

Peter Barnes

'An Uncooked Army Boot': Spike Milligan, 1918–2002

THE LAST *Goon Show* radio script Spike Milligan wrote, No. 227, dealt with murder, betrayal, starvation, and cannibalism, with a passing reference to the Holocaust.

It opens with the announcement: 'This is the BBC Home Service. Therefore will clients please use handkerchiefs when coughing. If a listener suffers such spasms, signal a BBC Attendant, who will be only too willing to destroy you with a humane killer.'

It tells the story of *The Luminous Plastic Piano with Built-in Oven*. Two upper-class crooks, Moriarty and Grytpype-Thynne, are starving. They look for theatrical work in Blackpool, and go to an agent, Bert Swain.

THYNNE: Any work there, Bert?

SWAIN: No, there's a waiting list as long as my arm.

THYNNE: Quick, the chopper. (*There is the sound of a chopper chopping through meat.*)

Moriarty and Thynne answer an advert for 'two comedy duettists, must supply piano', and are booked on the *Harry Stenchcombe Show* but are told the job is already taken by Bannerjee and Sons. Moriarty and Thynne shoot them and take their place. But, they have no piano. Fortunately Thynne's uncle, Henry Crun, makes trick pianos. But, he says, 'The damp is getting into the green felts, Min. The sunny Blackpool air is bad for pianos.'

However, there is one piano not suffering from the damp, which is made of brown plastic and has a built-in Regulo gas oven. Thynne tells Neddie Seagoon, who is performing in the same theatre, that the oven is for the encore.

NEDDIE: You're going to cook for an encore?

MORIARTY: Only if there's hunger in the stalls.



But Moriarty and Thynne flop and we hear the sound of an audience sharpening swords.

Fifty years later, Neddie Seagoon has reached the top and is driving along in his Rolls when he sees Moriarty and Thynne begging in the gutter. Moriarty has not eaten for thirty-three years. Thynne says they have saved a fortune on food and is willing to sell the secret. Neddie calculates that if he could give up eating, he'd be a millionaire.

Ten years later Neddie is begging for food. Moriarty and Thynne have turned him into a sideshow freak.

MORIARTY: Roll up, roll up. Sixpence to see the living Welsh skeleton.

THYNNE: Still not cured of eating, Ned of the Body? Yours is a tough case, Ned . . . but thirty more years will do the trick.

Neddie faints and is put under the floorboards before Moriarty and Thynne leave.

A schoolboy, Bluebottle, comes in, asking for a 'bob-a-job'. He is followed by Eccles, who has been sent by the Ministry of Drains to investigate strange smells coming from the floorboards. They find Neddie, who realizes Moriarty and Thynne have gone.

NEDDIE: At last I can eat. (*Sound of gulping.*)

ECCLES: I . . . ohhh.

BLUEBOTTLE: Here, where's Eccles gone? You . . .

ECCLES (*muffled*): Helppp . . .

BLUEBOTTLE: Hey! (*Sound of thumping on inside of Neddie's belly.*) Here, what's all those fist bumps keep coming in your belly?

ECCLES: It's me, throw down my glasses.

BLUEBOTTLE: Why?

ECCLES: If this is the end I want to see it.

NEDDIE: I'm sorry, I had to do it, I was hungry . . . you're a well-built lad. (*Sound of gulping.*)

BLUEBOTTLE: Cor, it's dark in Ned's Welsh belly . . . Eccles?

ECCLES: Hello.

BLUEBOTTLE: Where are you?

ECCLES: Here, I'm trying to get out the back. (*Sound of door opening.*)

ECCLES: I'm out.

NEDDIE: Ah, that's better.

So, by the end – for it breaks off at this point – Eccles, the likeable Everyman figure, is excreted out of the buffoon Neddie Seagoon's arse.

This piece was never completed or performed. Milligan was heading into unknown comic territory, where the humour freezes, the subject matter is bilious, and the telling bitter. It is cut from the same unyielding cloth as Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal*, where the author suggests the Irish problem can quickly be solved if the Irish breed their own babies for the table.

