similar examples, in “The Hastings Flyer”, Seagoon and Eccles are standing next to a wall, and need to be at “Pevensey Bay Station” (Milligan, *Scripts* 164). A tricycle is also next to the wall, but Eccles’ statement that “the tricycle ain’t mine” (Milligan, *Scripts* 164) rules it out as a mode of transport. Milligan takes the ideas of “wall at current location” and “desired destination of Pevensey Bay” as initial “givens”, adds the related idea that travel is necessary to reach the destination, tosses in the concept that theft is unthinkable (for Eccles and Seagoon at least), but does not scan his memory banks for other plausible means of acquiring transport. Instead, his solution runs as follows:

GRAMS. SERIES OF MAD SOUNDS PLAYED AT SPEED TO SOUND LIKE
SOME KIND OF COMBUSTION ENGINE.

[GREENSLADE]. The sound you are hearing is Neddie and Eccles driving a wall
at speed. We thought you ought to know. (Milligan, *Scripts* 164)

Moments like this, as well as providing Wallace Greenslade with an opportunity to earn his announcer’s fee by describing the indescribable, are consistent with “Milligan’s own system of logic, which usually involved leaving out several essential steps of reasoning on the way to a conclusion that seemed correct if inexplicable” (Wilmut and Grafton 74).

5. Preoperational Perceptions of Time and *The Goon Show*

Milligan's omission of steps of reasoning parallels findings by cognitive researchers investigating the perception of time among children. Jacques Montangero has found that primary school-age children are capable of establishing relationships between two variables with reference to the passage of time, but falter when a third variable is introduced (279-87). He postulates that "In 5- and 6-year-old children, understanding of duration...[is] limited to the relations between pairs of 'meanings' " (Montangero 285). The ability to integrate more than two variables into a consideration of duration, however, does become present "at least for certain types of problems, in children of 8 years and older" (Montangero 281). This appears to concur with the findings of Viviane Pouthas that "when asked to reproduce or estimate intervals, 8-year olds respond accurately while younger children perform erratically" (100). Basing his research framework in part on Piaget's division of the years between infancy and adolescence into preoperational and operational phases, one of the conclusions Montangero reaches is that "One specific aspect of children's time judgments is their great variability" (279).

There is considerable variability as well in the time judgements of Milligan's characters in *The Goon Show*. The 1956 episode "Drums Along the Mersey" is rife with erratic estimations of time intervals. Inheriting a million pounds from a relative, Baron Seagoon, but told that he cannot spend the money "till yur hundredth birthday", Neddie Seagoon, whose year of birth is given as 1921, appears to be two-thirds of a century short of cashing in (Milligan, "Drums"). However, a loophole is presented to him by Minnie Bannister, in the form of an "ancient Peruvian calendar stone" by the reckoning of which Seagoon would "be a hundred years old now" (Milligan, "Drums"). In order to take advantage of this method of measuring time,

Seagoon embarks on a Kon-Tiki-like expedition to prove that his Welsh forebears originally hailed from Peru. As well as introducing the idea that time can pass at different rates based not only on one's location but one's ethnicity, this episode takes a cavalier attitude towards the exactitude of calendar dates. Seagoon's expedition begins "On February" (Milligan, "Drums"), which is precise enough to eliminate 337 days out of any given year from consideration as the actual one of departure, but narrows it down no further¹³.

Later on, the principals in "Drums Along The Mersey" continue to grope, as children in the preoperational phase might, towards being able "to connect the relative orders of succession of events to be able to grasp the concept of duration" (Montangero 280). In pursuit of Grytpype-Thynne, who has double-crossed them and taken the money, Neddie Seagoon, Bloodnok and the very much alive Baron Seagoon "swam steadily for a week. Then another week, in that order" (Milligan, "Drums"). It may seem odd that the precise ordering of successive seven-day spans would need to be enumerated, but in the world of this particular episode, even the most trustworthy representatives of authority have trouble placing the duration of time within its proper context:

ECCLES. Hello my good man, what's going on 'ere?

MANAGER. Are you a policeman?

ECCLES. Yep, wanna know the time?

SEAGOON. Just a minute.

ECCLES. That right! It's just a minute past. That's right. (Milligan, "Drums")

¹³ At least he made it this much easier: since February is the month that adds a day every leap year, the number of non-February days in a year is a constant.

Eccles' estimate offers a one in twenty-four chance of a correct guess, which is about on a par with the roughly one in twenty-eight-and-a-quarter odds¹⁴ provided by Wallace Greenslade for those wishing to figure the exact start date of Seagoon's trek. All things considered, though, it is hard to imagine how anything other than a confused and conflicting reckoning of time could be expected from an episode which begins with the announcement that "There will now be thirty minutes of, including several and also one or two" (Milligan, "Drums").

6. "And this is where the story really starts": The Preoperational Mind at Work in Milligan's Construction of Narrative

Milligan's approach to storytelling reveals both a preoperational outlook and the expectation that his audience will share this outlook when following the sequencing of his narrative. The straight-ahead, linear arrangement of events which Milligan favours when crafting his *Goon Show* tales conforms to a standard pattern of story structure abstracted from studies of folktales by Russian formalist Vladimir Propp (119-25), and summarized by Nancy Stein and Christine Glenn as follows:

Setting

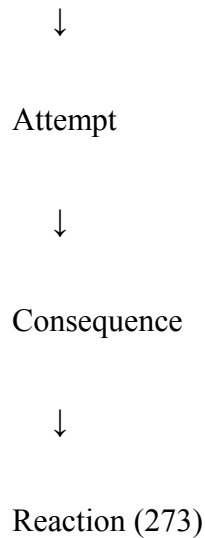
↓

Initiating event

↓

Internal response

¹⁴ Since the year is never stated, leap years thus become fair game, reducing the odds for a correct guess from a still annoyingly imprecise one in twenty-eight.



Stein and Glenn's researches indicate that "children...exhibit knowledge of story sequences similar to that proposed in the grammars" (265) for narrative structure offered by Propp and other theorists. However, the ability to recapitulate story structure definitely develops over time: "Even when story events contained cohesive markers, sixth-grade children constructed story sequences that conformed more to the canonical order than did second graders" (Stein and Glenn 277). The extreme rarity of analepsis, prolepsis, and other temporal disjunctions in *Goon Show* narratives means that these narratives, for all the sophisticated use of wordplay and sound effects within them, can be easily followed by schoolchildren without any need for rearranging the events within them. At least one contemporary press report offered the opinion that "if...the Goons are an acquired taste, then it has been acquired by...listeners under eighteen", corroborated by the assertion by one eight-year-old that "I always listen, and like all my friends I collect their records" (Pedrick 7).

As well as furnishing an overall narrative framework which puts younger audiences on an equal footing with adults, Milligan often appears to have left his inner child alone behind the

typewriter. Milligan's abrupt jumps in logic are consistent with Stein and Glenn's finding that "Some children tell stories that do not contain all of the components of an episode or a problem-solving sequence" (271). The sequences that Milligan invents for his characters to puzzle through compound this problem by throwing in extraneous components to make up for the missing ones. The following solution for finding an entire calendar year which has gone missing contains five lateral leaps of reasoning in its eleven lines:

MP 2. ...where are we going to start looking for this nineteen fifty six? That's what I want to know.

SEAGOON. Let me see, it's nineteen fifty six AD.

MP 2. So?

SEAGOON. 'A' and 'D' are the first and fourth letters of the alphabet.

MP 2. Yes.

SEAGOON. One, four...

MP 3. Er, one for the road.

SEAGOON. There are many roads.

MP 1. Cecil Rhodes.

MP 3. He lives in Africa.

SEAGOON. That's where I'll look for it - Africa! (Milligan, "The Lost Year")

Milligan's sprint-to-the-finish, devil-take-the-hindmost method of ending his stories, and the way in which his story endings jettison continuity and consequentiality, also show a strong similarity to the conclusions of stories as recapitulated by children in the preoperational phase of development. Among the hypotheses that Stein and Glenn draw from their findings, two are of particular relevance to *The Goon Show*. One is the idea that "younger children assume that the

knowledge of their audience is synonymous with their own knowledge” (Stein and Glenn 280). It is reasonable to assume that the use of a consistent stable of characters throughout the full-episode-length stories of *The Goon Show* would lead Milligan to assume that his audience was familiar with the essentials of the program’s format. As the series wore on, Milligan was increasingly wont to play games with the program’s well-established catchphrases, on the assumption that the audience had heard them enough to know they were coming under given circumstances. In “King Solomon’s Mines”, Little Jim, a falsetto Milligan-voiced creation whose primary function is to intone the words “he’s fallen in the wa-ter” at appropriate junctures, finds out how the other half lives:

GRAMS. Splash

LITTLE JIM. He’s fallen in the water.

SEAGOON. Next. Hup...

GRAMS. Splash

BLOODNOK. Seagoon. Swallow me thuns, I saw you throw little Jim into the water.

SEAGOON. Yes. I thought the change would do him good.

BLOODNOK. I warn you Seagoon. If Little Jim is not back for next week’s catch phrase I shall say it myself. Allow me to try; He’s fallen in the water. Un un nn nng...No. It’s no good. I can’t do it. (Milligan and Stephens, “King Solomon’s Mines”)

In addition to postulating the assumption of an audience's familiarity with story material, Stein and Glenn hypothesize that preoperational children's retellings of stories tend to lose coherence and structure as they progress because an overabundance of details "might overtax the working memory of young elementary school children" (278). Milligan's hasty endings, like those of the second-graders observed by Stein and Glenn, can also be seen as the result of mental fatigue. A production schedule that involved Milligan taking six full working days, plus whatever time he needed after a Sunday of rehearsal and recording, to ensure that "the new script [for the following episode] would arrive on the Monday morning" (Lewis 218) would seem to be calculated to produce exhaustion. This exhaustion, in turn, can be seen as the main cause of moments like this one which concludes one of Milligan's two Robin Hood tales from *The Goon Show*:

SEAGOON & BLUEBOTTLE & ECCLES. (sing) Robin Hood, Robin Hood,
 riding through the glen. Robin Hood, Robin Hood with his band of men.
 Feared by the good, loved by the bad, Robin Hood, how's your Dad?... (fades
 into drunken singing)
 FX. clomp of footsteps
 [GREENSLADE]. Oh! I do believe they've finished. Well, I must be off, catch
 the bus, you know. Goodnight. (Milligan and Stephens, "Mirry Mon")

7. Time, Task Completion, Preoperational Cognition and *The Goon Show*

The vagaries of task-related time in *The Goon Show* also demonstrate a link with preoperational cognition. In her studies of preschoolers, Sylvie Droit has found that “children cannot correctly evaluate the duration of events as adults do until the age of 6” (178). This, and her related finding that children in “the age range between 1 and 5 years [...] move gradually from knowledge about the duration of certain events or activities, acquired through specific personal experiences, to abstract knowledge which allows them to identify the temporal parameters of a variety of situations” (Droit 186) appear to be very much in line with the tendency of *Goon Show* characters to stick with their appointed tasks until the bitter end, even if their estimates of when that end will come are a little on the fuzzy side. Having tracked and cornered the missing year 1956 in the episode “The Lost Year”, Seagoon, Bluebottle, Eccles and Bloodnok “waited in the bush for a year. And by then of course the year had gone” (Milligan, “The Lost Year”). Failure to understand that some tasks have clearly-defined time limits allowed this particular task to remain unaccomplished...or, viewed another way, to accomplish itself. In either case, anyone who has ever baby-sat someone whose age is measured in single digits can attest that limits such as “bedtime” are temporal parameters whose abstract and concrete properties are both considered open to negotiation¹⁵.

