Radiophonic Writing at the BBC, 1945-1963

by

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Abstract

Creative radio is written and produced from an unavoidable set of material conditions,

but received by its listeners as ephemeral and supposedly immaterial sound. Focusing on

the writing, production and reception of literary radio broadcast by the BBC in the

postwar era, this dissertation establishes a connection between the cultural significance of

radio and the aesthetic significance of sound. The postwar BBC was a major participant

in the era of British cultural welfare statism, but the corporation also flourished as a

distributor of culture, providing challenging and even radical aesthetic experience. The

reputedly "highbrow" BBC Third Programme, I argue, was neither elitist nor exclusive,

nor was the radio drama it produced culturally or aesthetically "complete"; instead the

aurality of radiophonic writing invited pluralistic and active listenership. In the postwar

era radio was no longer new; however, Louis MacNeice, Giles Cooper and Samuel

Beckett found new ways of exploiting radio's maturity to develop a progressive radio

aesthetics. MacNeice, a full-time BBC staff member, was a radio professional whose

writings dramatize a conflict between his poetic instinct for sound and his impatience

with the institutional pressures of planning in the increasingly bureaucratic postwar BBC.

Conversely, Cooper had no fixed institutional position, and his sonically experimental

works, reflecting this precariousness, oscillate between innovation and obsolescence. Beckett's radio plays suggest a different type of precariousness, exploiting electroacoustic technology to convey a delicate ambiguity between exterior landscape and interior space. My analysis of all three writers demands an appreciation of their production as sound, and I offer my dissertation as a contribution to the growing field of literary sound studies; as such, I attend to the specifically sonic components of radio plays and features, giving a deserved critical prominence to producers and electroacoustic artists, particularly members of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. The meaning of broadcast radio, I argue, is constructed in the resonant aural sphere, a space of collaborative interaction between author, producer and listener. For radio creators and radio listeners alike, this resonant interaction turned the medium's coming obsolescence into a creatively significant moment of invention in the face of decay.

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Chapter 1
Radiophonic Writing: the material conditions and the medium

Introduction: What "radiophonic writing" means

This dissertation has a dual focus. By discussing the material conditions of broadcasting, I will engage with the cultural significance of radio; by discussing the broadcast sounds themselves, I will argue for radio's aesthetic significance. By the term "radiophonic writing" I mean to denote a complicated relationship between sound and writing. The *radio* in *radiophonic* speaks of the medium of radio, the mechanisms of broadcasting (or "radiodiffusion" as the French have it) including the BBC as a broadcasting corporation, its institutional structures, its facilities for cultural production and distribution. The *phonic* in *radiophonic* speaks of the oral and aural quality of produced radio. "Radiophonic writing" indicates sounds *along with* the material conditions under which they were produced; radiophonic writing is writing specifically created to exploit the sounded, and heard nature of radio.

The term "radiophonic," used in a discussion of the BBC, immediately evokes the Radiophonic Workshop, the special sound department opened at the BBC in 1956. *Radiophonic* more generally means specially-made radio writing – earlier instances of the term include Henk Badings' "radiophonic opera," *Orestes* (broadcast in 1954) and the poet David Gascoyne's long post-surrealist work *Night Thoughts: A Radiophonic Poem* (broadcast in 1955). By 1957 we hear regularly of "radiophonics" as an alternative term for "electronic music," as in the BBC's description of Ton de Leeuw's "radiophonic oratorio," *Job*. The term had been used much earlier – to mean generally radio-ready material – by the BBC, who in the 1920s spoke lightly of "radiophonic tonics" in their variety programming.

Writing is used inclusively here, to emphasise production as well as texts. By writing, I indicate texts such as written scripts, but also methods of inscription such as sound recording (understanding "phonography" as literally *sound-writing*). According to my definition, then, radiophonic *writing* involves authors of scripts, but also producers, studio managers, sound engineers, gramophone operators, electroacoustic composers, actors and others who assist in the creation of radio as an aural artform. My intention is to reconceive the radio form as a collaborative art.

The breadth of material discussed in this dissertation demands that the taxonomy of specific radiophonic forms be clarified. Peter Lewis makes a helpful distinction between "*radio*-drama" and "radio-*drama*" (Lewis 1981a: 8): the former referring to dramatic works written *for* radio, radio-specific in their content; the latter referring to plays that happen to be on the radio, such as adaptations or readings of stage plays. Lewis' distinction takes a valuable step towards emphasising the essentially radiophonic character of some radio plays, but my approach will extend to radiophonic material *beyond* drama. Radio-specific content is my primary concern here – not only drama, but other forms made specially for radio, such as creative documentary, radiophonic poetry, and "radio ballads" (actual interviews imaginatively edited plus specially composed songs). I use the term "radiophonic" to invoke variety.

The cultural significance of postwar radio: invention in the face of obsolescence

Taken as separate topics, the two sides of my dual focus have been discussed adequately; in meaningful connection with one another, less so. My concentration on the less-explored post-war era of radio allows me to discuss these two aspects of the medium – its aesthetic significance

and its cultural significance – in connection, and at an appropriate distance from the noise generated by two well-populated discussions.

For understandable reasons, the origins and early years of radio have received the greatest amount of critical attention. Two main narratives emerge in discussions of early radio: the narrative concerning technological novelty (when speaking of radio in general), and the story of Reithian authoritarianism (when specifically discussing the BBC or other examples of public service broadcasting). Wide-reaching media and sound studies works such as Jeffrey Sconce's *Haunted Media* (2000) and Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead's *Wireless Imagination* (1992) have described the aesthetic and philosophical significance of radio as a developing technology, excavating the experience of early radio listening as an experience of newness and strangeness. Studies of radio writing that have placed textual discussion and literary analysis in the full institutional context of the BBC – such as Todd Avery's *Radio Modernism* (2006) and the majority of the chapters in Cohen, Coyle and Lewty's joint-edited *Broadcasting Modernism* (2009) – have tended to focus on the first decades of network radio. These works have developed critical connections between the formation of the BBC in 1922 (and American and European radio networks in the same decade) and the flourishing of literary modernism in the interwar period; in these accounts, the newness of radio is found not only in the novelty of technologized listening, but in the newly-founded formal mechanisms of national broadcasting institutions. Since these critical discussions of cultural broadcasting on the BBC have focused on the years up to and including the Second World War, the corporation's approach to broadcasting has correctly been identified as authoritarian, in the manner prescribed by the first Director-General John Reith. According to Reith's explicitly stated agenda, the BBC would be a moralizing and improving force in British life; this popular morality and improvement would be acquired through benevolent coercion. To speak of the BBC in the first two decades of its existence is to

speak of Reithianism, and Reithianism is synonymous with "idealist Christian ethics" and "relentlessly centripetal strategies" (Avery 2009: 159,163) and a cautious, unifying control of the public sphere in the immediately pre-war years.[1] These accounts identify tentative challenges to Reith's approach, provided by the intellectual nuance of individual contributors;[2] the overall between-war BBC narrative, however, remains one of endemic authoritarianism.

By focusing on postwar radio, I will be thinking beyond the early years of radio and reorienting some assumptions that apply less easily to the mature years of radio. The postwar era, the period on which I'm focusing, was the era of what Daniel Albright calls "advanced radio" (Albright 100). While Albright applies this term to creative radio aesthetics, I intend to also consider the "advanced" stage of the BBC as a broadcasting institution. As such, I will reassess the critical starting point of the BBC as intrinsically Reithian and authoritarian. There are comparatively fewer critical studies of radio writing that consider the fuller institutional context of the *postwar* BBC. An important point here is that although the corporation's Reithian origins did not evaporate on contact with the fabled postwar atmosphere of regeneration, key figures *within the BBC* emerged in this period who favoured pluralistic approaches to broadcasting. Broadcasting necessarily involves an exchange between a central location and peripheral or marginal spaces. The attempted pluralism that I'll be tracing extends to both the centre and the peripheries: firstly, the postwar period of the BBC is marked by a greater pluralism amongst the

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[1] In terms of the construction of cultural identity under the Reithian broadcasting model, the extremes of regionalism and cosmopolitanism would be secondary to a nation-building unity. The postwar BBC would reverse these priorities.