There is a malignancy here, a glimpse of a darkness without end. It is as bleak as

Waiting for Godot and funnier, which is lucky for Beckett's reputation. For just as comedy films rarely, if ever, get considered for an Oscar, so a comic writer rarely gets treated seriously. Critics prefer solemnity to hilarity in their heroes. Comic talents are seldom, if ever, given as much weight as merely sombre ones. Consequently, the comic talents often overcompensate for their low esteem by hungering after completely humourless projects to prove their seriousness. It is true Evelyn Waugh was taken seriously, but then I have never found him truly funny, except in the manner of his death (he died on the lavatory on Easter Day 1966, shortly after celebrating Latin Mass). On the whole, if you want to become a classic, beware of laughter. It kills any prospect of literary fame.

Actually, Milligan, besides being Irish, has another connection with Beckett. He wrote a brilliant footnote about a God who actually turned up:

Darkness. A voice narrates in the darkness. 'In the beginning God said . . . 'Another voice thunders . . . 'Let there be light', . . . and a forty-watt bulb goes on, and there is a man in a nightshirt, lying in a bed underneath it. The man gets up and says, 'Who put that light on?'

In writing this piece it is tempting to take up Walter Benjamin's dream of producing a book of literary criticism consisting solely of quotations, with no commentary at all.

'Stop! Stop! This spoon is out of tune, Min.'

'I recognize you by the air you're breathing.'

'Follow that continent, darling.'

'Who's that approaching, riding a kilted monkey and carrying a mackintosh sackbut?'

'I am frightened, I don't want to be deaded yet.'

'A tall man with garnished ginger knees and several ways about him.'

'It's a bloody awful life being dead.'

And this extended riff:

'I suspect you of foul play.'

'Little does she know I've never played with a fowl in my life.'

'Little does he know that he has misconstrued the meaning of the word "foul".'

'The word "foul" in my sentence is spelt F-O-U-L not F-O-W-L as he thought I spelt it.'
'Little does he know I overheard his correction of my grammatical error, and I'm now about to rectify it – (aloud) Ahem, so you suspect me of foul play spelt F-O-U-L and not F-O-W-L.'

Milligan shows reality floundering on the wreckage of language, doubting the very possibility of communication through words. Our language has become either too refined or banal, sometimes both. It falsifies thought from the start. The only radical solution is to cut the ropes tying it to the fake, blowing it to pieces and putting the pieces together, in a new and revealing configuration. In the process of pursuing its inner logic, Milligan's language deviates more and more from something descriptively ordinary into something luminously funny, even to itself.

'A tall man with garnished ginger knees and several ways about him' conjures up a vividly sinister image. As does: 'Who's that approaching riding a kilted monkey and carrying a mackintosh sackbut?' This time the surreal images the words evoke could be given a rational meaning. Whoever is approaching must be a midget if he is riding a monkey, dressed in a kilt, and they are probably Scottish, and musical, and prepared for rain if they are carrying a 'mackintosh sackbut'. But the logical explanation is overwhelmed by the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated, un-identical elements. The utterly alienated becomes the utterly familiar. One image is no more significant than any other – say a 'kilted monkey' or a 'mackintosh sackbut'. These are no longer on the edge of language, but in its very centre.

This is why I only want to deal, in this brief tribute, with Milligan the comic writer, and not with the froth of his TV fame which tends to obscure his remarkable achievement. He could be a stunning performer but was never a natural clown: he remained an inspired amateur. Professional comics do not laugh at their own jokes (think of Buster Keaton) unless it is part of their act, as with Tommy Cooper or Ken Dodd. Milligan laughed and giggled incessantly because he thought his jokes were funny. Every giggle diminished their impact.

Great comedy is not comedy helping to make the serious stuff easy to swallow. The comedy *is* the serious stuff. The work is not great despite the comedy; it is great because of the comedy. The insights and truths about the human condition are in the laughter, not outside and separated from it.