¹⁵ My parents unwittingly opened these negotiations in our household by allowing me to watch *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. The program itself aired before my prescribed bedtime, but the clocks giving the time in cities around the world which were a prominent feature of the main newsroom set gave me the idea that it was always going to be not quite bedtime *somewhere*.

8. *The Goon Show* and Preoperational Modes of Spatial Cognition

With reference to spatial relationships, *The Goon Show* presents a preoperational cognitive framework very similar to its framework for the cognition of time. As with its temporal schema, the most saliently preoperational feature of *The Goon Show*'s overall schema for organizing space has to do with its division of space into discrete frames of reference. The inability of these frames of reference to link with one another in a consistent or coherent fashion to allow for smooth conceptual transitions between spatial scales signals the similarity between Milligan's spatial schema and the workings of the preoperational mind.

In spite of the many devices available for signalling a change between conceptually different spaces, Milligan almost exclusively chooses to jump the listener from one locale to another by means of narration. For instance, in "Drums along the Mersey", bridging music with a stirring maritime motif and a background of waves and seagulls are used to herald the passage of the story from dry land to the high seas ("Drums" recording 13:50-14:03). In itself, this is easy enough to follow, but Milligan has something up his sleeve to follow it. The trick is revealed when Seagoon informs the audience that "we left the coast of Peru, and using Moriarty's special map and tempered compass carried the raft inland" (Milligan, "Drums"). The net effect of going to all this trouble to have a sound effect establish a locale, only to have the spoken word contradict it, is to reduce the sound effect to the level of a stage convention (and an unreliable one at that). It also reinforces the position of language—particularly language employed in diegesis—as the central element of the *mise en scène*.

In *The Goon Show*, scenes can be thought of as clicking from one to the next in the manner of a slide show, rather than transitioning smoothly and gradually through actual or implied

movement in space. In no episode is this more apparent than in 1956's "The Nadger Plague", whose main running gag is the presentation of objects, characters, and settings as a series of lantern slides (Milligan and Stephens, "Nadger"). In fact, the episode itself is introduced by Wallace Greenslade as "the first colour slide" in the lantern (Milligan and Stephens, "Nadger").

The idea of *The Goon Show* as a slide show (albeit one shown on a projector with a bulb that keeps winking on and off) brings with it the idea that the program is staged in an implied picture plane with only two dimensions, or with an incomplete representation of three. This "flattening" of *The Goon Show*'s world appears to be consistent with a model of childhood cognition which remains influential on studies in the field. John Eliot notes that "In their initial study, Piaget and Inhelder found that subjects between five and six years of age tended to select a viewpoint comparable to their own viewpoint for all pictures" (107). *The Goon Show* often features sophisticated elaborations on the central premise of this perceptual model. After selecting a single viewpoint, and building a "flat world" around it, Milligan rapidly shifts points of view, each time flattening the surrounding frame of spatial reference. To pay another visit to the pillarbox of 1954's "The Great Bank of England Robbery" (since there's no danger of those inside it having gotten out since our last visit), one of Seagoon and Eccles' failed escape attempts involves the listener visualizing a series of intercut "tight two-shots", as the two men use each other to climb towards the mail slot. The plausibility of this situation holds until its sheer impossibility is pointed out:

GREENSLADE. Listeners, may I draw your attention to this problem. Seagoon gets on Eccles's back, and Eccles, half-way up a wall, stays where he is while

Seagoon mounts on his back and so on. What's the distance between Seagoon, Eccles, and the ground? I'll tell you, it's, um...

SECOMBE AND ECCLES. Wahhhhh! (Crash)

GREENSLADE. ...exactly.

ECCLES. Why don't you keep your big mouth shut? (Milligan, "Bank Robbery 1954")

It is no accident that this suspension of the law of gravity until someone acknowledges it sounds like something out of a Saturday morning cartoon. A parallel to *The Goon Show's* preoperational and subjective use of spatial framing and implied linear perspective, as well as a potential source of inspiration for it, comes from the animated cartoons which first ran on movie screens during Milligan's youth. Late silent-era and early sound cartoons, restricted by tight schedules and even tighter budgets, generally left perspective-altering scenic effects to the artist's pencil, rather than the camera's lens. More well-equipped than most, the studio in which Pat Sullivan produced the "Felix the Cat" series during the mid-to-late 1920s still had to make do with a rostrum camera which "was stationary; movements in and out of the camera field were mechanically impossible and had to be drawn" (Canemaker 106). Making a virtue of necessity, "Felix often three-dimensionalizes an action by dynamically bringing it from a far distance to close range" (Canemaker 106) through a series of progressively larger drawings. However, when the situation calls for it, Felix discards the need to enlarge the drawings, and retains a background object's original scale from his point of view when importing it into the foreground. To take one example of what happens when Felix does this, "the door of a faraway house could be used, regardless of perspective, as a hatch in a blank wall" (Bendazzi 57).

This form of perspective-swapping is just one of many effects in *The Goon Show*'s arsenal of cartoony spatial gimmickry. An extended riff on this basic concept forms the meat of the 1957 episode "The Moon Show". Grytpype-Thynne and Moriarty's claim that "at the end of the last century, during the anti-Moriarty riots in Paris, the dear Count was forced to flee to England, bringing the moon with him"—and "in the daytime, disguised as the sun" no less—appears to be just another of their transparent confidence tricks on Seagoon. However, their hypothesis of lunar portability is given credence by astronomers Eccles and Bluebottle¹⁶, who find the moon "inside de telescope" they are using to view it (Milligan and Stephens, "Moon"). The confusion as to which is the genuine moon is solved, for simpler minds at least, by another apparent Grytpype-Thynne-and-Moriarty swindle. Holding a jam jar up to the sky, Grytpype-Thynne has no trouble at all in convincing Seagoon that the moon is now "in the jam jar" (Milligan and Stephens, "Moon"). Con job or not, the closing line of narration tells us, with no trace of irony in Wallace Greenslade's voice, that this is "how Mr Seagoon brought the genuine moon back to England" (Milligan and Stephens, "Moon"). In the absence of evidence to the contrary, the specific fictional world of this episode must then be assumed to have multiple moons which can be detached from the sky and trapped by those who dare to believe in such things.

The retention of the original scale of an object through distances in an implied pictorial field in *The Goon Show* is more than simply a reminder that "multiple frames of reference must be coordinated" (Cohen 5) in the learning of tasks involving spatial cognition. It also provides another link between preoperational cognition and Milligan's *Goon Show* writing. Both the

¹⁶ This is one of the duo's few appearances during *The Goon Show*'s entire ten-season run which shows them holding jobs which require either of them, much less both, to display any perceptible degree of intellectual functioning.

variability of container-to-object ratios and the conflation of spatial scales in *The Goon Show* display similarities with the ways in which children in the primary grades depict their world. One recent study of spatial scales in children's drawings found that, regardless of the size or configuration of the ground in which to draw figures, "7-year-olds...showed some habitual, average figure size in drawing that did not differ between drawing conditions" (Lange-Küttner 923). The author of this study, C. Lange-Küttner, notes that, in contrast to the children in older age groups, the seven-year-olds "would draw a figure in a size that was independent of how much available area there was in each space system. In other words, the figures were not yet projections in space" (923).

Figures in *The Goon Show* appear not to have attained the status of projections in space, either. Instead, they are conceived as being close at hand or off in the distance, increasing or diminishing in scale only on those infrequent occasions which demand it. The rest of the time, the confines and constraints of the space around *Goon Show* characters seem to matter as much to Milligan as they might to one of Lange-Küttner's seven-year-old subjects. Of course, a space is more than just so much emptiness: "As Sauvy and Sauvy (1974) put it, our actions define our spaces and, in turn, our spaces are defined by our activities" (qtd. in Eliot 103-4). In *The Goon Show*, however, any activity at all may suddenly commence without warning; therefore, every space depicted must be scaled to fit any activity. Milligan was constantly making his audiences wonder what hidden depths lay in London's trash cans for those bold enough to explore them:

Seagoon. [on] Curse - trapped inside a dark, donk dustbin. But wait - [slowly] –
there's somebody in the dustbin with me! [in a whisper] He's coming
over..... I'll – I'll pretend I haven't seen him.

Grams. rapid, echoed footsteps approach from far distance and eventually stop

Eccles. [smacks lips] Hellooooo. [draws applause] Ta, ta ,ta

Seagoon. It's the famous Eccles.

Eccles. It's the famous Eccles.

Seagoon. How did you get in this dustbin?

Eccles. I've got influence. I know the man at the door. (Milligan and Stephens,

“Fake Seagoons”)

It is fitting in this case that Eccles, *The Goon Show*'s unreconstructed man-child, has found his way into the dustbin first. This is the same Eccles, after all, who helps Seagoon “to stack at least fifty to a hundred chairs” (Milligan, *Scripts* 68) to reach the window of a prison cell which up to that very moment had contained nothing other than Seagoon and Eccles themselves (Milligan, *Scripts* 66).

It can be tempting to dismiss the preoperational method of mapping space and Milligan's comic recreation of it, as “wrong” or “incomplete”. A note of caution has been sounded against this line of thinking by cognitive scientist Roger Downs:

...consider children's graphic representations of space. A typical set of judgments would suggest that these representations are arbitrary, inconsistent, and inaccurate. [...] Specifically, the basis for these judgments is the use of...multiple perspectives, and multiple scales within the same representation. (332)

Downs' view is that such judgements are based on canons of aesthetics rather than absolutes, and that many apparently childish representations of space are “a creative response to some fundamental problems of representation—the problem of continuity and the problem of simultaneity” (332). Regardless of how sophisticated our techniques and technologies for mapping space become, the understanding that one cannot perceive two discrete spaces from the

same perspective at the same time forms the core of our understanding of “the vast difference between the world as described through scale geometry and the world as experienced” (Treib 10). Rather than being primitive, untutored and erroneous, children’s representations of space can thus be seen as “a creative, sophisticated effort to come to terms with this difference, with multiple scales and perspectives as one possible graphic response” (Downs 333). This is worth keeping in mind any time a child, or a Goon, presents us with something like this:

EIDELBURGER. [...] Now, Neddie, here is a map-plan of the Louvre and the surrounding streets.

F.X. LONG UNFOLDING.

SEAGOON. You take one end.

F.X. UNFOLDING. THE MAP BEING UNFOLDED CONTINUES FOR A WHOLE MINUTE.

SEAGOON. It’s big, isn’t it?

EIDELBURGER. (*in the distance*) Yes, it is! This bit here shows the Rue de la Paix.

SEAGOON. Good heavens, you’re miles away—walk straight up that street—take the second on the left—I’ll be waiting for you.

F.X. TAXI PULLS UP.

EIDELBURGER. I took a taxi—it was too far. (Milligan, *Scripts* 107)

To borrow a term from cartography, the key to the comedy in this sequence is the conceptual substitution of the map for the actual space it represents. As Marc Treib notes, “Because it is a conventionalized form, the map imposes a structure on the world, rather than merely describing it” (6). Descriptive convention can be hard to separate from reality: it is easy enough at the best

of times to get lost in a map; losing oneself becomes all the easier when the map's apparent scale approaches 1:1.

As conceived by Milligan, space can also be mapped by conventionalized structures used in other fields of human endeavour. Seagoon's crew furnishes a tidy solution to the vexing question of how to navigate at sea when one is set adrift on a piano:

BLOODNOK. Ohhh—Seagoon—take over the keyboard, I can't steer any more.

SEAGOON. Eccles? Take over the keyboard.

ECCLES. I can't. I haven't brought my music.