[2] Todd Avery, for example, celebrates the "countercultural, counterethical, and counterhegemonic" use of public broadcasting by Desmond MacCarthy (Avery 2009: 173).

creators of radio; secondly, the period also sees a reimagined role for the listener that follows from the BBC's postwar re-shaping of network structure.

Another consequence of my focus on post-war radio is that I am unable to make grand claims about the exciting strangeness of the medium in general to listeners in this period. The postwar period is also the age of radio's maturity as a medium. What was novel to listeners in the twenties and thirties was familiar to postwar audiences. Furthermore, television and commercial radio networks, new challengers for the attention of the British public, appeared on the cultural horizon. My critical approach to postwar broadcasting necessitates an attempt to recognize the possibility of staleness, and the threat of obsolescence that formed the atmosphere through which these works were transmitted. When we encounter strangeness and innovation in postwar radio, it occurs as a response to this threat.

And what about postwar British culture in general? Obsolescence hangs heavily here, too. For my purposes, the "postwar" cultural moment is the awkward but interesting gap between the end of the war and the fullest bloom of mid-sixties youth culture. (Coincidentally, the three principal writers to feature here are respectively Northern Irish, Anglo-Irish and Irish-turned-continental; by "British" I mean the BBC through which these works were produced and transmitted – in any case, in my study the BBC *in total* is the main actor, and the inclusion of these writers complements my understanding of centrifugal creativity within the corporation.) Mid-century British culture, accounts tend to tell us, is moribund, domestically uncertain, internationally irrelevant, symptomatic of the nation's loss of confidence and identity during the overdue break-up of its embarrassing empire. The highpoint of literary modernism has receded; aesthetic conservatism reappears. T.S. Eliot informs us that "the standards of culture are lower than they were fifty years ago" (Eliot 1962: 19). Hundreds of thousands emigrate to Canada,

Australia, New Zealand. Angry young men in the 1950s confirm with some bitterness and some glee British culture's near-expiration ("it's pretty dreary living in the American Age," remarks John Osborne's Jimmy Porter (Osborne 1956: 17)) but do little to revive the national spirit; the humiliating Suez Crisis confirms Britain's international political irrelevance. Artistically, avant-garde absurdism is happening on the continent. The counter-culture is gestating in America. There is an endemic "loss of confidence and ambition amongst British writers" (A. Davies 3); Cyril Connolly proclaims that the "English renaissance … is further away than ever" (Connolly 1947: 1). The revival of British culture, when it comes in the sixties, is populist and youthful – it has little to do with literature or statist broadcasting (is in fact held up in some circles as a glorious antagonist of the pop-unfriendly BBC). So goes the broad-brushstroke portrait of postwar Britain: British culture worth noting begins, like sexual intercourse in Larkin's account, "Between the end of the 'Chatterley' ban / And the Beatles' first LP" (Larkin 167). I hope to contribute a more nuanced and inclusive account of postwar British culture, following on from serious and comprehensive studies of the period by Alan Sinfield, Paul Long and others. The postwar BBC, as a state broadcasting body, stands as an indicator the supposed decline of the radio medium, of British culture, and of the British state. If radio as a medium, and British culture in general, were declining into obsolescence, then so be it. Obsolescence is critically and aesthetically interesting. If Britain's intellectual culture was in decay during this period, then from this decomposition emerged new and strange potential cultures.

So why am I holding radio as a focal point for discussing the gestation and renewal of postwar British culture? *Not* simply because broadcasting departments were a training ground for emerging dramatists who would produce significant stage work after serving an apprenticeship on radio; although this much is true of Harold Pinter (who wrote *A Slight Ache* for the BBC in 1958), Caryl Churchill (*The Ants*, 1962), Joe Orton (*The Ruffian on the Stair*, 1964). And *not*

simply because radio writing is a minor form granted legitimacy through its occasional use by prominent playwrights like Samuel Beckett (in the 1950s and 60s) and Tom Stoppard (who wrote *Artist Descending a Staircase* in 1972). And *not* simply to enable a purely textual analysis of script, as has been capably performed on several notable radio plays from this period. Rather, to connect written play-texts to the sonic, extra-textual elements of radio writing – that is, to hear as well as read radio writing, to take radio work as work in sound, and to construct an account of radio that is less author-centric.

Radio in the postwar period was at a point of creative difficulty, in terms of the age of the medium; it was also at a point of ontological difficulty, in terms of a general, increasing uncertainty about the value of creative cultural broadcasting via radio. However, in this period a set of creative responses from writers and producers to these difficulties emerged – my explanation of the aesthetic significance of these works will uncover instances of invention in the face of obsolescence. To understand the real relevance of such aesthetic innovation, it will be necessary to explain the socio-political and cultural context of the postwar BBC.

Part 1. Post-war British Society and the BBC

Clement Attlee's Labour government, 1945-51

The transition from wartime to postwar Britain was neatly marked by an almost immediate change in government. A landslide victory in the July 1945 election brought Clement Attlee's Labour party into power, ready with social and economic policies heavily influenced by the Beveridge Report of 1942. The report overseen by William Beveridge urged the program of social insurance that was implemented by Attlee's government as the postwar Welfare State.

Influenced by Keynesian economic theory, the postwar government insisted on an enlarged role for the state in the lives of individual Britons: the state's duty to provide social services for its citizens would be met through the creation of a National Health Service, housing assistance, the attempted provision of free comprehensive education (including meals and milk), increased social security, full employment and the nationalisation of key industries. This was an age of decolonization and domestic austerity (wartime hardships would not disappear overnight) but also an age of re-generation, in which the role of the state in the lives of individuals would be one of deliberate and benevolent intervention. "'Planning'," notes Peter Jenkins, "was a key word in the Labour vocabulary, almost a magic word" (Jenkins 250). Though Attlee's government fell in 1951, the basic tenet that the state was actively involved in providing for the well-being of citizens – the "cradle to grave" ideal of the Beveridge Report – was more or less accepted as a feature of British politics through the era of "post-war consensus," an era that ended when statism came off worse in a head-on collision with Thatcherism in 1979. Yet the word "consensus" should not be used with too heavy a hand. Closer readings of the cultural atmosphere of the period bring doubt and uncertainty to our attention. Ambivalence persisted, as noted here in Tony Judt's account of postwar Europe: "It is symptomatic of the ambivalent mood of post-war England that the country had just fought and won a six-year war against its mortal enemy and was embarked upon an unprecedented experiment in welfare capitalism – yet cultural commentators were absorbed by intimations of failure and deterioration" (Judt 2005: 205).

Alongside the welfare state's provisions for the physical well-being of the population, the postwar period saw the beginning of a welfare statism devoted to culture. The Arts Council of Great Britain, which grew out of the wartime Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, was secured in 1946 under the chairmanship of Keynes. The British Film Institute, originally conceived as a source of support for film-makers, shifted its emphasis towards

nurturing the public's appreciation of film. The strengthening of state funding for public libraries, as recommended in R. A. Butler's 1944 Education Act, resulted in newly-built civic central libraries, architecturally elegant concrete modern structures. The Festival of Britain in 1951 marked the centennial of the Great Exhibition but also celebrated Britain's emergence from postwar austerity; in mood and appearance (producing more excellent concrete, like the Royal Festival Hall) the Festival was statist, late-modernist and optimistic – to the sardonic amusement of Noel Coward[3] and the outright horror of Evelyn Waugh (Frayn 319). New Towns were planned, town-like housing estates were built: more concrete, more consternation for village-green conservatives. By the mid-1960s, planning for the Open University, a free and accessible higher education service, commenced.