In the theatre there is nothing more absurd than 'properly motivated' characters. As if men and women were ever properly motivated. Our best hope is that they never become motivated and can act out of character and constantly surprise us and themselves. Milligan never succumbed to the trap of trying to create 'real', three-dimensional people. He could always find the words; he had them in abundance. His problem was choosing and placing the events.

He did, however, start off with the right credentials to become a major playwright: he considered disrespect for authority a cardinal virtue. When faced with authority, his reflex action was to cock a snook. With all his other achievements, Milligan holds a high rank in the awkward squad, along with Rabelais, Joyce, and Wilde. His love of words and wordplay links him securely with these three comic masters. In his writing he never succumbed to the temptation to create 'official humour' which survives in its readiness to seem to attack existing atrocities in order to be able to excuse them.

Unfortunately for Milligan, tragedy has always been rated higher than comedy, for critics believe the lies tragedy tells about squalid lives and squalid deaths, when it tries to prove rotting corpses are heroic. If comedy was valued, Milligan's *Goon Show* scripts – all 227 of them – would appear complete in some equivalent of the 'American Library'. But not here, not ever.

The *Goon Shows* ended in January 1960. After a tryout at the Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury, *The Bedsitting Room*, written with John Antrobus, opened at the Mermaid Theatre, London, in December 1961, before transferring to the Duke of York's Theatre a month later.

The play is an amazing leap onto the wildest shores of comedy. It opens with the back projection of an H-bomb explosion,

followed by the cooing of a baby. After a pianist talks gibberish and sings 'When The Lights Go On Again, All Over the World', a placard with the words 'Buddhists Use Esso' is lowered. A Phantom enters with a white-gloved pointed finger on a pole. He walks over to a charred tree, the branches of which have grown barbed wire. Perched on it is a vulture. The Phantom opens a small door on the tree, inserts a key, and winds it up. The vulture makes twittering noises.

Milligan managed to distance his best work from tired narrative forms and from the daily language of journalism. Most contemporary plays are warmed-over journalism. The best deal with pertinent social problems; these have been currently aired in the media, so audiences are not disturbed. They are familiar and comfortable with them, however advanced and radical the playwright's approach may be. Milligan did not deal with familiar problems but with metaphysical ones.

The Bedsitting Room is a unique comic-horror view of a post-nuclear world in which the few survivors have gone mad. Its jarring, dream-like scenes and Dada dialogue have few antecedents in European drama – Strindberg's *Dream Play* and Jarry's *Ubu Roi* being the nearest, with similar unmoored, freewheeling atmospheres of juddering grotesquery and insane farce. In film, only W. C. Fields's short *The Fatal Glass of Beer* has a similar approach, with Fields as an elk-farmer in Alaska, driven mad by solitude, continually opening the door of his cabin, getting a handful of paper snow in his face and muttering, "'Tain't a fit night for man or beast.'

In *The Bedsitting Room*, the Third World War has lasted two minutes, twenty seconds, and 'The task of burying our forty-eight million dead was carried out with cheerfulness and goodwill.' Mrs Gladys Skroake is now Queen, as the Royal Family, a brace of pheasant, and Helicopter Jim are safe in Barclays Bank in Australia. The whole country is radioactive. One of the few survivors, Lord Fortnum of Alamein, is turning into a bedsitting room. This condition is widespread. Other survivors have already turned into cupboards and chests of drawers.

This is the extraordinary central image of the play: a man is being transformed into a bedsitting room. We see bricks falling out of his clothing, and in the second act he has been completely reconstructed. The whole of the second act, in fact, takes place in this room and we only hear Fortnum's voice. We are continually reminded that the room we are looking at was once a man.

It is a marvellous theatrical image and what real drama should be about – imaginative daring and glorious, many-layered, unnaturalistic theatricality. It seems the natural mode for the medium, for, in truth, even in the most naturalistic productions, the settings are always unnatural. We ask ourselves, is that supposed to be a mountain swaying in the breeze? It is smoke and mirrors at best. Why pretend it is real?

In *The Bedsitting Room*, Captain Pontius Krak is discovered climbing a ladder and planting a Union Jack on top of it. Why? 'Because it's there!' he explains.