SEAGOON. You'll have to busk for the next three miles. (Milligan, *Scripts* 110)

The necessity in radio of using sound on its own to describe space which can only be navigated in the "real world" using visuals already implies a multiplicity of perspectives in spatial mapping. Employing notation used to denote specific frequencies of sound in order to map a sonically-conceptualized space is a solution so intuitively obvious, and so elegantly simple, that a child could have come up with it. The notion that, in the absence of sheet music, improvisation will suffice to find one's way through unknown spaces is a variation on this theme.

Viewed from the perspective of a child, the overall world map of *The Goon Show* also begins to make a bit more sense. In a survey of the research literature on children's construction of cognitive maps, Alexander Seigel and Jennifer Cousins¹⁷ summarize the findings of a number of researches as follows:

¹⁷ No relation to the present author, to the best of his knowledge.

As children travel, they encode social information in their maps. They learn where different behavior settings are, where to go to find things, people, personal involvements, or help. [...] They develop normative expectations about social life and social forms. (360-1)

Extrapolating this idea to the journeys taken by the characters in *The Goon Show* transforms Milligan's naïve anglocentrism into this kind of normative expectation. No matter where Neddy Seagoon's travels take him, his primary contact is with other Britons. In the preponderance of cases, this restriction of acquaintanceship is the by-product of Seagoon's travels being at the behest of British civilian or military authority. The need to involve the other members of *The Goon Show*'s stock of regular characters is another contributing factor to Seagoon's tendency to associate primarily with British colonies of expatriates, diplomatic missions and military garrisons when abroad. This tendency, which parallels the extension of London municipal services to the four corners of the earth described in the previous chapter, also helps to extend *The Goon Show*'s cognitive world map from a purely spatial to a social and conceptual dimension. British social and power structures can take hold any place on earth, simply by virtue of one Briton's presence there. Major Bloodnok in particular has the ability to crop up anywhere and everywhere, offering no justification for his presence, and acting as if he has as much right to be wherever he is as the local flora and fauna. In "The Africa Ship Canal", which recounts events purporting to take place in 1957, Bloodnok is a district commissioner somewhere in the "Congo jungle" (Milligan and Stephens, "Africa Ship Canal" 5). Since no part of the Congo basin was ever British territory, it is hard to say whether his presence as an official of the Colonial Office would have come as a bigger surprise to the French or Belgians who *did* control the area at the time, or to the Congolese themselves.

Not only does *The Goon Show* portray Britons as the “natural” inhabitants of anywhere in particular, it also foregrounds this attitude’s corollary: all indigenous people, in the presence of a single Briton, are automatically relegated to the status of landmarks, useful in establishing the setting, but little else. The idea that non-Britons function chiefly as elements of the background, to be deployed only when absolutely necessary, in the non-British parts of *The Goon Show*’s world recurs throughout the series; in no episode, however, is this notion made more explicit than in “Shangri-La Again”. After being chased out of Peking by invading Japanese forces, Seagoon, Bloodnok and the remainder of the British legation make a startling discovery in their peregrinations to the fabled valley of Shangri-La: Asia, it would seem, is running dangerously low on Asians. This is as good an explanation as any for the fact that the elite of the valley are the decidedly Caucasian “head Lama” Henry Crun, his likewise Caucasian companion and consort Minnie Bannister, and his equally non-Oriental heir apparent Bluebottle (Milligan, “Shangri-La”). After Seagoon’s group’s arrival, the only remotely Asian character heard for the rest of the episode is a “Shangri-oo-la-la girl” voiced for one short line by Sellers (Milligan, “Shangri-La”).

The Goon Show never leaves Britain in a conceptual sense, which is probably just as well, since, no matter where their travels take them, Milligan’s characters have a knack for unexpectedly winding up smack-dab in the heart of Britain. In “The Mummified Priest”, Seagoon’s party wends its way “for ten months” through the maze of tunnels inside an ancient Egyptian tomb, only to find themselves in the same cellar in the British Museum where Henry Crun had been left to “starve to death” earlier in the episode (Milligan, “Priest”).

It would be all too easy to stop there, as “The Mummified Priest” does, and simply say that Milligan plays at being a child for the purposes of having his audience play at being children, and thus, like many an episode of *The Goon Show*, declare the destination reached by default. No matter how tempting it is to see the return to childhood as an end in itself, the fact remains that *The Goon Show* was conceived with an adult audience in mind. Any regression on the part of Milligan, and by implication on the part of his audience, must be seen as a choice informed by a world-view constructed from an adult’s perspective. *The Goon Show* comes across as the product of a mind which saw not only adult life, but contemporary life, and the prospects for the future, as unpredictable and threatening. A half-century and more into that future, this outlook remains relevant, and takes on an added degree of eerie prescience. The next chapter of this thesis examines aspects of time, space, and narrative in the world that Milligan created for *The Goon Show*, and the ways in which these aspects parallel and prefigure trends and tendencies in postmodern dramaturgy.

CHAPTER 5

THE ACCORDION PLAYS A NEW TUNE BEFORE ANYONE CAN WRITE IT DOWN: ANTICIPATIONS OF POSTMODERNISM IN *THE GOON SHOW*

In *The Goon Show*, Spike Milligan created a fictional world where time and space are inconstant. The changeability and inconsistency which mark this world are best negotiated using cognitive strategies which most of us abandoned in our primary-school years. It is one thing to posit a world like this; it is another to return to it over a hundred times to tell its continuing story, as Milligan did. As with any creator of an ongoing fictional world in a broadcast series, Milligan had a choice each time he returned to the world of *The Goon Show*. He could stick to paths well-travelled and familiar to himself and his listeners, or he could strike out and blaze new trails. In his writing for *The Goon Show*, Milligan displayed a desire and a tendency to do the latter.

Milligan's voyages of discovery landed him on conceptual *terra incognita* that looks strangely familiar to us today. Even so, much of what Milligan unleashed upon the British public every time *The Goon Show* was broadcast may have seemed to his contemporaries to be calculated to produce the reaction attributed to a possibly apocryphal figure—a “psychiatrist who asked if he might attend a rehearsal. He listened unattentively and unmoved to the end, rose and left the studio, saying ‘Thank you. I’ve had enough’ ” (Bennett 9). Nearly twenty years after the broadcast of the last *Goon Show* episode, someone put a name to what had overwhelmed the good psychiatrist, without knowing that he had even done so. With an *esprit d’escalier* which Milligan might appreciate, Jean-François Lyotard summed up his impressions of many recent cultural developments which resembled *The Goon Show*’s “weekly outpouring of surreal laughs and explosions” (Sale), using a single, newly-minted word: *postmodernism*.

The word “postmodernism” has come to mean so many things to so many people that a return to first principles is necessary, as a reminder of what Lyotard was trying to convey when he wrote *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979. The key to understanding Lyotard’s motivation for coining the term “postmodernism” is that he sought to describe, not a movement nor an historical period, but a state of mind. In “postmodernism”, then, “The “post-” indicates something like a conversion: a new direction from the previous one” (Lyotard, *Explained* 76). For Lyotard, the postmodern can be found in any attitude which self-consciously and purposively calls into question the accepted wisdom which sets the current limits of progress for any area of human understanding:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia of the unattainable; but which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. (Lyotard, *Condition* 81)

1. Pipping Them at the Postmodern: Milligan the Advance Scout

Two aspects of this general idea are particularly important in giving a sense that Milligan’s writing in the 1950s bore a distinctly postmodern stamp. First off, Milligan’s style and sense of humour served to interrogate normative patterns of construction and discourse within the craft of comedy writing, as they existed when he entered the field in earnest around 1950. Second, and just as importantly, this interrogation was not the accidental by-product of an innate,

inexplicable knack, but the result of Milligan's conscious desire to be a force for change in his chosen field.

A "search for new presentations" in ways which consistently "denied itself the solace of good forms" was one of the most striking features of *The Goon Show*, for those who first encountered it as listeners. This, after all, was the program that "sloughed off all resemblances to other radio shows, and, indeed, to normal human activities" (Bennett 9). Whether the medium was radio, television or film, Milligan's writing was noted for its tendency to "take the mickey out of a host of stock...situations" (Hutchinson 11). Eight years into *The Goon Show's* run, the *Radio Times*, house organ of the same BBC which broadcast both Milligan's mickey-taking work and the stock situations which were its targets, offered the assessment that "Broadcasting has never recovered from" the program's "farrago of inspired nonsense which is a talking point in classrooms, clubs and colleges" ("Sound and Laughter").

If the official voice of official broadcasting took some little time in conferring a degree of legitimacy on Milligan's experiments, his colleagues were rather quicker to recognize how startlingly original Goon humour was. Harry Secombe speaks of his time with The Goons in terms redolent of the sense of mission and esprit de corps shared by the entire group:

We were against the established form of presentation [in comedy]. At the time we began, the profession was full of stand-up comics who came on and told a string of jokes and finished with either a song or a dance. Our approach was different.
(*The Story* 20-1)

It is important not only to see *The Goon Show* as the outcome of an "approach" which questioned the *status quo ante* in comedy, but to see this approach as a deliberate and calculated

one. Over and above displaying a pattern of trailblazing in his work that was noted by others, Milligan expressed an awareness that he was setting forth into new areas. For Milligan, laughter was not a bang-bang Pavlovian response to simple, unchallenging stimuli. Comedy writing, therefore, was not merely a question of salting a script with the types of jokes and references that others had used to get laughs: “what I try to do is to do what the patrols do, I try to go out into enemy territory where nothing has happened before” (Scudamore, *Spike* 282). The military metaphor is more than a colourful turn of phrase pulled out of the air: Milligan knew who the enemy was, and what their tactics looked like:

I’ve always had to fight my way through the Benny Hills in the wilderness. They are like the main bunch of the army, they know the obvious, and what they think the audience wants—bums, knockers, tits, funny double-entendre jokes, things like that. (Scudamore, *Spike* 282)

If comedy reconnaissance forays amid barrages of tit-and-bum banalities were risky, Milligan made it clear that he viewed taking the safe road as a virtual death sentence. His description of the fate of a fellow comedian who did so is particularly telling:

A new ‘star’ whom [Milligan and Jimmy Grafton] wrote for has appeared on *Variety Bandbox*, Robert Moreton, a droll, who told ‘Merry Japes’ from his Bumper Fun Book; he was like a lot of five-minute wonders, as soon as he’d been aired enough, he would be gently left off the BBC star list. Not finding work, he committed suicide, no one from the BBC was at his funeral, still he was, and that’s what mattered. (Milligan, *Peace Work* 214)

Milligan's assessment of his own comedy career before *The Goon Show* is no less damning, tinged though it is with expressions of a desire to excel. His first paying writing job, acquired under Grafton's aegis, was "writing for a piss poor comic called Derek Roy who was as funny as a baby with cancer. I thought that original material that wasn't begging the laughs would be so much better" (Behan 134). Milligan appended the first such script he contributed to, for a 1949 episode of Derek Roy's radio program *Hip Hip Hoo Roy*¹⁸, to his volume of reminiscences entitled *Peace Work* (219-37). His purpose in doing so was twofold: he included the entire script "to show what level comedy was in forty years ago", but "underlined some of the jokes that were mine" (Milligan, *Peace Work* 218) to demonstrate that he already knew how to rise above it.

The advance knowledge that he was entering a field that was ripe for change makes some of Milligan's later statements about the impact of *The Goon Show* come off as more than a little disingenuous: "In retrospect, I now realise that it was a breakthrough on a major scale in British humour, the like of which was hard to follow" (*The Story* 61). There is no retrospect about it: the man knew that he was after breakthroughs all along.