The post-war restructuring of the BBC, 1946

The BBC was central to these various instances of postwar cultural welfare statism. The corporation, Michael Frayn notes without apparent hyperbole, "hammered the Festival into the national cortex with 2,700 programmes on the subject" (Frayn 336). The Open University functioned with the assistance of the BBC by producing and broadcasting University-related programs. The cultural edification offered by the British Film Institute and the Arts Council was supplied in spades, daily, by the BBC. Naturally, then, the BBC itself went through a period of remodelling in order to be fit for the postwar purpose.

The sharpest change to the structure of radio broadcasting was the introduction of the BBC's three-network structure; the BBC's role in postwar cultural redistribution hinged

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[3] Coward seized the opportunity for a topical record, "Don't Make Fun of the Festival."

specifically on the formation of a network dedicated to art, culture and intelligent discussion. In the years before the war, radio was divided into National and Regional services; during wartime, these networks were amalgamated into a Home Service, and transmitted alongside a Forces network. The postwar structure divided the BBC's radio output into a Home Service, a Light Programme continuing the musical and variety fare offered to the forces as morale-supplements, and the Third Programme. The neutrally-named Third Programme,[4] first aired in September 1946, offered a nightly schedule of arts, culture and intellectual debate, of the type frequently referred to as "highbrow." The first week of transmission, for example, included programs on European cinema, French poetry readings, performances of "serious" music (Bach features heavily in the listings, but modern composers like Alban Berg also appear), discussions of the socialist credentials of George Bernard Shaw, recordings of English and Scottish folk ballads, dissertations on the Russian novel – leading up to the usual Bible reading and organ music before midnight shutdown.

At first glance such material, undoubtedly edifying and improving, might appear in keeping with the Reithian origins of the BBC. The religious closing half-hour of each night's transmission enforced the notion that Reith's overtly Christian morality hung over the project; more importantly, the content of the broadcasts was "high culture" enough to indicate that the BBC remained committed to the role of paternalistic reformer of the nation's minds and souls. High-mindedness need not have anything to do with morality – except in the sense meant by the aesthetic formalism of Clive Bell, for whom "all art is moral because … works of art are immediate means to good" (Bell 185) – I will return to this idea. The immediate concern when

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[4] Other names were contemplated: the equally-undescriptive Network C; the classically-alluding Minerva Programme; the Droitwich Programme, after the location of the BBC's major transmitting station (Carpenter 13).

faced with the Third Programme broadcasting schedule is whether the whole thing wasn't plainly elitist or at least, as Tony Judt notes in passing, exclusively "directed at … the 'intelligentsia'" (Judt 2005: 206).[5]

This charge of elitism can be answered directly. Although the corporation did not become perfectly social-democratic overnight (on becoming Director-General in 1960, Hugh Carleton Greene had to "open the windows and dissipate the ivory tower stuffiness which still clung to some parts of the BBC" (Greene 13)), the artistic aspirations of the Third Programme made the corporation on the whole less, rather than more elitist. The network was presented, as Alan Sinfield writes, "not as a reinforcement of privilege, but as potentially for everyone: that was the pact of postwar welfare-capitalism" (Sinfield 2004: 58). A 1949 survey of the BBC's listenership found that of the Third Programme's audience, 28% identified as upper-middle class, 37% as lower-middle class, and 35% working class (Briggs 1979: 83, Collini 441).[6] Robert Silvey, who conducted audience research for the BBC, remembers an enquiry into Third Programme listenership: a sample of the public were classified as "Good, Fair, Poor, and Very Poor" prospects for Third listenership, based on educational level, reading habits, and stated interest in a specified range of subjects; to the network planners' surprise, 9% of "Poor" and 3% of "Very Poor" prospects listened to the Third Programme (Silvey 146-7). The insistence that complex or challenging art belongs to a social or cultural elite is unhelpfully pessimistic, as Paul Willis

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[5] Richard Hughes, writer of the BBC's earliest radiophonic play, *Danger*, reminds us of the BBC's international reputation for elitism even before the formation of the Third Programme. Hughes recalls attempting to pitch ideas for radio plays to American radio authorities: "That sort of thing might be possible in England, they explained, where broadcasting was a monopoly and a few crackpot highbrows in the racket could impose what they liked on a suffering public" (Hughes 36).

[6] The figures still balance out as "higher class" than the listenership for the Home Service and Light Programme. Interestingly, no respondents identify as upper class.

insists when he notes that "the conflation of art and culture with social elitism and exclusion leads to conformist hesitancy and the minimum strategy of knowing the accepted wisdom" (Willis 5). The Third Programme, as its listings show, allowed space for introductory explanations of context, inclusive debate, helpful analysis: a reading of Sartre might be prefaced by an introduction to basic tenets of existential thought; a program of avant-garde sound poetry might be introduced by a gentle and patient explanation of the accessibly "emotive," "amusing" and "musical" qualities of the work, as when the Austrian poet Ernst Jandl's works were performed (Jandl).

Of course, this welcoming introduction to difficult material supposes a committed listenership (some of the introductory talks were broadcast the *night before* a reading or performance, requiring the listenership to tune in on a nightly basis) enrolled in the free program of cultural redistribution. Such is the ideal. How many were really listening? We know that the Third Programme had low listening figures, at least in comparison to the Home Service and Light Programme – in its earliest months, the Third had around 700,000 listeners (6% of the listener share), but by 1953 this number was down to around 45,000 (Carpenter 48, 116). These numbers quantify the pairs of ears into which the Third Programme was transmitted but do not speak of the depth of listening that took place. William Haley, Director-General of the BBC during the corporation's formation, insisted from the beginning that the intended audience was "selective not casual, and both attentive and critical" (Whitehead 9); fewer listened, but they listened better. This understanding of the network as usefully exclusive persisted. Noel Annan, writing in 1952, defended the Third in these terms: "the tiny fraction of the population which listens to the Third Programme listens because it already knows and understands a good deal about the matter which is being discussed" (Annan 144). But familiarity with the subject (enjoyed by those initiated into the world of "high" culture) was not a prerequisite for critical

listening: the correspondence pages of *The Listener*, the BBC's weekly magazine, include intelligent responses from listeners who confess to having little experience of, say, Beckett's drama, but who nevertheless grasp crucial points of the plays. Beckett's radio play *All That Fall* was the subject of one such in-depth and ongoing discussion. Marshaling these listener responses as evidence, *The Listener*'s critic Roy Walker notes that the freedoms allowing *All That Fall* to exist "are not Home Service freedoms" (Walker 1957b: 358); the Third Programme was necessary to preserve the right to experiment.