Mummy was awfully upset about the bomb. . . . She got radiation sickness you know . . . privately, of course. . . . Daddy came in to me one morning and said, 'Son' . . . he knew that much . . . 'Mummy's got radiation sickness.' . . . we gave her a wonderful send-off. . . . We let her wear Daddy's floral tennis frock.

In spite of its comic viewpoint, this description is a deadly accurate picture of how a certain type of English, upper-middle-class family would treat nuclear death. It is decent and reticent: let's-have-a-cup-of-tea, pull-yourself-together, remember-you're-British. If you think it is excessive, just look at most British films of the Second World War, particularly something like *In Which We Serve*.

When Lord Fortnum actually turns into a bedsitting room, his reaction is equally typical and pointed.

FORTNUM: Now tell me, where am I?

KRAK: Body Odour Mansions, 29 Cul-de-Sac Terrace.

FORTNUM: I know dat, that. But what borough?

KRAK: It's pretty bad news, I'm afraid. It's Paddington.

FORTNUM (*gasps and choking*): Quick, put a notice in that window. 'No coloureds and no children and definitely no coloured children.'

Under the laughter of *The Bedsitting Room* lurks the uncomfortable truth that, despite its blasted landscape and the pitiful condition of the few survivors like Mate, the Shelter Man, the Plastic Mac Man, and the Underwater Vicar, we are still mired in the same old vices of bigotry, violence, and greed; and so we are still laughing at the spectacle of the enduring meanness of the human spirit. There is no heroic pulling together here. Even a pitiful, disease-ridden victim like Fortnum is busy calculating how much he can charge for renting himself out as a fully furnished room. By the end of the play, Fortnum is pretending to be God.

FORTNUM: Now, owing to the extreme radiation in these celestial altitudes we are establishing the Kingdom of Heaven on earth at Number 29, Cul-de-Sac Terrace, Paddington, no coloureds or children.
KRAK: Oh Lord merciful Lord how shall I reside in Thy kingdom?
FORTNUM: By paying a purely nominal rent of fifty guineas a week.
MATE: I'll pay it, I'll pay it.

Mate throws money up to God before the lights go down round a group singing 'The First Noel'.

The Bedsitting Room is a groundbreaking play and, one would perhaps have hoped, the first of many. But like most comics, Milligan wanted to play Hamlet. He wanted to be serious, mistakenly believing that serious is more important than funny. He cast himself as a straight actor in a straight version of Ivan Goncharov's classic novel, *Oblomov*, which opened at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, in 1964.

The first act on the opening night was dull and uncertain. At the beginning of the second act, Milligan came out and asked the audience, 'Are you all back yet?' The audience laughed. That was enough for Milligan, who thankfully reverted to type and ad-libbed the dialogue for the rest of the act, which he was never very sure of anyway. Though Milligan shouted at Milton Shulman, a critic of the day, in the front row, strangely enough the newspaper reviews the next morning never mentioned Milligan's inspired ad-libbing.

The audiences knew, however, and word of mouth ensured that the production was a hit. After a little re-rehearsal to accommodate Milligan's improvisation, it transferred to the Comedy Theatre, under the title *Son of Oblomov*, and ran for a year.

Son of Oblomov is deconstruction in action; Brecht's alienation made comic flesh. During the course of the play, Milligan commented on the play itself, his fellow actors, their performances, and their manifest deficiencies. He even discussed their personal problems. The play becomes an excuse for Milligan's comic pyrotechnics: Duchamp scribbling a moustache on the Mona Lisa.

It was, in part, exhilarating and liberating, blasting the traditional pieties surrounding the theatre in this country – the suffocating, elitist snobbery, middle-class prejudices, and poisonous atmosphere of self-congratulation. Just think of the Haymarket Theatre, where the audience is just one step away from appearing in full evening dress, and where you can hear the ghostly clip-clop of horse-drawn hansom cabs drawing up outside.