2. Milligan's Deconstructions of History and Historical Fictions

The Goon Show offers a catalogue of breakthroughs in a variety of fields of endeavour: Everest is climbed from the inside; dustbins are made which can not only withstand the ravages of nuclear warfare, but travel up Niagara Falls while doing so; a dry canal is cut across Africa, not for shipping, but as a conduit for air travel; a lunar expedition is mounted by fitting rockets to the Albert Memorial. There is more to this list of silly "firsts" than meets the eye. Whenever

¹⁸ This title should tell you everything you need to know about how good it must have been. The script appended to *Peace Work* removes most of the residual doubt.

an episode of *The Goon Show* features such a discovery, it hijacks the real-world accomplishment which inspired it, and spirits it far away from its original destination. Guided by parody and hyperbole, Milligan effects “an internal erosion of the legitimacy principle” (Lyotard, *Condition* 39) by which the initial undertaking was judged to be a successful attempt within existing discourses of human enterprise and discovery. Among the best-known of Milligan’s concentrated exercises in ironically interrogating unjustifiably grandiose human endeavour is the 1956 episode “The Jet-Propelled Guided NAAFI”. For no other reason than to show it can be done, “strolling Prime Minister of no fixed address” Neddy Seagoon has a servicemen’s cafeteria with the attributes of an intercontinental ballistic missile “Shot to Malaya and set up in seven seconds” (Milligan, “NAAFI”). Impressive as this accomplishment is, it brings with it a further challenge. Not only is the newly-launched soldiers’ caff untold miles from the nearest British soldier, but it is awash with fresh tea—“ten thousand cups”, to be precise, brewed by the NAAFI manager upon touchdown, presumably as part of a pre-programmed launching protocol (Milligan, “NAAFI”). In a spectacular feat of Cold War-era brinksmanship, Seagoon rises to the challenge by ordering a covert military operation to the trouble spot: “Twelve hundred planes, ten thousand men. All pledged to avert tea-wastage” (Milligan, “NAAFI”).

As a demonstration of the lengths that officialdom will go to in order to avoid being caught out in an error of judgement, “The Jet-Propelled Guided NAAFI” is rivalled only by a 1957 special episode of *The Goon Show* entitled “The Reason Why”, which purports to chronicle the 1876 acquisition of an Egyptian obelisk by the British Government to fill an empty space in the Thames Embankment. Although the monument can supposedly be gotten for free, the expenses incurred in transporting it to the port of Alexandria, raising it when it sinks to the bottom of the

harbour, ransoming Seagoon from a tribe of Bedouins who have captured him for no reason deemed worth explaining, chartering “a squadron of Arab dhows to scour the seven seas” when the obelisk (now encased in a “buoyant wooden jacket”) comes loose from the rope towing it, and finally erecting the recovered obelisk in London, come to the grand total of “a hundred and eighty thousand pounds, eight shillings” (Milligan and Stephens, “Reason”).

The closing narration of “The Reason Why” identifies Milligan’s poke at extravagance in the name of penny-pinching as “perhaps...the authentic story of Cleopatra’s Needle” (Milligan and Stephens, “Reason”), the name popularly given to the obelisk referred to in the episode. Although Milligan deliberately calls the veracity of the events just related into question by identifying his historical consultant as “Professor Toynbee, that is Professor Jim Toynbee of Hyde Park Railings” (Milligan and Stephens, “Reason”), their validity, from at least one postmodern point of view, is beyond reproach. Historian Hayden White lays bare the mechanism through which historiography creates its own sense of validity:

Many modern historians hold that narrative discourse, far from being a neutral medium for the representation of historical events and processes, is the very stuff of a mythic view of reality, conceptual or pseudoconceptual “content” which, when used to represent real events, endows them with an illusory coherence and charges them with the kinds of meanings more characteristic of oneiric than of waking thought. (*Content* ix)

As well as possessing many of the contours of oneiric thought, Milligan’s interrogations of grand narratives in *The Goon Show* possess Hayden White’s “illusory coherence”, in that they

describe occurrences which, no matter how far-fetched and outré, feature behaviour that seems believable, if human nature is viewed as being essentially irrational.

A *Goon Show* story which took its basis from a first-hand account of World War Two espionage furnishes an excellent example of Milligan elaborating on the already surreal nature of actual events to create something out of a fevered dream. “I Was Monty’s Treble”, from 1958, signals in its announced on-air title that it intends to outdo the exploits related by M.E. Clifton James in his autobiographical *I Was Monty’s Double* by at least fifty percent. The main plot, in fact, begins with three versions of Viscount Montgomery in the field (or field marshal) of play, in the form of “John Mills...Richard Attenborough [and] Anthony Steele” (Milligan, “Monty’s Treble”). The idea that portraying a given personage on film (as each of the above-named actors had) entitles someone to embody that personage retroactively in real life is a deliberate appropriation by Milligan of what Hayden White describes as “the confusion of historical individuals with the kinds of “characterization” of them required for discursive purposes” (“Historiophoty” 1199). The subsequent judgement by a *Goon Show* Wehrmacht officer that “some casting director has blundered” (“Monty’s Treble” recording, 5:25-5:28) in the choice of Steele as Montgomery demonstrates that discursive do purposes have their limits, though.

From there on in, dream-logic declares martial law on this episode, enforcing its will in ways that go beyond even Milligan’s usual degree of strangeness. Determining that they require a minimum of “forty thousand Monty’s doubles” to keep the Germans guessing, The War Office leaps into action, manufacturing the ersatz generals at a rate that soon induces something well beyond confusion in the enemy (Milligan, “Monty’s Treble”). Foiled in their attempts to abscond with either “the original” Montgomery or “the plans of an original Fred Montgomery”,

German agents do at least manage to destroy a marble “statue of Monty's future movements” (Milligan, “Monty’s Treble”). Their moment of triumph is short-lived: what they destroyed “was in fact only a statue of John Mills and Richard Attenborough's future movements” (Milligan, “Monty’s Treble”). Thwarted by the fragmentation of a historical individual by means of his subsequent cinema characterizations, the Germans still have one more trick up their sleeves. The Battle of El Alamein, won by the British, turns out to be “a fake” in the form of “Alamein’s double, played by Eccles”—a revelation which surprises Eccles no less than anybody else (“Monty’s Treble” recording, 26:59-27:06).

By fixing his gaze on moments traditionally portrayed as triumphs of British valor and ingenuity, and reimagining them as idiotic failures, Milligan uses for the purposes of comedy an idea that would be taken up by Lyotard, Hayden White, and other postmodern critics of one-dimensional, hegemonic readings of history. In “The Sign of History”, Lyotard argues that the “pretensions to universal validity in terms of historico-political reality” of ideologically-governed beliefs can be interrogated by a close reading of the same historical events which ideologies use to justify themselves (*Reader* 394).

Milligan’s close reading of the self-justifying metanarrative of Britain’s “mighty empire of restrictive practices” (Milligan and Stephens, “Horror”) extends beyond such provocatively-announced episode titles as “Insurance—the White Man’s Burden” (Milligan and Stephens, “Insurance”). An animus towards the fictions of empire is particularly noticeable when Milligan presents the rationale for undertakings on a historically grand scale as being unique to a “British” way of thinking. When, for example, Grytpype-Thynne protests to Parliament that the proposal to dig a “dry canal for aeroplanes” across Africa is impracticable on the grounds that

Seagoon, the author of the scheme, “knows nothing about canals”, one of Those Members Present moves “that as it is customary in our beloved country England, a man so totally unsuitable for the job, should be given the contract” (Milligan and Stephens, “Africa Ship Canal” 4). In this particular episode, unsuitability appears to be the main criteria for all jobs, no matter how important. During a casual conversation, the distinctly unstatesmanlike duo of Eccles and Bluebottle reveal that each of them has, at various times, been Prime Minister (Milligan and Stevens, “Africa Ship Canal” 9).

In the postmodern view, anyone is potentially suitable for the job of interrogating hegemonic ideologies that govern popular perceptions of history. As far as Lyotard is concerned, all it takes is the ability and willingness to ask searching, even embarrassing, questions:

the meaning of history...does not only show itself in the great deeds or misdeeds of the agents or actors who became famous in history, but also in the feeling of the obscure and distant spectators who see and hear them and who, in the sound and fury of the *res gestae*, distinguish between what is just and what is not.

(Lyotard, *Reader* 401-2)

Milligan uses his vantage point as an obscure and distant spectator to lob canisters of laughing gas at the baggage train of thought whose cargo is the idea that Britain’s colonial history was an unending succession of heroic victories in the face of overwhelming odds. The first full-episode-length instance of this in *The Goon Show* came in 1954, with “The Siege of Fort Knight”¹⁹. Recorded at the end of the program’s fourth season, this tale sees a relief column

¹⁹ The recording used as a reference for this story is a version of the original 1954 script “reworked for the ‘Vintage Goons’ series” (Wilmut and Grafton 139) and broadcast in 1958. The transcription to be found at thegoonshow.net is widely and frequently at variance with this recording. Assuming that the discrepancies are not due to ineptitude

sent “thirty thousand miles away²⁰, in the very liver of Africa” (“Fort Knight” recording, 0:22-0:28) to supply a beleaguered colonial outpost with not fresh troops or ammunition, but a waterproof gas stove to see them through the monsoon season²¹.

Upon their arrival, the troops bearing the impermeable oven are greeted, not by their grateful comrades, but by a butler. The major domo is somewhat discomfited at having to serve dinner to both them and the fort’s current guests, “the enemies of the Queen” (“Fort Knight” recording, 23:04-23:06). The ease with which Her Majesty’s gallant men in uniform (or at any rate, their household staff) have acquiesced in the face of danger is not the last blow to British pride in this episode. Mounting a last charge to liberate Fort Knight, Seagoon and his cohorts storm the fort, only to discover that “there’s nobody here” (“Fort Knight” recording, 26:43-26:45). Milligan leaves little doubt that he wishes the listener to read this “disappointing end to the show” (“Fort Knight” recording, 26:49-26:51) as an indictment of the ideals of King, Country and Empire, by putting these final words into the mouth of Wallace Greenslade: “Perhaps listeners will now believe how bad things really are in the Old Country” (Milligan, “Fort (K)night”).

on the part of the anonymous transcriber, the transcription may be derived from or any combination of any or all of the following sources: a recording of the original 1954 episode, an unedited recording of the 1958 broadcast, an original script or fragment thereof for either episode, or a reconstruction from memory. Although “the amount of reworking applied to [original 4th series scripts] varied” (Wilmot and Grafton 72) when remounting them for the “Vintage Goons” series, evidence from those episodes for which 1954 and 1958 transcriptions are extant indicate that such reworkings had no effect on these episodes’ stories or main plot devices.

²⁰ Milligan’s tendency to overestimate the circumference of the earth, or propose taking the long route to get to a destination, is clearly fully-formed, even this early in the series’ full-episode-length story format.

²¹ This is not a common meteorological occurrence in Africa, much less a regular one, but then again the “Kurdish tribesmen” referred to as Fort Knight’s besiegers (“Fort Knight” recording, 0:37-0:39) hardly have much to do with Africa either.