Although the highbrow/lowbrow binary is not helpful to my discussion, it will not cease to exist. The majority of the discussions that place the Third Programme in the context of a hierarchical division of culture focus on the "talks" kind of program, as these broadcasts more neatly fit the stereotype of the "academic atmosphere" noted by Briggs, full of the "bumbling dons" described by Heppenstall, trying to navigate between the extremes of "talking down" and being "over-specialized" (Briggs 328, Heppenstall 39, Collini 439). Such descriptions hold up when applied to broadcast lectures and scripted talks, but have rather less meaning when applied to more specialized radiophonic forms such as radio drama, poetry and creative documentary. Whereas the talks tradition at the BBC remained more vulnerable to the accusation of perpetuating a Reithian, monologic approach to broadcasting (exacerbated by the announcer's style of delivery being "the opposite of chat" (Carpenter 132)), creative radio developed the truly sonic nature of the medium in ways that were both radical and in keeping with inclusive oral traditions. Listening to a talk is an intellectual experience; listening to *creative* radio – what I am calling truly radiophonic material – is a radical aesthetic experience, which may or may not prompt intellectual responses.

Like the highbrow/populist binary, the division between the Third Programme and Home Service was not absolute; this too becomes clear if we focus on creative radio. When it came to

cultural programming, the Director-General William Haley hoped that "each [network] would 'shake into' or 'merge' into the other" (Briggs 1979: 76). Creative work was more likely than talks to be "diagonalised." This term refers to highly-regarded Third Programme material being tried out on the Home Service, and given repeated broadcasts if warmly received – Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood* crossed over from the Third to the Home Service in this way. The practice of "diagonalisation" (Carpenter 58) shows that the networks were structured with the popular appeal of challenging materials as a realistic goal. Other writers, such as Louis MacNeice, wrote material for both networks; his verse play *The Dark Tower* was broadcast on the Home Service and repeated on the Third. Why should creative radio provide an opportunity for crossing over network segregations? In creative radio we see a fuller embracing of the radiophonic form, which surpasses the accusations of elitism, authoritarianism or apolitical passivity.[7] Cyril Connolly responded positively to the BBC's use of art, comparing it favourably to Soviet-style state art and arguing that through the efforts of the BBC, postwar Britain became "a State which does not necessarily adopt social realism but encourages art for its own sake" (Connolly 1953: 135) (other attitudes to the BBC as a "statist" channel remained ambivalent, as we will see). The aesthetic formalist approach to culture implied by Connolly's use of "art for its own sake" presents an alternative to both the "doctrinaire rantings" of Soviet art (135), and the didacticism associated with the Reithian model; the aesthetic approach, to Connolly, supplies an aural space freed from the homiletic tendencies of Reithianism. Radiophonic *art*, facilitated by the structure of the BBC's creative departments, promoted social and aesthetic inclusivity.

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[7] Tellingly, journalistic pieces that spanned across networks – for example, readings from John Hersey's report on Hiroshima crossed over from the Third to the *Light* Programme – tended to be formally experimental and borrowed techniques from fiction. (Briggs 83).

The Department/Network structure of the BBC

The structure and character of creative departments within the BBC during this period made possible a variety of *types* of artistic radio writing. The majority of the creative radio writing referred to in this dissertation was produced by one of two departments: Drama, or Features. These departments, employing their own staff of salaried script-writers and producers, were not attached to a particular network but provided material for the Home Service, Third Programme and sometimes the Light Programme. (A good deal, but not all of the writing discussed here is Third Programme material.) The Drama department, as the name suggests, was responsible for producing plays, while Features department had an altogether broader purpose – from the 1930s onwards, Features existed alongside Drama (the two were eventually merged in 1967), producing plays of its own, alongside poetry, semi-documentary programs and other hybridized creative forms.

In the immediate postwar period, the principal difference between Drama and Features productions was that Drama, under the control of Val Gielgud, stayed closer to the traditions of the theatrical stage, either in its original material or in its many adaptations from the European canon. To borrow Peter Lewis's earlier terms, Drama department material tended to be more "radio-*drama*" than "*radio*-drama," at least until the arrival of progressive producers in the mid-1950s shifted the department towards a fully radiophonic approach.[8] One such progressive influence, Donald McWhinnie, became Gielgud's deputy in 1953 and went on to produce works by Beckett and Pinter; Gielgud himself was hostile to both these writers. Martin Esslin, the

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[8] Experimental writers such as Lance Sieveking and Tyrone Guthrie worked in drama during the 1930s; however, their experimentalism was frustrated. Gielgud says of Sieveking that radio "provided him with no laboratory in which experiments could be carried out" (Heuser).

critical champion of Absurd drama, became assistant head in 1961 and head of Drama in 1963. To the would-be experimenters and explorers in the Drama department, the creation of the Third Programme was invaluable: the "commissioning" of Beckett in 1956 (I use the term loosely) came via John Morris, then controller of the Third, who twisted Gielgud's arm and then paired Beckett with an innovative and sympathetic producer in McWhinnie. In this instance at least, the network leaned persuasively on the department in order to get their man.

Members of Features department, on the contrary, saw fewer obvious advantages in the formation of the Third,[9] as their department had a substantial lineage of experimental writing and production. Even before the heightened experimentalism of the later 1950s, the plays produced by Features, such as those of Louis MacNeice, tended to be specifically radiophonic in character; as did the poetry, dramatic documentary, semi-musical "radio ballads," satires and semi-scripted sonic collages produced to mark special occasions. The department, headed by Laurence Gilliam, hired intellectuals on salaried or contract terms to write and assemble these works, and encouraged an exploration of the possibilities of the radio form.

The feature form is notable for its versatility. Each of the major Features writers to comment on the form has supplied a slightly different definition – not entirely in contradiction with other definitions, but marked by the personality and attitude of the definer. Rayner Heppenstall, one of the salaried writers and producers, says of Features that "the idea seemed in essence to be that anything would pass as a feature programme if it maintained a hold, however

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[9] Book-length accounts by Features members Rayner Heppenstall and D. G. Bridson make this point (Heppenstall 36, Bridson 177-9).

tenuous, on reality,[10] even if it was either *about* something (although the characters played by the actors might be fictitious) or if, as a play, it was specially written and derived from literary or other history" (Heppenstall 27). Douglas Cleverdon, another major Features producer, makes the distinction that "a radio play is a dramatic work deriving from the tradition of the theatre, but conceived in terms of radio. A radio feature is, roughly, any constructed programme … that derives from the technical apparatus of radio" (Cleverdon 17).[11] A significant number of the major writers employed by Features department – Heppenstall, Louis MacNeice, Dylan Thomas, Henry Reed, David Gascoyne – were known primarily as poets rather than playwrights; their work was less tied to dramatic tradition and form. Such a loose remit provided license to experiment, and made a certain fluidity of responsibilities necessary. If a writer were to be useful to Features, versatility was key: an author should also know how to handle a microphone and create and edit sound effects. So it is that the producer Nesta Pain referred to Features as a "cottage industry," in contrast to the "play factory" of Drama (Heppenstall 158). Instead of an industrial division of labour, Features emphasised collaboration, and aspired towards "pure radio" (Briggs 348) – this purity consisted in an advanced attentiveness to sound, but also an equality of sound and script, and a malleability of production methods. Gilliam, the department's charismatic figurehead, ensured the aesthetic versatility and vigour of Features; the

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[10] The "hold on reality" here is meant to refer to a Feature's incorporation of "actuality," as in the tradition of 1930s documentary films.

[11] Some concrete examples might clarify this vague definition of a "feature." Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* (1954), probably the most famous BBC feature of all, developed out of a proposed documentary about the life of a Welsh coastal town – the extensive use of a narrator, a poor dramatic device but an excellent features device, has its basis in these origins. Louis MacNeice's "Mosaic of Youth" (1959) brought together real-life recordings with English teenagers from various social background, all gathered on portable tape recorders by MacNeice himself, along with scripted lines written for actors. The series of collaborative radio ballads by Charles Parker, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger (1958-64), splicing actual interviews with specially composed songs, are discussed below.

characterization of Gilliam as "Lorenzo the Magnificent" (Briggs 348) even hints at Features as the centre of the new renaissance whose existence was denied by Connolly (see above, page 6).