Son of Oblomov was liberating, but only for the first week. After that, it ended up as a lively evening with Spike Milligan. Why go through the charade of pretending to do a play in order to humiliate fellow actors and the playwright? Perhaps the play deserved it, but in that case it should never have been produced in the first place.

Milligan and his audience got cosy. They expected to be outraged and, when they duly were, they laughed happily. There was no theatrical danger after the first few shows. Anything could be absorbed and made safe. Deep down they knew Milligan the performer could be relied on not to go too far – Milligan the writer was a different matter. Besides Lenny Bruce, the only comic who improvised to the audience yet sustained a bracingly sour contempt for them and all things respectable was Max Wall.

The Bedsitting Room and *Son of Oblomov* were Milligan's only theatrical pieces. It is pointless regretting the directions an artist takes. But in this case it is legitimate. The English theatre needed Milligan's original voice. He, too, would have benefited from

the concentration and structural density needed to write a play.

He had, however, already, in 1963, written a novel, called *Puckoon*. It was his first and best, despite an enchanting seven-volume account of his hapless wartime experiences, starting with *Adolf Hitler: My Part in His Downfall*. But *Puckoon* is the equal of the finest comic novels of the twentieth century, along with *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *Confessions of Zeno*, *Catch -22*, and the best of P. G. Wodehouse.

What is great comedy writing? It is comedy that stays funny. *Three Men in a Boat* does not, *Puckoon* does. From the mockingly over-lush opening – ‘Several and a half metric miles North East of Sligo, split by a cascading stream, her body on earth, her feet in water, dwells the micro-cephalic community of Puckoon’ – it creates a real, unreal world of ‘Holy Ireland’, with characters like Father Fudden, who found faith in a pair of new boots; and Sergeant Major Kevin Grady from the Republican Militia, ‘who last week was a private, his rapid promotion due to the discovery of his commanding officer’s boots under his wife’s bed; every night since he had looked under the bed for further promotion’; and ‘Dan Milligan, son of a famous paternity order’, who ‘rolls up his trousers whilst sunbathing and notices his legs for the first time’. He asks:

‘Wot are dey?’
‘Legs.’
‘Legs? LEGS? Whose legs!’
‘Yours.’
‘Mine? And who are you?’
‘The Author.’
‘Author? Author! Did you write these legs?’

Puckoon is a masterpiece of sustained comic invention from the beginning to the end, where a man is ‘left hanging from a tree with a rusty organ pipe lodged over his head, from where came a muffled voice. “You can’t leave me like this!” “Oh, can’t I . . . ?”’

Milligan is a home-grown, one-of-a-kind. He has no fame outside England. How could

he have? He is too strange, too unpredictable for America, which exists for the repetition of the identical, where the particular and idiosyncratic is destroyed by the general, where even stand-up comics serve up identical, processed, pre-packaged humour. There could be no place for Milligan in such a junk-food culture.

As for the rest of the world, how do you translate ‘You look like an uncooked army boot’ or ‘A Frenchman of noble birth, the family arms, a rack rampant on a field of steaming argent tat, voted actor of the year by Mrs Mabel Fiems, son of the eminent crapologist and swine, Count Dingleberries Moriarty’?

As far as I know, nobody has tried to translate Milligan. He has not got the cachet of a literary reputation. On the contrary, he stands on the furthest boundaries of show business, drama, and literature. In other words, he is nowhere, because he cannot be placed. He suffers from a literary culture that lacks curiosity, which no longer wants to know anything really new; above all anything that is open, free-flowing, unguarded.

Yet he is a true original. There will be no academic studies, no eulogies from gullible literary editors. Perhaps it is just as well. His contemporary reputation as a clown will be fleeting, as memories of his live performances fade, but his works will not be dissected and scribbled over by current arbiters of taste, so he has every chance of emerging as a literary classic in a few years.

The last words should be Milligan’s, as there was none better at words.

BILL: 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. (*Sweet background music, very, very soft.*)

HARRY: Darling – darling, will you marry me?

BLOODNOK: Of course I will – darling.

BILL: Thank you – good night.