Using ridicule to undermine the mythos that justified British imperialism forms the core of Milligan's strategy for coping with personal memories of "the terrible power that Britain had...at the beginning of the [twentieth] century" (Behan 36). Hayden White has the following to say about the type of self-congratulatory jingoism that Milligan tossed into the shredder:

Myths and the ideologies based on them presuppose the adequacy of stories to the representation of the reality whose meaning they purport to reveal. When belief in this adequacy begins to wane, the entire cultural edifice of a society enters into crisis, because not only is the specific system of beliefs undermined but the very possibility of socially significant belief is eroded. (White, *Content* x)

Milligan found that the most effective way to highlight the inadequacy of stories which legitimized British hegemony was to people his versions of them with characters who were inadequate for the roles in which they were cast. As an embodiment all the cardinal virtues of a nation's vision of itself, Neddy Seagoon comes off at the best of times as a "clumsy, heavily-laboured hero" (Milligan and Stephens, "Lake"). In spite of all of this, Seagoon finds himself time and again at the centre of events, and moreover, in a position of authority and trust. "The Jet-Propelled Guided NAAFI" and "The Great Tuscan Salami Scandal" both see him entrenched in the high office of Prime Minister, even if in one of these cases his place of residence is given as "no fixed address" (Milligan, "Salami"; Milligan and Stephens, "NAAFI"). The first instance of Seagoon as a British luminary that can be placed on a "true" historical timeline occurs in "The Histories of Pliny the Elder", when he "portrays" a distant ancestor, "the Welsh chieftain

Caractacus Seagoon”²² (“Pliny” recording, 12:19-12:24)²³. The theme of Seagoon as a legendary champion of British liberty against oppression is taken up again when he takes the title role in *The Goon Show*’s two “Robin Hood” stories²⁴. Seagoon crops up as a defender of the mythos of British history in other guises as well. In “The MacReekie Rising of ’74”, Seagoon protects both a legend and its physical manifestation. As one of the guards at the Tower of London, he must prevent a party of Scottish insurrectionists from storming the Tower and stealing the ravens who nest in it. The justification for this bird-loving act of self-sacrifice is the folk belief that “if the ravens leave the tower, the tower will surely fall”, and with it, England (Milligan and Stephens, “MacReekie”). In this story, British legend proves to be no match for Goonish stupidity: the ravens are never stolen by the Scots, but instead (in a way which recalls a certain nursery rhyme) baked by Minnie Bannister into a pie (Milligan and Stephens, “MacReekie”). Conveniently for The Goons, but inconveniently for those listeners who might want a definitive word on the subject, the episode ends immediately thereafter, with no news on whether England has in fact fallen.

²² It should be noted in passing that this is another example of Milligan coalescing a long historical period vaguely conceptualized as “Roman times” into a single smaller time frame. The one and only noteworthy Caractacus, from whom Seagoon’s character name and function for this episode derive, was the leader of native British resistance against the Romans, but in the first century A.D., and not against Julius Caesar as the episode has it.

²³ I have chosen to cite the recording itself because—incredibly—the transcription of the episode to be found at *thegoonshow.net* contains the phonetically valid, but verifiably inaccurate, spelling “Caracticus”. Since the name is clearly a reference to a historical figure whose name is spelled otherwise in print, one has to wonder why no correction was made...especially since Harry Secombe makes two attempts in the recorded episode to pronounce “Caractacus” the first time he says the name.

²⁴ These are 1954’s “Ye Bandit of Sherwood Forest” and 1956’s “Robin Hood (and His Mirry Mon)”. Seagoon is referred to as “Robin Hood” in both, but Harry Secombe’s portrayal of the once and future Earl of Locksley leaves little doubt as to the identity of the characterization.

All in all, however, it is probably better that guardianship of the British mythos remain in the hands of Neddy Seagoon. The 1958 episode “The Battle of Spion Kop” ends with a remount of the battle of Waterloo, with “Eccles playing the part of Wellington” (Milligan, *More Scripts* 36). The Iron Eccles’ predictable loss to Napoleon means that “new history books” (Milligan, *More Scripts* 37) have to be printed.

3. *The Goon Show* as Reductio ad Absurdum of the Metanarratives of Scientific Thought

History is not the only subject on the curriculum which requires new textbooks after Milligan has had his way with it. A constant questioning of the validity of a scientific understanding of the world puts *The Goon Show* in line with “postmodern modes of thought that more generally question fundamental Enlightenment assumptions about human subjectivity, knowledge and progress” (Heise 136). Rationality and empiricism in and of themselves are never *The Goon Show*’s principal targets: Milligan levels his artillery squarely at the idea that a purely rational and empirical approach to knowledge-gathering is bound to gather knowledge that will contribute to the betterment of humankind. The nature of the scientific “advances” of some of *The Goon Show*’s putative sponsors is likely to give pause to even the most ardent supporter of logical positivism. From the sheer pointlessness of “Footo, the Wonder Boot-Exploder” (Milligan, “Internal” 1, 7, 12; Milligan and Stephens, “Scradje” 11, 12), to the future-consumer-destroying sadism of “Kiddies Head Crushing Machines, Ltd.” (Milligan, “Internal” 1), not much that is dreamed up in the Research and Development departments of corporations in *The Goon Show*’s world seems geared towards the betterment of anyone or anything in particular. In this world, even knowledge itself has become a consumer product with about as much practical use as a pet rock, thanks to “brains, the new wonder head-filler” (Milligan, *Scripts* 91).

Brains can be used for more than just filling heads, of course. They can establish boundaries for inquiry which, if obeyed too scrupulously or too blindly, inhibit the search for knowledge rather than encourage it. Milligan reveals a skeptical attitude towards science as a self-sufficient generator of knowledge through his choice of a character to embody the scientific establishment. As *The Goon Show*'s resident inventor, savant, and all-around boffin, the addle-pated Henry Crun is a dubious advocate for the conditions of truth in any domain of knowledge, much less any scientific one. It chills the blood to imagine someone as senile as Crun to be part of the brain trust of a nascent military-industrial complex, as is the case in "The Giant Bombardon" from 1954²⁵. In spite of this, Crun is hard at work developing a nineteenth-century terror weapon in his home laboratory "in a tree in Hyde Park" (Milligan, "Bombardon"). Eccentricity among inventors is nothing new, but Crun's grasp on logic calls his competence into question:

[MINNIE]. ... What's all that other type noise down there?

CRUN. I'm washing the dinner plates Min.

FX. Scraping of crockery. (Continues under)

[MINNIE]. But we haven't had dinner yet, Henry.

CRUN. Ah, but I'm washing them now so that we won't have to wash them after.

(Milligan, "Bombardon")

Crun's choice of both a lab assistant and a rationale for his munitions work are also causes for concern:

CRUN. You know that elephant was helping me build my giant bombardon in the cellar.

²⁵ 1954 was the original year of broadcast of this episode, of which neither a recording nor a transcription survives. The quotes are taken from the re-recording of the story done in 1957 for the 'Vintage Goons' series.

[MINNIE]. I don't know...I don't know what we want a giant bombardon for.

[...]

CRUN. Well, if you sleep in the barrel of it Min [...] Sleeping in the barrel, Min, it gets rid of rheumatism of the knees you know. My uncle slept in a cannon once.

[MINNIE]. What did it get rid of?

CRUN. It got rid of my uncle... (Milligan, "Bombardon")

By working out the logistics of putting a cellar big enough to hold both an enormous cannon and an elephant into a tree²⁶, Crun displays a special kind of genius. At the same time, he displays a special kind of idiocy, by designing and building an artillery weapon intended solely for use as a therapeutic bed, when previous experience has shown the dangers of doing so.

And yet, by one definition offered by Lyotard, Henry Crun's scientific method is perfectly valid: "Science does not expand by means of the positivism of efficiency. The opposite is true: working on a proof means searching for and "inventing" counterexamples; in other words, the unintelligible" (*Condition* 54). Sleeping in a cannon may be an inefficient (and potentially deadly) method of curing rheumatism. On the other hand, by inviting the consideration of counterexamples to this particular cure, it does seem to conform to the method of trial-and-error implicit in Lyotard's model for science.

²⁶ The existence of a cellar in a tree in Milligan's fictional world may not necessarily imply that this cellar is below ground level. One possible indication that Milligan intended the location of the cellar to be ambiguous is the fact that he fought shy of using the phrase "root cellar"—a pun which would have been consistent with his technique of free-associating from both the lexical content and the visual imagery of any given line of dialogue in *The Goon Show*.

4. Breaking Causal Chains Causes Causal Chain Reactions: Indeterminacy in *The Goon*

Show

Unintelligible as the explanations for them may be, the laws and regularities which Milligan has created for his fictional cosmos are themselves governed by a very intelligible guiding principle, which can best be described as the discretionary suspension of the laws of causality. Simply put, in *The Goon Show* given causes do not reliably produce given effects. Milligan's characters grasp this principle of indeterminacy well enough to experience moments like this without questioning them too much:

MINNIE. (distant) ... Who's that down there?

CRUN. I've lost my key, Min.

MINNIE. Oh dear, nnn...I'm...I'm.... I'm coming...I'm coming, buddy... [*As her footsteps begin on the stairs*] (I'm coming...)

FX. [*Footsteps down five flights of stairs, separated by long landings...this takes 37 seconds*]

CRUN. I can't understand it, we live in a bungalow! (Milligan and Sykes, "Fireball" recording 3:28-4:23)

After making a note of this anomaly, Crun goes back about his business, without checking to see where the extra storeys have appeared from, or whether they are still there. For him and Minnie, the notion that space could be perverse enough to expand when, and only when, one chooses to traverse it is taken as a fact of life.

As irrational as such a belief may be, it makes a rough kind of intuitive sense. The walk in fair weather along even ground that seems longer in one direction than the other is a common experience; so is the nightmare about the destination that gets farther away the faster one runs to approach it. Where experiences such as this are concerned, *The Goon Show*'s world diverges from ours in one important respect. In *The Goon Show*, these occurrences are normative rather than exceptional, and have an empirical as well as an experiential component. If someone in our world says that a seventy-mile journey is "roughly sixty miles", we will still have seventy miles to travel, come what may. In the world of *The Goon Show*, a traveller looking to shave some time off the same trip has the option to "go roughly", secure in the knowledge that "it's ten miles shorter" (Milligan, "Priest"). However, the traveller who creates this shortcut by the power of suggestion, as Seagoon does in "The Mummified Priest", needs to be alert to the possibility that his rate of speed can be affected by changes in the rate of the passage of time. Earlier in the same episode, when Seagoon talks about his job, he mentions that "the hours were very long, seventy minutes each" (Milligan, "Priest"). If the hours of his journey suddenly began to take ten minutes longer to elapse (and Milligan never gives the listener any good reason to assume that this might *not* happen), travelling sixty miles in place of seventy at the same number of miles per hour would take one-sixth longer than expected.

Time and space in "The Mummified Priest" are set on a collision course with one another, as though each were the product of one of two separate and irreconcilable domains of knowledge. Milligan's characterization of the knowledge domains governing time and space as indeterminate creates this conflict between them; it also places them in a conceptual territory which has recognizably postmodern features. Two decades after *The Goon Show*, Lyotard offered the following thumbnail sketch of the postmodern conceptual landscape:

Postmodern science—by concerning itself with things such as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, “*fracta*”, catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes—is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical. It is changing the meaning of the word *knowledge*, while expressing how such a change can take place. It is producing not the known, but the unknown. (Lyotard, *Condition* 60)

The unknown is a regular product of Milligan’s mind: characters in *The Goon Show* appear most at one with their surroundings when the security of contestable fact dissolves into something that is nearly, but not quite, beyond words. In “The Lost Year”, there is less consternation than might be expected when Eccles, who has been sent on a wild goose chase to the North Pole, suddenly turns up on board a ship bound for Africa, driving a dogsled, “And surrounded by his own private blizzard” (Milligan, “The Lost Year”). The blizzard that Eccles brings with him is proof that he is not wrong to be driving a dogsled on a southbound oceangoing vessel. Instead, the ship is wrong for being an improper place to drive a dogsled. Eccles is merely rectifying the situation by bringing the proper place to drive a dogsled along with him. The idea that Eccles is perfectly right in this belief, from his point of view at least, is reinforced when he, the dogsled and the blizzard turn up later in the heart of Africa, just in time to transport a fatigue-and-thirst-weakened Seagoon and jungle-boy Bluebottle to “a British outpost” commanded by Major Bloodnok (Milligan, “The Lost Year”).