The aesthetic inclusiveness of Features was combined with a tendency toward progressive or even radical politics. Tony Judt, in his account of postwar politics and culture, labels the Third Programme "unmistakably English in its studious avoidance of divisive or politically sensitive topics" (Judt 2005: 206). (Note that Judt is speaking of the intellectual and political content of the Third, rather than the radical aesthetic experience through its artistic and cultural content.) Judt may be right to note that in some respects the Third Programme *in general* was tactfully apolitical. Features, however, which as a department predated the Third Programme, and supplied material for both the Third and Home, developed a strong left-wing core of staff during the war years, partly through happy coincidence. The department was relocated out of necessity to Manchester in wartime; this also happened to be the BBC's location in the pre-war years for sending politically troublesome staff members, who could not be fired outright, on regional assignments: the Lancashire socialist D. G. Bridson recalls Reith, apparently serenely ignorant of the radical Mancunian tradition, sending the Oxford Marxist Archie Harding to Manchester "where you can't do so much damage" (Bridson 22). Bridson's own contributions to radio in the 1930s, made from this northern base, included poems about the three million unemployed, read by Ewan MacColl (at a time when the use of the word "unemployed" contravened official BBC policy (Bridson 34)), a play about the "more tiresome sides" of Manchester businessmen (45) and a Soviet-style "industrial symphony" about the Sheffield steelworks (60). During the war, Bridson produced programs in collaboration with

Langston Hughes, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger.[12] Returning to London in the postwar

period, he went on to work on projects such as a ballad opera about a love affair between a West

Indian immigrant and a Scotsman, and a program of "sick humour and satire" involving the

Americans Tom Lehrer and Lenny Bruce (254, 326). The Birmingham-based Features producer

Charles Parker, who joined the BBC in 1953, collaborated with MacColl and Peggy Seeger on

the *Radio Ballads* series of programs, beginning with *The Ballad of John Axon* in 1958. This

formally experimental program, based on the actual death of a Stockport railway worker who

had sacrificed his life the previous year in an attempt to halt a runaway train, tells the worker's

story and explores the lives and culture of northern railwaymen without employing a central

narrative voice; rather, real-life interviews with colleagues and family are creatively intertwined

with specially-composed songs by MacColl and Seeger in the folk-revival style. Further radio

ballads dedicated to fishermen, travelers and gypsies, miners and road-builders followed until the

end of the series in 1963.[13] At least during this period, radio was opened up to a variety of

voices.

Another dimension contributing to the pluralism of radio features was the genre's

inclusion of comic material. When comedy appeared on the Third Programme (not a common

occurrence, but not as unthinkable as the stereotype of the po-faced Third might indicate), it was

typically generated by Features. The liberation from coherent dramatic plot allowed by the

feature form created the opportunity for a certain type of wandering comic satire, most

successfully accomplished by Henry Reed's series of *Hilda Tablet* plays, featuring the hapless

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[12] Bridson's collaborations were not exclusively directed by his left-wing sympathies: he also worked with the bellicose Wyndham Lewis (1955) and the disgraced Ezra Pound (1960).

[13] As Paul Long has discussed, the creators suspected political rather than the stated economic reasons for the series' cancelation. (Long 2004: 133)

literary biographer Herbert Reeve (a nod towards Reed's own previous line of work) and the experimental composer Hilda. Comic features tended to be in dialogue with intellectual radio: when the Third aired a repeat broadcast of Louis MacNeice's existentially troubled play *The Careerist* in 1948, they followed it with an affection comic parody, *The Life of Sub-Human*, two nights later. *Third Division*, a six-part series aired on the Third in 1949, was a collection of comic send-ups of typical Third Programme concerns.

The network and department structure during the postwar period, then, tells a different story to the one depicting the BBC as a single, authoritarian voice. Features pointed the way towards a collaborative radio art, and this way was taken by the increasingly exploratory Drama department.

Collaboration in Radio

This increasingly collaborative approach to creative radio was intensified by the growing role of the producer. The postwar period saw a general shift in creative radio practice towards broadcasting fully produced, pre-recorded programs, and this change encouraged a different quality of collaboration. Rayner Heppenstall recalls that the Third Programme, on its formation, was the first network to allow pre-recording ("but it was some years before Home Service and Light Programme allowed it" (30)). Live transmissions necessarily kept dramatic radio more akin to stage theatre, requiring a comparable period of rehearsals under the watch of a producer whose role was closer to that of the stage director. With pre-recording – onto newly-available magnetic tape, which could be thoroughly edited in preparation for broadcast – something more like the collaborative "cottage industry" way of working described by Pain was established. The producer, now able to restructure the captured performances, could *compose* sonic material; the

producer, as well as the author, took on a compositional role, as described here by Heppenstall: "pre-recording on tape gave the producer more work. The essential thing is that … that producer shall never allow himself to be rattled and that, while recording, he, with red pencil poised and thumb ready at the talk-back key, shall be ready to pounce even on the sound made by a carelessly turned page of script" (Heppenstall 34). Even more directly, Desmond Briscoe recalls that "Michael Bakewell came to watch me mixing and said afterwards that it was like watching someone play Liszt on the piano" (Briscoe 20). The changing producer's role during this period of radio contributes to the acceptance of "the studio as a compositional tool," as urged in a 1979 lecture by the producer and musician Brian Eno (Eno 127).

Besides actors performing scripted dialogue, the other sonic materials at the producer's disposal came from sound specialists of one order or another. The involvement of high profile composers in collaborative radio productions was a feature of the earlier years of the Third Programme: in 1946, MacNeice's play *The Dark Tower* was produced with a specially-composed score by Benjamin Britten, while notable English modernists such as Elisabeth Lutyens and Humphrey Searle frequently composed music for plays, documentary features and "imaginary talks" broadcast by the Third. Again, Features rather than Drama is credited (by the admittedly partisan Heppenstall) with "commissioning new music as well as new writing," although composers would later be "priced out of business" following a dispute with the Musicians' Union in 1956 over pay concerns and the use of pre-recorded music in radio programs. This dispute, reported with belligerent unsympathy by Heppenstall, practically ended the "verse epic with large-scale incidental music," of the type attempted by MacNeice, as a

viable radio form (Heppenstall 33, 81).[14] The outcome of the Musician's Union dispute also restricted the use of pre-recorded music in radio broadcasts. In-studio gramophones were a major source of non-verbal sound in creative radio; significantly for radiophonic art, the restrictions didn't apply to non-musical sound effects.[15] A gramophone recording of a piece of music is relatively easily added to a recorded performance, but the operation of a sound effects disc demanded another type of ingenuity (these sound effects might be short in duration, and might be played at different speeds to suggest other sounds). Developments in the technology itself also shifted the creative emphasis: by the second half of the 1950s, once tape was added to discs as an infinitely more malleable source of sound, a new type of sonic art was in full emergence: the humbly-deployed studio assistants or "gramophones operators" now flourished as *bruiteurs*. Responsible for shaping and re-structuring sound, these *bruiteurs* played a crucial role in the changing system of production-as-composition in the tape era of creative radio.

The increased availability of tape, the growing requirement for new sound effects, and the emergence of a generation of sound specialists influenced by developments in European electroacoustic music – *musique concrète* in France, and *elektronische Musik* in Germany – resulted in the foundation of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop in 1958. The Workshop had no network or department allegiance, and produced sound for both radio and television. Devoted to the creation of "special sound," the Workshop disregarded the distinction between music and sound and was therefore able to operate beyond the limitations of the Musicians' Union. The Radiophonic Workshop – like Features department, a type of "cottage industry" requiring

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[14] This industrial dispute is another example of the effect of institutional structures shaping creative art, as well as a reminder that the ideal of radio as an inclusive and collaborative project can falter.

[15] The distinction between music and sound effect was not and is not rigidly defined, as will become apparent.

underfunded adaptability and non-codified ingenuity of its members – added an extra

collaborative dimension to radio. The fact that the Workshop produced sounds that were

fantastical rather than derivative changed the relationship between author and sound-artist. As a

sound effects department, the Workshop and associated electroacoustic artists were more than

just a solution to sonic problems unwittingly posed by the script; these new, strange sounds were

also a creative option whose possibilities were deliberately explored by writers on all networks.[16]

Creative employment: writers at the BBC

The writers whose task was to create text that could be given life as meaningful sound

were hired by BBC departments (not networks): as salaried full-time employees, as

commissioned occasional script-writers, or as successful submitters of unsolicited scripts. The

permanent staff members – such as Bridson, Heppenstall and MacNeice, all employed by

Features – were employed as producers as well as writers, so that their contribution to a

completed program would be one of technical execution as well as literary conception.[17] The

texts on which these author-producers worked were diverse: projects conceived from a deeply

personal, even idiosyncratic enthusiasm; translations, adaptations, or explanatory prefaces

introducing listeners to more challenging works; or documentary scripts responding to current

events. Writers' enthusiasm for these projects varied: the word "hackwork" appears frequently in

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[16] For example: in 1956, Beckett noted that he had a "special quality of bruitage" in mind when writing *All That Fall*; Frederick Bradnum's 1957 script for *Private Dreams and Public Nightmares* includes a column of detailed notes on sounds to be realized radiophonically – "a comet-like shriek … acoustic change … a developed sound like a cry"; in 1959 Louis MacNeice specifically requested "specially devised sounds" from Tristram Cary for his Norwegian and Irish folk tales (Beckett *Letters* 2 656, Briscoe 21, MacNeice *Letters* 17 Apr. 1959).

[17] These full-time author-producers might write, produce or write *and* produce a program.

discussions of some types of creative labour. Sinfield describes radio professionalism as a "para-literary" occupation (Sinfield 2004: 61) – literary creation was balanced with other, perhaps more mundane responsibilities.

Beyond the full-time staff of writers, an unfixed network of freelance contributors, often personally connected to staff producers, enjoyed the benefits of regular commissions from Features or Drama department. Dylan Thomas, for instance, never took a staff job at the BBC but in the last ten years of his life contributed to 156 BBC broadcasts as a writer, actor, reader of poems, or participant in literary talks (W. Davies xvii). The "painless" readings and discussions would earn Thomas between £15 and £20 a time plus traveling expenses, and scripts would bring more – Paul Ferris, Thomas' biographer, calls the BBC "the best single market in the country to writers and performers" (Ferris 209). Thomas's connection to Features department was strengthened by the friendship and loose patronage of the producer Douglas Cleverdon, who produced Thomas' *Under Milk Wood* in 1954.[18] Henry Reed, a wartime poet who found writing the satirical *Hilda Tablet* series of plays a preferable source of income to teaching or literary biography (Stallworthy 1991: 18), was similarly drawn to Features through connections to permanent staff members: MacNeice had taught Reed in the classics department at Birmingham in the 1930s, and Cleverdon helped to furnish Reed with a "modest income" and hand him commissions that would send him to his favoured Italian destinations. Muriel Spark was prompted into writing for radio by the coaxing of her friend Rayner Heppenstall (Spark v).[19]

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[18] Cleverdon acknowledges the possible nepotism in this system of loose patronage, recalling Roy Campbell's remark that "the one advantage of being in the BBC was that you could give jobs to your friends" (Cleverdon 7).

[19] In a letter from Derek Stanford, quoted by Spark's biographer Martin Stannard, the "mutual interest" between Heppenstall and Spark is considered: "Rayner is partly interested in you (with an eye to amorous

Drama department commissioned writers with a growing reputation on the stage: Brendan

Behan's radio play *The Big House* (1957) followed from the success of *The Quare Fellow*

(1954), and Beckett's *All That Fall* (1957) came after the international fame of *Waiting For*

Godot (1953).

The least securely positioned writers related to the BBC were the hopeful submitters of

unsolicited scripts. Julian MacLaren-Ross, for example, in his *Memoirs of the Forties*, recalls his

difficulties attempting to sell a script adapted from Graham Greene's *A Gun For Sale*, even with

Green's endorsement (MacLaren-Ross 16) (MacLaren-Ross, like the protagonist of his novel *Of*

Love and Hunger, sold vacuum cleaners for a living and didn't get a script accepted by the BBC

until 1961). Where MacLaren-Ross largely failed, others succeeded. Joe Orton received £65 for

his play *The Ruffian on the Stair* in 1963; more importantly, his career as a dramatist benefited

from the BBC's "institutional kiss of life," as Orton's biographer John Lahr has it (Lahr 154). In

the year of the play's broadcast, Lahr records, there were fifty-eight new writers among the 395

radio plays aired on the BBC. Harold Pinter was "sustained" by the BBC in his pre-fame

endeavours (154); the same can be said for John Arden and Bill Naughton. In these examples we

see corporation, department and network all providing for emerging writers: the BBC offered

these younger artists the opportunity of an income; the departmental structure connected writers

to sympathetic supporters and collaborators; and the Third Programme offered a space in which

writers could develop free of the pressures of populist commercialism.

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doing), you are interested in Rayner (with an eye to anything doing in radio)," a suggestion to which
Spark took semi-offence (Stannard 194).

We might reasonably suppose, then, that BBC employment was extremely welcome to those who could get it. This was not always the case. During wartime, employment as a creative radio worker had been accepted as a fulfillment of duty, a contribution to the war effort; in peacetime, the radio worker's role had to be reassessed. The role of state or public institutions (the BBC amongst them) during wartime "transformed the relationship between state and cultural production," as Sinfield puts it (Sinfield 2004: 54), but the attitudes of this new class of salaried intellectuals were liable to change in the postwar period. The Labour Health Minister Aneurin Bevan, in speaking of the postwar project of nationalisation, saw no inherent contradiction between statism and art:

> Some day, under the impulse of collective action, we shall enfranchise the artists, by giving them our public buildings to work upon; our bridges, our housing estates, our offices, our industrials canteens, our factories and municipal buildings where we house our civic activities. It is tiresome to listen to the diatribes of some modern art critics who bemoan the passing of the rich patron as though this must mean the decline of art, whereas it could mean its emancipation if the artists were restored to their proper relationship with civic life. (Bevan 50-51)

Beyond Bevan's idealism, Alan Sinfield notes the increasing anxieties amongst British writers regarding the relationship between the artist and the State. Sinfield pays particular attention to left-leaning artists – Cyril Connolly, George Orwell, Stephen Spender – who had grown disillusioned with Stalin's interpretation of Communist state power:

> Connolly and his circle … didn't want to be involved with the State: they imagined it leading to a Soviet-style control of culture. They didn't know, though, where else to turn. They saw that 'good' culture had depended on a leisured class fraction which, through

the successive blows of the First World War, the Depression, the Second World War and

the egalitarian mood of 1945, had lost confidence and resources. (Sinfield 2000 83)

We see in the radio workers of the period an acceptance of publically-funded employment that is

typically tentative, and at times expressly anxious. Rayner Heppenstall recalls tracing Laurence

Sterne's route through Europe described in his *Sentimental Journey*: "In his passport, Sterne

says, he was described as 'Yorick, court jester'. I was described in mine as 'author and radio

producer'. Another kind of performing monkey" (Heppenstall 53). The conflict between artistic

independence and the benefits of collectivity persisted.