5. Superspace—The Final Frontier: *The Goon Show*'s Universe of Multiple Universes

The idea that persisting in an activity in an inappropriate locale will bring an appropriate locale into being is yet another of *The Goon Show*'s challenges to conventional notions about the ways in which spatial frames and dimensions interact, as well as a challenge to conventional notions about the very concept of dimensionality in space. Milligan left a clue to understanding this feature of *The Goon Show*'s universe on the road to Fort Knight. Once assembled, the waterproof gas stove designed by Henry Crun turns out to have the ability to repel not just moisture, but the laws of probability as well. Testing the oven by turning the temperature gauge to three different settings, Crun reveals a theatre organist playing an interlude, a railway station, and The Ray Ellington Quartet ("Fort Knight recording, 13:41-17:22). This unexpected feature of Crun's invention proves indispensable when the mission to relieve Fort Knight is hemmed in by hostile natives. Turning on the stove and dialing up the railway station once again, Crun, Seagoon and the relief column complete the rest of the journey "by train" ("Fort Knight recording, 20:38-20:39).

The break between the end of the previous paragraph and the beginning of this one ought to have provided sufficient time to ponder some question along the lines of "how did they get the gas stove inside the train when the entire train station was inside the gas stove to begin with?" The answer is simplicity itself:

CRUN. [...] Everybody get into the gas stove and then bring it in after us. I'll get in first...come on, Seagoon. Eccles--hand me in the right side of the stove.

ECCLES. Okay. [*Straining as he passes in the side of the stove*] Ow...

CRUN. Now the left.

ECCLES. [*Straining*] Ow...

CRUN. Now the top and the back.

ECCLES. [*Assorted straining noises.*]

CRUN. Good, good... [...] Now close the oven door from the outside and bring it in after you.

ECCLES. Wait a minute. Close it from the outside...and bring it in after me...that would mean climbing through it when it's shut and not opening it till I get through. [*ponders the situation*] Oh-ho-ho-ho...

SEAGOON. Eccles—what are you waiting for?

ECCLES. I don't know how to do it. ("Fort Knight" recording, 20:57-21:43)

After taking a moment to recover from the shock of Eccles' first-ever admission of *not* knowing how to do the impossible²⁷, Seagoon offers him a solution: "We'll take the rest of the oven by train, while you can get the oven door and go ahead on foot" ("Fort Knight recording, 21:45-21:48).

All of this bears a superficial similarity to the endless sequence of doors revealing unexpected places displayed in "The Yehti"; at the same time, it contains a vital elaboration on the thinking behind it. Whereas "The Yehti" involved the concept that a door in a determined space could open onto an indeterminate space, the gas stove intended for Fort Knight constitutes a self-contained and apparently determinate space which can open into a multiplicity of non-related, but still clearly determined, spaces. This interlinking of frames of reference in "The Siege of

²⁷ This is covered by the studio audience freely supplying laughter which has a tone that can best be described as a mixture of bemusement, bewilderment, and stunned disbelief ("Fort Knight" recording, 21:43-21:44).

Fort Knight” represents a conceptual broad jump from a phenomenological view of spatial frames as a product of perception and experience to a theoretical view of space as fixed, immanent, substantial, and yet to some degree ineffable. Without being aware of it, Milligan thus hit upon one of the postulates of post-Einsteinian physics: “an imaginary mathematical structure which envisions situations in which there exist more than three dimensions”, sometimes referred to by the term “superspace” (Hope 36-7). Murry Hope, a populariser of cutting-edge and avant-garde science, explains the concept as follows: “Superspace contains points in much the same way as ordinary space does, only each point in superspace marks the location of every object in a whole universe” (37).

The idea that everything can be potentially everywhere at once is a high-wire act of mental gymnastics involving some very complicated mathematical formulae. The basic idea behind it all can be explained in the straightforward terms theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking used during a 1999 lecture: “according to Quantum Theory, the universe doesn’t have just a unique single history. Instead, the universe has every single possible history, each with its own probability” (“Warps”). The catch (as theoretical physicists understand it so far) is that all these possibilities and probabilities cannot overlap, which, as Hawking jocularly put it, “would explain why we haven’t been over run by tourists from the future” (“Warps”).

Unfortunately for theoretical physics, “cannot” is a concept which cannot be expressed in *The Goon Show*. The point in space represented by Fort Knight’s gas stove becomes a gateway to a matrix of trans-dimensional possible universes, through a property that Milligan adds to the worlds contained within the stove. Not only is at least one of these spaces larger than the presumed capacity of the stove that serves as its container, but it has the ability to serve as a

container for the stove itself, once the stove is disassembled. By virtue of being able to open onto a larger space, and subsequently to be packed back into that space, the spatial frame bracketed by the gas stove demonstrates the flexibility and mutability of a cosmos composed of a theoretically infinite number of intersections of individual super-space points. Using the central hypothesis of (for want of a better term) the infinite number of possible infinities which governs this paradigm, the web of space and time can be conceived, not as a static array of coordinates that can be easily plotted on a graph, but as “a complex and ever-changing labyrinth of perpetual motion” (Hope 41)

6. *The Goon Show* Hits a Heisenberg, but Doesn't Sink: Milligan and the Uncertainty

Principle

“The Siege of Fort Knight” offers up a brain-teaser worthy of Zeno or a Zen master: if a moveable gas stove contains an equally mobile train only when set to a certain temperature, where are the train and the stove relative to one another when the stove is off? Part of the answer was provided by physicist Werner Heisenberg in the 1920s: “Prior to observation, the properties of a particle are *indefinite*, as it covers, or fluctuates over a range of positions or velocities *simultaneously*” (Hope 143). “In other words,” as Hawking puts it in *A Brief History of Time*, “the more accurately you try to measure the position of the particle, the less accurately you measure its speed, and vice versa” (57). “The uncertainty principle has profound implications for how we view the world. Even after more than seventy years they have not been fully appreciated by many philosophers, and are still the subject of much controversy” (Hawking, *Time* 57).

The uncertainty principle's implications have spread far beyond the specialized field of particle physics, and have come to influence a world-view characterized by a loss of faith in the explanatory power of cause and effect. Summarizing what Lyotard identified as the crux of this

Weltanschauung, Niels Brügger notes that previous causality-based “narratives of legitimation supporting both science and social bonds functioned satisfactorily, but for Lyotard they have become untrustworthy; indeed, the postmodern context *is* this untrustworthiness” (78). William Demastes identifies “issues of unpredictability and uncertainty” as central to an understanding of the postmodern mindset, and argues that this mindset’s “*choice* to recognize and concentrate on such phenomena should be conceived of as something of an appropriate choice” (Demastes 8).

Milligan’s own set of choices frequently involve dropping broad hints that nothing in *The Goon Show* is necessarily meant to be taken as a cause or effect of anything else. When the 1954 episode “The Affair of the Lone Banana” opens with nearly a minute of the William Tell Overture, progressively sped up and quick-mixed into a crash of glass, metal and assorted junk, it does not herald the appearance of William Tell, Giacchino Rossini, The Lone Ranger, The Lone Banana²⁸, or anyone (or anything) in particular. All the listener ever gets by way of explanation, when the crashing noises stop, is Harry Secombe saying “and why not?” (“Lone Banana” recording 0:00-0:54). Coming as it does right off the top of the episode, this simple question can be read as a direct challenge by Milligan to anyone who might dare to impose conventional logic on the unpredictability and disorder inherent to *The Goon Show*’s universe.

²⁸ A lone banana does feature as a plot device in this particular episode: it is a vital clue to the whereabouts of disappeared laundry heir Fred Nurke. Nurke himself is only heard near the end of the episode for a brief ten seconds over the telephone (“Lone Banana” recording, 29:59-30:09). As Harry Secombe might explain, “and why not?”

7. Disorder as a Creative Force in *The Goon Show*

“Disorder” is, of course, a relative term. It says as much about the observer’s need to put things in a certain order as it does about the orderliness of the things themselves. When Hawking speaks of entropy as “a form of Murphy’s law: things always tend to go wrong” (*Time* 149), he paints a picture of a universe that is gradually falling into a disarray that will result in its ultimate dissolution. Milligan depicts the universe in quite different terms: in his cosmology, disorder can become a system’s main creative force, introducing, if not exactly predictability, then a degree of repeatability to seemingly singular occurrences. “The String Robberies” features Minnie and Henry using their house as a vehicle which makes the sound of an “*Old Car Banging & Honking*” (Milligan, *Book* 96), first to drive to the police station, then later to pick up the hitchhiking fugitives Grytpype-Thynne and Moriarty²⁹ (Milligan, *Book* 105). Soon after this second encounter, it becomes apparent that other edifices have taken up the practice of locomotion, as a “photographer’s dark room” conveniently pulls up to allow Seagoon and Bluebottle to develop pictures of the escaped criminals (Milligan, *Book* 105).

A sudden craze for driving domiciles (or parts thereof) is one of numerous instances in *The Goon Show* when “unexpected and significant events occur as a result of minute deviations in a cause” (Demastes 65). “Scradje”, for example, features first a hockey stick factory, then a pyramid, used as transport (Milligan and Stephens, “Scradje” 3, 11). At other times, however, the same (or similar) deviations occurring have no guarantee of producing events of any kind. Eccles chauffeuring Seagoon on a wall in “The Hastings Flyer” is a unique occurrence for that episode; Seagoon’s and Crun’s theatre-organ time trials in “The Mighty Wurlitzer” do not cause

²⁹ This is also a case of necessity being the mother of invention: Minnie has to drive the house because Henry is “not allowed [to go] out [of doors]” (Milligan, *Book* 96).

one another, but are conditioned by the previous existence of a land-speed record for the instrument in question.

By varying the methods through which the progression from relative order to relative disorder will be manifested in an episode of *The Goon Show*, Milligan creates a system where entropy works towards renewal, rather than decay. While unravelling the mystery of “The Great String Robberies”³⁰, canny Inspector Seagoon of Scotland Yard demonstrates that the disorder introduced into a system can produce an order of its own:

[SEAGOON]. So *that’s* what a missing piece of string looks like. Where’s it gone? Oh, but wait, can’t you see...Someone’s cut that string in the centre, and pulled the pieces in opposite directions, giving the impression that a piece has been removed from the middle. (Milligan, *Book 95*)

This, however, is just a provisional theory. A little more collegial discussion provides what is agreed upon as the actual state of affairs:

[SEAGOON]. ...Now I see what happened. What cunning! The criminal cut a piece off each end, *then* cut across the middle, and pulled them apart, making the string look its original length. (Milligan, *Book 95*)

This conclusion, and the subsequent quest to recover missing string that may only have been called into existence by the postulation of its absence, are both object lessons in how “Retrospection can produce an illusion of linear causality, can work backward to produce a forward-looking possibility of predictability” (Demastes 79) in an inherently disordered system.

³⁰ This is the title under which the episode referred to in other places (including compilations of *Goon Show* recordings) as “The String Robberies” is published in *The Book of the Goons* (Milligan, *Book 91-106*).