Part 2. The Aesthetic Significance of Sound

Radio as an Aural Public Sphere

As I have shown, creative radio work at the BBC was dependent on, indeed inseparable

from, the structure and the working conditions of the corporation and its departments. An equally

important element for our understanding, however, is the medium of radio as the aural space in

which broadcasting and listening happen. The relation between the creators of radio art and the

listening public constitutes a "public sphere" as described in the work of Jürgen Habermas,[20] but

constituted specifically as an aural space. Furthermore, as Patrick Deer has noted, the mix of

voices in radio's aural sphere could be pluralising in effect, even in wartime:

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[20] To Habermas, the public sphere comprises both the physical meeting places in which intellectual discussion happened (with roots in the 18th century coffee house) and the virtual spaces of media (such as newspapers) which becomes a comparable arena for inclusive discussion.

To adapt Steven Connor's terminology, BBC radio helped construct an 'auditory I' for the Home Front, which indulged the 'plural permeated space' of sound and defined the self 'as a channel through which voices, noises and musics travel.' (Deer 134)

The "public sphere" voice, understood as belonging to aural space, does not indiscriminately declare outwards from a privileged centre to a surrounding mass, as in the Reithian model of broadcasting. Rather, the voice has a considered, mutual involvement with the collective mind to which it speaks. Wartime broadcasting necessitated the focusing of this approach, as John Fordham (quoted by Deer) notes in commenting that "it was the social mission of representing a people's collective experience to itself in time of war which determined the dominance of the 'feature'" (Deer 141-2). Fordham takes the feature form as an emblem of progressive radio. The wartime feature's engagement with the "collective" was commonly an attempt to confirm a general consensus of shared national values; the postwar feature took this model but extended collective experience to include diversity. We find the precedent of collectivizing experience, set during the war period, informing the work of both Features and Drama department in the postwar years, driven not by urgent practical necessity but by an exploratory creative impulse.[21]

The move towards pluralisation in postwar radio – a step further away from the monologic broadcasting voice of interwar Reithianism – came through creative work, but was also the result of the interaction between creative radio and its listeners. The public to whom the phrase "public sphere," used in the context of my work, refers should not be understood as a

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[21] Melba Cuddy-Keane, in her essay "Virginia Woolf and the Public Sphere," remarks on a similar progression in the work of Habermas, who refined his account of the public sphere to include diverse social models (Cuddy-Keane: 2010 232).

passive, placeless and objectively knowable mass. The areas in which postwar radio listening took place were still overwhelmingly private or domestic spaces: the BBC's own magazine *The Listener*, celebrated this fact in a 1932 article stressing that the domestic listener receives the broadcast "as an individual, protected from the emotions which are so easily aroused in mass audiences" (Lacey 116). *The Listener,* intended to enforce the audience's connection to radio's aural space by offering a source of weekly comment and reflection on recent broadcasts, continued to acknowledge the domestic reception of radio, calling its drama review pages "The Critic on the Hearth." The magazine encouraged and published audience responses to radio broadcasts, aspiring towards an ideal scenario in which the "listener" referred to by the publication's title was an *actively participating* listener (the Third Programme was founded, as we have seen, on the principle of engaged, active listening). Early radio was compelled to attempt what Paddy Scannell calls "the socialisation of the private sphere" (Lewis 1989: 60). The real space of radio, according to this intention, is the intersection of the public and the private. Michele Hilmes notes that early radio was a "primary means of negotiating the boundaries between public life and the private home," effecting an "invisible permeation of our lives" (Hilmes 1-2); quite rightly, but creative, inclusive radiophonics on the BBC – "advanced radio" – were designed to ensure that this permeation was not unmutually invasive. The better examples of radio sought to engage brains as well as strike ears; to speak *with*, as well as speak *to*.

My conception of active listening and radio's aural sphere follows the work of Kate Lacey, whose book *Listening Publics* (2013) draws attention to the "act of listening." Lacey, whose work is largely confined to the pre-World War II era, traces the "privatization of the listening public" occurring through domestic radio listening; in this account we see broadcasting "extending the reach of public listening, but apparently defining it as individuated, dispersed and disempowered" (113). *Apparently* is the key word in this sentence: Lacey goes on to note that

"public" and "private" are terms with a fluid relationship to one another, "producing hybrid forms and spaces that resist simple categorization" (113). The creative postwar works with which my own dissertation is concerned go on to explore and exploit these hybrid spaces. We see producers such as Donald McWhinnie acknowledging that radio, despite the public nature of broadcasting, is fundamentally a "private medium" (McWhinnie 11) but tailoring his productions (which included radio plays by Samuel Beckett and Giles Cooper) to respond to this "privacy," affecting creative disturbances of the domestic space.

My analysis of broadcasting, then, proposes a relationship of interaction between the broadcaster and listener. Marshall and Eric McLuhan, in a passage quoted by Lacey, define acoustic space *in general* as a "resonant sphere," dynamic in nature. This notion of the "resonant sphere," which I take to be more than a throw-away metaphor, is a useful description of radiophonic broadcasting's relationship to acts of listening. "Resonance," acoustically speaking, refers to the physical character of sound, which is amplified in interaction with the resonant frequencies of a vessel – a room, a bowl, the ear.[22] Thinking in terms of resonance reminds us that a sonic event does not "happen" at the source of the sound, but as an interaction between the diffused soundwaves and the spaces they permeate.[23] To apply this acoustic point to broadcasting in particular: the meaning of radio is created in exchanges between the public sphere of broadcasting and the private, intimate acts of listening. The "resonant sphere" model of

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[22] An acoustician will be similarly aware of how the texture of a sound will be determined by the space it fills – the receiving space will dampen or amplify or echo the sound.

[23] I am indebted here to Melba Cuddy-Keane, who in her work on sound in modernist narrative uses the term "diffusion" for sound emitted from its source, and "auscultation" for the act of listening to the diffused sound (Cuddy-Keane 2000: 70-1).

broadcasting speaks of meanings evoked in the listener, and demands a reading of radio "texts" (scripts or recordings) that remains alert to intersubjective possibilities.

The "resonant sphere" model of auditory space proposed by the McLuhans and extended by Kate Lacey owes its effectiveness to the fact that unlike the virtual spaces created through other disseminated media (printed text, film and television, the internet), acoustic space is *fundamentally* spherical. Making this claim, however, opens up at least one of the pieces of sound studies "baggage" bemoaned by Jonathan Sterne, in a complaint made in the introduction to his 2003 book *The Audible Past*, and restated in 2012 in his *Sound Studies Reader*. Sterne reflects on the emergent critical interest in aurality and sees a dogmatic "audiovisual litany" shaping cultural analysis in the sound studies field, by which critics habitually set hearing and vision in opposition to one another, to the extent of attributing to sound a moral superiority over vision (Sterne 2003: 15-16). Sterne's list of "cultural prenotions about the senses" (Sterne 2012: 9) – which includes items such as "hearing involves physical contact with the outside world, vision requires distance from it" and "hearing tends towards subjectivity, vision tends towards objectivity" – is headed by the point that "hearing is spherical, vision is directional" (Sterne 2003: 15). Sterne, motivated by a desire that an emergent field should maintain a critical flexibility, is impatient with the idealization of hearing and the denigration of vision, and the accompanying failure to offer a study of sensory perception in which the senses complete one another. Yet for my interrogation of the aesthetics of broadcasting to take shape – concerned as it is with the interaction between public space and private space, and between centres and peripheries – it is essential to note the spatiality that is particular to sound. I am helped in this respect by Melba Cuddy-Keane, who writes of the "inclusiveness of auditory perception" with precision: "[p]eripheral vision generally operates with the range of 140-180°, with the area of acute central vision being significantly less (often functioning within a range of 5°), whereas we

can, at any one moment, detect sound sources within the full circumference of 360°" (Cuddy-Keane 2005: 387). The claims about hearing that Sterne treats with suspicion *can* be asserted, and substantiated. Listening includes an involvement with circumambient space; the extent of this space, changed by the introduction of the complicating and enriching hyperextensions of amplifying, recording and broadcasting technology, informs my model of broadcasting and radio listening.