8. Chaos in *The Goon Show*: Not So Much a Theory as a Way of Life

Prediction through retrospection is always a stone's throw over one's shoulder from the *post hoc* fallacy; it is the intellectual equivalent of people "walking backwards with their boots off, carrying gas-stoves above their heads" (Milligan and Stevens, "Scradje" 8) to prevent their boots from exploding while on their feet. Yet Milligan's universe is defined by the regular and systematic use of such chaotic forms of logic. In fact, the logic that governs *The Goon Show* is the logic of chaos theory, which rather appropriately "does not have a precise definition but rather loosely denotes a number of up-to-date research fields in the natural sciences" (Weingart and Maasen 467) designed for the express purpose of coaxing regularities out of systems with no fixed outcome. The power of chaos theory as a metaphor which defines current discourse in the humanities has been widely noted: sociologist Peter Weingart is of the opinion that "Most [such] discourses deem it important to refer to chaos" (518), regardless of the references' grounding in pure or applied science.

One such recent discourse forms the main thesis of William Demastes' *Theatre of Chaos*. Stating that "Chaos theory...describes the general nature of events...but...can't provide information that can anticipate and control nature" (160), Demastes identifies a tendency in postmodern English-language dramaturgy which, "like the chaotics of science...espouses a vision of dynamic interaction leading to orderly disorder" (xvi). The manipulation of time and space found in *The Goon Show* puts the program very much in line with Demastes' assertion that "As the chaos paradigm grants unpredictability within a determinist frame, it also allows for any number of directions in its move to regain order out of a destabilized condition" (145).

Whenever possible, Milligan moves in more than one direction at once; the resulting order can best be described as a stalemate among numerous potentialities which have been simultaneously actualized. As we have seen, Bluebottle can be deceased, and still alive enough to complain bitterly about his latest “deading”; Eccles can be a drill team unto himself, or a one-man choral group; and the phrase “person-to-person call” can take on an entirely new meaning:

FX. Phone rings.

MORIARTY. [*with ‘telephone distort’ effect, speaks over phone ringing*]

Secombe?

SECOMBE. Yes?

MORIARTY. Pick up the telephone.

SECOMBE. Why?

MORIARTY. I want to speak to you on it!

SECOMBE. Right!

FX. Phone ringing ends

SECOMBE. [*Blows on receiver*] Hello?

MORIARTY. Is that you, Secombe?

SECOMBE. Yes.

MORIARTY. I'm glad you were in! ("Bank of England Robbery" recording 2:03-2:15)³¹

In keeping with a chaos model of reality generation, this and countless other moments in *The Goon Show* put the lie to seemingly rational assumptions such as this one: "Classical logic insists that an object can only be "here" *or* "there", never "here" *and* "there" " (Demastes 29). There is no telling how many "heres" and "theres" one can occupy, in a world where an interchange like this is possible between a live person and a recorded one:

GRAMS – MORIARTY. This is Moriarty speaking on a record. Now listen mon ami, here are your instructions. Have you reached the end of the tunnel?

SEAGOON. Yes!

GRAMS – MORIARTY. Good! Now, I've got some notes written here, so strike a match.

SEAGOON. We haven't got any.

GRAMS – MORIARTY. Never mind, I'll nip out and get some. Taxi!

GRAMS. Taxi approaches. Door closes, taxi accelerates away (Milligan, "Bank of England Robbery Vintage")

Not long after this, Moriarty phones Seagoon to tell him that a blunt phonograph needle has laid him up "In hospital, badly scratched" (Milligan, "Bank of England Robbery Vintage"). If such a contretemps can befall a pre-recorded voice in the here and now, it not only calls into

³¹ For those who are wondering why "Secombe" has not been replaced by "[Seagoon]" in this instance, a quick explanation. The character played by Harry Secombe had not yet been regularly designated as "Neddy Seagoon" when this episode was originally recorded in 1954. Although no different in any significant respect from Seagoon, the character is referred to as " "Fingers" Secombe" during the episode (Milligan, "Bank of England Robbery 1954").

question any certainty concerning “here” and “there”, but any certainty concerning “now” and “then”.

These uncertainties are, ironically, easiest to sort out when Milligan is not on the top of his game as a writer. Admittedly, Milligan at his best often allows loose ends to sit with their gaps exposed, waiting for the listener (or Inspector Seagoon) to imagine the missing piece of narrative string that would connect them. The episode “Queen Anne’s Rain”, however, features so many unaddressed lapses in temporal and spatial continuity that it accidentally interrogates its own discourse about time and space. Greenslade’s story-opening narration that “The scene is a certain place, at a certain time, in a certain year” (Milligan, “Rain”) sets the tone for the welter of uncertainty that follows³². Not long afterwards, it is revealed by Minnie and Henry that the story is set in 1880; references to “the River Seven”³³ (“Rain” recording 5:50-5:51) and a “bridge to London” (Milligan, “Rain”) leave clues, but nothing more, about where the setting of the story *might* be, and where it is definitely *not*. Almost two-thirds of the way through the episode, we finally find out where the setting actually *is*: the ridiculously-named, but altogether real and verifiable, village of Upper Dicker (“Rain” recording, 19:34-19:36).

³² And if it doesn’t, then Milligan (as himself) saying “we’re not giving anything away tonight, folks” (Milligan, “Rain”) is more than ample warning that the inexplicable and the unexpected will be even more in evidence than is usual for *The Goon Show*.

³³ Referred to in the transcript to be found at thegoonshow.net as “the River Severn” (Milligan, “Rain”). The confusion is understandable, given the way that the line is read by Peter Sellers as Henry Crun. Since the entire line, “The River Seven has risen foot inches” is clearly meant to be the payoff to a “rearrange the words” gag which is set up by the line “The River Foot has risen seven inches” (Milligan, “Rain”), it is more likely that Milligan wrote “Seven” and not “Severn”. Either way, it refers to a river which is nowhere near the town which is eventually revealed to be the site of the action.

Here is where the gaps in continuity begin to open wide, for all to see (or hear). Upper Dicker is in East Sussex; the River Seven is in North Yorkshire³⁴; the floods mentioned earlier in the episode on the river in question would not affect travel from the village in question to London. A familiarity with Milligan's body of work would suggest at this stage that the Upper Dicker of "Queen Anne's Rain" is best understood as being capable of shifting its location, or of existing in at least two places at once.

Familiar as it may be to *Goon Show* aficionados, this explanation does nothing to alleviate the doubt cast by the steady stream of conflicting anachronisms and unacknowledged time-shifts which plague this episode. Apart from the reference to 1950s British pinup girl Sabrina³⁵ which is such a common *Goon Show* feature that it passes virtually unnoticed, "Queen Anne's Rain" stubbornly refuses to lock on to any one time period in particular. The year 1880 is mentioned only once in passing, by Minnie and Henry, not the most reliable of sources at the best of times. An Upper Dicker local who has yet to be formally introduced to the concept of homophones later confuses the situation by attributing the torrential downpours that have been causing local flooding to a piece of national news: "I read in the paper that it's Queen Anne's reign" (Milligan, "Rain"). The listener is now forced to choose between accepting a historical impossibility—

³⁴ And, for the sake of thoroughness, the River Severn, which flows through Shropshire, Worcestershire, and Gloucestershire, before emptying into the Bristol Channel, is clear off on the other side of the island from both Upper Dicker and the River Seven.

³⁵ Whose name, coincidentally, is derived from the Latin name for the River Severn. It's enough to make one wonder if she slipped into this episode through a form of subconscious auto-suggestion on Milligan's part... a less obvious one than the one which would be normally imagined to be in operation, that is.

Queen Anne is still on the throne in 1880—or a time-jump back to the early eighteenth century, making a newspaper report³⁶ about Queen Anne quite possible.

What would *not* be historically possible, in 1880 or the early eighteenth century, is Winston Churchill as Prime Minister. Yet there he is in the very next scene, taking questions in the House of Commons, and taking the news that “The village of Upper Dicker has accused Queen Anne of reigning too long” (Milligan, “Rain”) altogether too seriously, given the temporal impossibility of the entire situation. Just when the listener has almost adjusted to this latest paradox, good old Wallace Greenslade tosses another monkey wrench into the already jammed-up works by back-announcing Churchill’s words as part of a “Today in Parliament” broadcast, thus strengthening the claim for any year during Churchill’s two terms of office as another contender for the title of Most Probable Time Period for this episode. The sudden unmotivated announcement at the end of the episode that “Queen Anne’s stopped reigning” (Milligan, “Rain”) means that the title is likely to forever remain vacant.

The chopping and changing of locale and time frame in “Queen Anne’s Rain” show Milligan’s strategies for distorting time and space in *The Goon Show* stretched beyond their ordinarily tolerable level of absurdity. The episode’s relative incoherence is also a reminder that no matter how far Milligan sometimes appears to plumb the depths of madness while he turns time and space inside out and back again, the usual method behind it is equally deep. As Philip Oakes noted in the magazine *Books and Art* after viewing *The Goons* in action: “ ‘Lunacy is our planet,’ says Spike Milligan. But it is lunacy of a purging and purposeful kind that both reveals

³⁶ Quite likely in the *Daily Courant*, the first successful English-language newspaper printed in Britain, whose years of publication run from 1702 to 1735.

and releases” (qtd. In Milligan, *Scripts* 9). As Milligan plays cat’s cradle with the laws of the universe for our entertainment (and for his), he reveals to the listener that, as Eccles already has discovered, conventional notions of time and space, and the rationales behind them, are merely things written on pieces of paper. In this way, *The Goon Show* releases any willing listener from preconceptions based on received knowledge about perceived experience; these are the very ideas which the program’s seminal producer Peter Eton understood to be part of “the “standing order” ” (*The Story* 119) which Milligan aimed to undermine one joke at a time. Sapping the foundations of what things are supposed to mean, or as Lyotard would put it, “incredulity towards metanarratives” of knowledge (*Condition* xxiv), is the very essence of the postmodern outlook. A generation before the postmodern era, but faithful to the way Lubomir Doležel describes the postmodern spirit, *The Goon Show* twisted the universe of time and space into “a wonderland where each thing can morph into another, a ludic world free of conventions, rules, and traditions” (4-5).

CONCLUSION: THE ACCORDION IS PACKED AWAY

The initial aim in titling this thesis “Milligan’s Accordion” was to provide the reader with a compact visual metaphor for the processes of temporal and spatial distortion in *The Goon Show*. Although he was an accomplished musician, Spike Milligan did not play the accordion. Metaphorically speaking, however, he is a master of this particular instrument. Like an accordion virtuoso, he varies the rhythms and cadences with which he squashes and stretches temporal and spatial frames of reference, in ways that frequently test the limits not only of time and space, but of any metaphor for them.

The distortion of time and space in *The Goon Show* obeys its own accordion-like logic of push and pull. Over the course of an episode, degrees of indeterminacy are gradually introduced into an apparently fixed and coherent frame of temporal reference, while degrees of determinacy are gradually introduced into a spatial frame that begins as something of an unknown quantity.

Time in an episode of *The Goon Show* is always moving forward, but it is also looking in several directions at once. Even as the story unfolds in an eternal present, moving in a linear fashion through a sequence of events, it does so while continually referring to this story in the past tense, through narrations by its own characters. At the same time, characters in the story acknowledge the time flow of the radio broadcast which serves as the framing device for the story proper; they also interpolate themselves into the broadcast, even while the staff announcer, orchestra, and musical guests in that same broadcast regularly take part in the enactment of the story.

Time flows in even more mysterious ways than this in *The Goon Show*. It can speed up, slow down, or stand still without warning. Generally, it does so with reference to whatever activity is

currently going on. When the task to be accomplished is easy or straightforward, time can stretch out to inordinate lengths; the more difficult or potentially time-consuming the activity, the more likely time is to move with incredible speed. This part of Milligan's conception of time also has a habit of making a nonsense of calendars, as months on end get crammed into the space of mere days whenever the situation warrants it.

In certain episodes in particular, and for certain characters in general, time seems not to be an issue at all: the processes of aging and decay go on hiatus, allowing decades, even centuries, to pass without having any appreciable effect on whichever members of *The Goon Show's* repertory company happen to be thus blessed by their creator. Likewise, death is far from an equal-opportunity destroyer in Milligan's scheme of things: some of his characters are nearly impossible to kill, while others simply refuse to stay dead if it means losing a chance for extra lines of dialogue.

In short, there is very little about Milligan's writing for *The Goon Show* that can be grasped by viewing time as a universal construct. Almost no consensus about the essence of time emerges from what Milligan's characters say; even less emerges from what they do. Instead, the flow of time is demonstrated to be experiential, highly subjective, and to some extent subject to the will of whichever character is describing his or her experience at any given moment.

Space in *The Goon Show* is also depicted as the product of personal experience. With only sounds, music and voices at his disposal, Milligan's conception of space in each of the "staging areas" in a *Goon Show* story comes across as far more impressionistic than literal. The impression the listener most frequently receives from this fictional world is a sense that there are no transitions between places; spaces which would flow into one another as one passed through

them in the “real world” are instead separated by conceptual barriers. *The Goon Show*’s characters have the ability to traverse great distances instantaneously: if they stand still for too long, the narrative they belong to has a tendency to whisk them in a heartbeat to some distant locale, or to bring them face-to-face with multiple, and irreconcilable, frames of spatial reference.

In such a world, “here”, “there”, “near”, and “far” become matters of opinion, rather than absolutes. Depending on the requirements of an individual joke, or of the story as a whole, things and places which would ordinarily be close at hand are unattainably far off, while ones vastly beyond the range of human perception are within easy reach. Distances and scales for travel are nearly impossible to reckon accurately: the planet Milligan has created allows for straight-line journeys greater than the circumference of the Earth between countries and continents in the same hemisphere. Many of these treks end up being much shorter than expected, however, since all places in *The Goon Show*’s world can be a stone’s throw from Central London at a moment’s notice.

“Inside” and “outside” are also highly problematic concepts in *The Goon Show*’s fictional world, and are open to considerably more negotiation than they are in ours. Once they get “in” and “out” sorted out (and in), Milligan’s characters encounter a further problem: the interior and exterior dimensions of enclosed spaces are rarely in agreement with one another. Not only can Seagoon, Eccles, and the rest of *The Goon Show*’s dramatis personae enter mailboxes, garbage cans, and similarly cramped quarters without possessing the talents of a contortionist, but once inside, they often find the accommodations spacious beyond even their admittedly wild expectations.

No matter what space they find themselves in, characters in *The Goon Show* must be constantly alert to the perils posed by deceptively simple means of demarcating space. Doors are never to be trusted: even well-used doors in safe, familiar places can open without warning onto strange and threatening new vistas. Fortunately for all concerned, Milligan equips his characters with a built-in defense mechanism against such traps. If the space one finds oneself in is too dangerous, or ceases to suit one's purposes, it can simply be dismantled and reassembled, in whole or in part, somewhere else.

The ability to reconfigure space on demand is part and parcel with *The Goon Show*'s status as a radio program. Milligan's choice to open each episode of the program in the undefined space of the recording soundstage is an admission of that status. The concomitant choice not to open a *Goon Show* broadcast in the first locale of that week's featured story is a further admission of a belief that space is inherently indeterminate, and can be conceptualized and re-conceptualized, as the occasion calls for it.

Milligan most often chooses to create these changes in his conceptual framework of time and space by literally calling them into existence. The spoken word is by far the most important mode of communication used to create the content and context for an episode of *The Goon Show*. Milligan's style of storytelling deliberately leaves a considerable degree of ambiguity concerning the time frame for the telling of his stories. A *Goon Show* story gives the impression of being two stories at once: it is a series of events taking place in an implied past which are narrated in the present; but it is also a series of events taking place in an implied present which are narrated as they unfold.

Ironically, there is very little ambiguity concerning the power of words in *The Goon Show* to bring tangible concrete form to abstractions such as “time” and “space”. Although Lubomir Doležel sets an outer limit for human knowledge by referring to “the impossibility to utter magic performatives...language that, when uttered, produces an actual-world entity” (9), Milligan’s writing involves the constant use of this form of sorcery. Moreover, this type of magic is one recognized as being valid by those among us whose age and experience do not yet allow them to distinguish reliably between the actual ability of words to note the nature and existence of things, and the wish that words alone can make things appear. Milligan’s narrative approach and strategies have strong parallels to those of primary-school-age children. *The Goon Show*’s characters tell their stories in ways which are often easiest to follow if the listener discards “adult” notions about consequentiality and possibility, and accepts with childlike faith that any event is a possible consequence of any other event, if someone says that this is so.

Such faith disrupts the logic inherent to hierarchies for the organization and classification of knowledge. Disruptions such as these, particularly if they involve humour, are calculated to cause discomfort with an understanding of the world based solely upon the empirical. Playing the role of the child who points out that the empirical has no clothes, Milligan makes a number of observations which have an affinity with a general outlook that would later be labelled as “postmodern”.

It is easy to spot the seeds of postmodernism in the work of Milligan’s contemporaries who wrote for the legitimate stage: part of the appeal of Beckett and Ionesco for scholars and theorists lies in their enigmatic inaccessibility, and the seriousness of their own theoretical writings. When one sets out to make enigmas accessible by making them funny, as Milligan did

with *The Goon Show*, one's efforts can be dismissed as frivolous. Peter Barnes notes that since "Comic talents are seldom, if ever, given as much weight as merely sombre ones" (206), Milligan "has not got the cachet of a literary reputation" (210) of the kind that other writers and practitioners of his generation have received.

A persistent irony that continues to haunt Milligan's reputation is that he was passed over for inclusion in a new genre by someone who ought to have known that *The Goon Show* fit right into it. It is hard to say whether Martin Esslin was aware of the existence of *The Goon Show* during the program's years on the air, since he was working for the BBC's European Service at the time. Still, it is difficult to excuse the fact that *The Goon Show* receives not even a passing mention in Esslin's genre-defining work *The Theatre of the Absurd*: by the time of the book's publication in 1961, Esslin had transferred to BBC Radio Drama in London, and was in a good position to find out about Spike Milligan's brainchild from those most familiar with it. Esslin's oversight—based on ignorance or not—was never rectified in later editions of *The Theatre of the Absurd*. The counter-claim that Esslin simply failed to see a serious intent in what Milligan was doing holds no water, either. The Marx Brothers and W.C. Fields can hardly be accused of being serious, yet Esslin cites them as progenitors of the absurdist style (*Absurd* 336). Regardless of Esslin's reasons for not reifying Milligan's work by including it as an example of the genre he first classified, *The Goon Show* is clearly an heir to the "age-old traditions that the Theatre of the Absurd displays", among them "clowning, fooling, and mad-scenes", "verbal nonsense", and "(t)he literature of dream and fantasy" (*Absurd* 328).

Although his writings may not have been canonized in the same way that Beckett's and Ionesco's have been, Milligan's own words about his work reveal a clear intention to experiment with new ways of making people laugh. The new comedic techniques on display in *The Goon*

Show involve new ways of looking at the world, ones which became familiar to Milligan's audiences, but remained for the time being nameless. Labels for the sorts of things Spike Milligan was doing during the 1950s would come later, and would be applied to the work and ideas of people with more apparently serious intentions. With the emergence of an artistic and critical outlook that would be labelled "postmodern", terms such as "close reading" began to gain common currency outside academic circles, and among a broad general public. This term, along with much of the vocabulary of postmodern criticism, encapsulates (albeit retroactively) Milligan's plan of attack on all forms of accepted knowledge.

In *The Goon Show*, a great deal of what had appeared certain to Britons for at least a century came under interrogation. Britain's historical status as a great and resilient empire was questioned, found questionable, and held up to ridicule on a regular basis; the ability of scientific discourses and logic to explain, predict and control the workings of the universe was put to a severe stress test which used nonsense as its source of pressure. In order to emphasize the limitations of predictability and control as discursive and cognitive strategies for understanding our place in the grand scheme of things, Milligan exaggerated the degree of control which two crucial elements of our perceptual landscape have over us. In *The Goon Show*, time and space are granted powers which make their properties difficult to predict from one moment to the next; these powers operate with a crude but effective form of agency which follows its own perverse agenda, sometimes aiding, but just as often thwarting, the aims and ambitions of Milligan's characters.

The indeterminacy which is a defining feature of *The Goon Show*'s world is not readily observed at everyday scales of time and space. It is, however, the very essence of matter that

comes in parcels which are too small to perceive, and which move too quickly to track, without highly sophisticated apparatus. The Uncertainty Principle and quantum theory have not replaced Newtonian mechanics as descriptions of the behaviour of objects we can see and touch, but these models have furnished a flexible and adaptable metaphor for systems based on human interaction. *The Goon Show*'s introduction of uncertainty into an otherwise Newtonian framework of time and space problematizes the assumptions of regularity and predictability upon which this and other frameworks of knowledge are based. Challenges to knowledge-claims involving certainty are so deeply woven into the fabric of Milligan's writing that *The Goon Show* can be seen as a systematic rejection of conventional structures of epistemology. Knowledge can only ever be of a provisional nature in a world where even the impossible is open to degrees of discussion such as the following:

MINNIE. Who ever heard of a bald-headed man with hair on, eh?

CRUN. Well, I have—

MINNIE. Who? Eh? Go on, tell me, who?

CRUN. Mnk...no—I'm not going to tell you.

MINNIE. That's because you don't know anybody with a hairy bald head.

CRUN. Yes I do, Minnie.

MINNIE. No you don't.

CRUN. ...yes I do.

MINNIE. Who, who? Go on, tell me who?

CRUN. I don't see why I should. (Milligan, *Scripts* 49)

The entire argument takes up nearly two-and-a-half-minutes of air time; finding words to be inadequate as weapons, Henry and Minnie augment their verbal arsenals with swords and pistols, before Minnie storms out, only to carry on the dispute by telephone immediately thereafter ("Head-Shaver" recording 12:32-14:55). Henry Crun is more certain of the impossible "fact" that a bald man can have hair on his head than he is of the probable "fact" that, if such a man existed, he would have a name. Even if this man's name were written down on a piece of paper, as "eight o'clock" is for Eccles, Crun could be no surer than Eccles is of having the right answer on hand more than twice a day.

The next step in gaining a better appreciation of Spike Milligan's uniquely warped world-view, and how it fits into the transition from the modern to the postmodern era, is not yet written down on paper for Eccles, or anyone else, to consult. It would involve a thorough study of *The Goon Show's* deconstruction of epistemological strategies, and the ways in which this may have influenced the postmodern understanding of knowledge as a work-in-progress, rather than a finished product. For the time being, one thing that is clear about *The Goon Show* is that, in the world Spike Milligan created, all knowledge about time, space, and everything else is slippery. Neddy Seagoon, Henry Crun, Eccles, and the rest of Milligan's cast of characters constantly struggle to get a handle on what should be the simplest facts of life. Facts, however, are even more stubborn things in Milligan's fictional world than they are in real life: their obstinacy derives from their protean ability to assume new forms at the drop of a line of dialogue. Where the transitory nature of facts about time and space in *The Goon Show* are concerned, the listener does well to keep in mind a catchphrase Milligan often spoke out of character, after a protracted

sequence of sounds left the question of when and where the current action was taking place uncomfortably unresolved: “well...we shall see”.

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