I do not wish to overstate the extent of our culture's general privileging of one sense over another – fifteen years' worth of contributions to the emerging sound studies field have gone some way towards redressing any undue privilege given to sight[24] – but rather, I intend to specifically challenge the distinction between backgrounds and foregrounds that arises from an emphasis on visual space. These designations depend on the relative position, and the level of attention, of the listener. Agreeing with Ari Y. Kelman that "[b]ackground noise is not background at all" (Kelman 230) and taking instead spherical, resonant auditory space as my model for the soundworld, I consider sounding and listening as a dynamic exchange between centres and peripheries. The nature of these exchanges is varied, and the points of centrality and periphery are not fixed. An act of sound-making – the chiming of a bell, for example – involves dispersing sounds from a central point towards marginal locations. The leaden circles dissolving in the air described by Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* – booming *out* across Westminster from Big Ben – stand as a visual image of the outward sweeping of a sound (Woolf 2000: 4).[25] This

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[24] Walter Ong's *The Presence of the Word* (1967), identifying the shift from oral culture towards literacy and alphabetic culture as restructuring human interaction, is a classic account of "sight-centric" culture. More recently, Casey O'Callaghan has critiqued "visuocentric" focus in his 2007 book *Sounds* (4-12).

[25] To take a more ancient example: David Toop, in his book *Sinister Resonance*, quotes the following comment from Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks: "Although the voices which penetrate the air proceed from their sources in circular motion, nevertheless the circles which are propelled from their different

instance is provided by Melba Cuddy-Keane as an example of "diffusion," of the emission of sound from its source (Cuddy-Keane 2000: 70-1). The listener, meanwhile, can claim to be in a position of centrality in relation to the peripheral parts of the sound-world in which they are immersed. To the auditor, listening entails the encroachment of sounds from the periphery on the sensorium of the centrally-located auditor. (Cuddy-Keane uses the term "auscultation" for the act of listening to the diffused sound.) The key point here is that every listener can claim to be in position of centrality; put simply, every listener's sensorium is the centre of her own perceived soundscape. To this end, Kate Lacey claims that the resonant sphere has "no centre and no margins" (Lacey 6); at the very least, the perceived central and marginal points are matters of intersubjective fluidity and confluence. *Acts of listening* (Lacey's term for the public's engaged reception of sound) and *points of listening* (Alan Beck's term describing acoustic perspective in radio production) are equally important to my analysis.

How To Listen?

My attentiveness to aural space, then, leads me towards an aesthetics of immersion and intermingling. When Elizabeth Bowen assessed the progress of the recently-established Third Programme in 1947, her line of enquiry was two-fold. In addition to wondering how the Third was living up to its role as a provider of serious culture, Bowen had another question: "As listeners, how are we coming along?" (Bowen 207). Bowen's enquiry into the standard of

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centres meet without any hindrance and penetrate and pass across one another keeping to the centre from which they spring" (*Notebooks* 37, quoted in *Sinister Resonance* 47). Both Woolf and Leonardo's images give to sound a deserving physicality.

listenership was not made from a Reithian insistence on audience conformity to the high

standards of the Third. "The aim is not to discriminate between people (thereby grading listeners,

invidiously, into classes)," Bowen claimed, "but to make people discriminate for themselves"

(204). Bowen praised the Third Programme for being "receptive, open and on the move" (203)

rather than unremittingly prescriptive, and combined this defence with a rebuttal to those who

wanted the network to be "more adult-educational, less aesthetic" – that is, focused on

economics and current affairs rather than the arts (207). To Bowen, the broadcaster and the

listening public would be mutually complicit in creative radio. The Third's devotion to culture

and creative radio, she insisted, is what accounted for its special relationship with the listener:

> Creativeness, the creative use of radio, is the function and *raison d'être* of the Third
>
> Programme. But this implies interaction – how can it not? To an extent, the Programme is
>
> to create the listener: not less, the listener is to create the Programme – by his response,
>
> mobility, curiosity, sensitiveness and willingness to approach the not yet known. (204)

In what sense does creative radio *in particular* ensure this reciprocal relationship with the

listener? The answer lies in the often-alleged incompleteness of the creative radio form (the

supposed "blindness" of radio is discussed below), which is in fact an invitation to the perceptive

listener to actively construct the world suggested through the transmitted signals of sound and

voice.

The "completion" of radio by the listening ear positions the listener as an individual, and

still more crucially as a participant. Dermot Rattigan, who stresses the listener's *dramatic*

imagination as key to completing the aural perception of radio, sees active listening as key to

resolving the contradiction between the collectivizing reach of broadcasting and the

individualism of the listener, asserting that "the individual listener's ability aurally to interpret

and through the neurological process imaginatively reconstruct the radio signal … gives radio its

oft quoted accolade, that it alone has the unique ability to communicate directly with each

individual while broadcasting to *all* listeners" (Rattigan 13). Frances Gray, similarly, notes that

the "willingness of the audience to participate in a creative act" speaks of radio's intimacy (Gray

1981: 51). For John Durham Peters, the simultaneity of experience produced by radio

broadcasting enhances the intimate nature of the medium, the listeners comprising "a diaspora of

simultaneous intimacies" (qtd. in Lacey 125). Rudolf Arnheim, an early theorist of the medium

who stressed the need for radio to assert its independence as an artform in its own right,

contrasted creative radio with the use of radio as a redistribution medium: whereas the use of

radio to merely *recreate* events such as live concerts or performances is likely to leave the

listener isolated – Arnheim hypothesizes a sad private listener who "hears a happier audience

laughing too loudly and doesn't know what they are laughing at" (Arnheim 139) – radiophonic

productions include the listener in the completion of a soundworld. Arnheim was writing shortly

after the emergence of the German *Hörspiel*, a form whose name indicates that the *play* happens

not simply "on the radio" but in the ear of the listener. Each of these accounts of radio listening

suggests that, given the right material, the constructive ear will draw the listener out of privacy

and towards participation.[26]

Bowen's question, "as listeners, how are we coming along?", asked six months into the

Third Programme's life on the air, was pre-empted. The Third Programme announced itself to

the public in September 1946 with a maiden broadcast called *How To Listen*. While this title

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[26] Steven Connor, stressing that broadcasting and listening are "asymmetric actions," supposes that "we can say that radio is characterized both by the intimacy of its impersonality and the impersonality of its intimacy" (Connor 2009b: 275).

seems to indicate a prescriptive manual for the uninitiated audience on how to handle the Third's

challenging material, the program was in fact a satirical concoction by the comic writers Stephen

Potter and Joyce Grenfell, both Features department members who had produced earlier "How

To…" pieces for the Home Service. If listeners felt daunted by the challenges to follow from the

BBC's much-discussed new highbrow network, then Potter and Grenfell's script exposes an

equivalent anxiety on the part of network planners. The narrator in *How To Listen* is not a

monologic, didactic voice speaking indiscriminately to a featureless public; on the contrary, the

voices of narrator and producer fuss over whether they are really being heard by members of the

public, and we then "listen in" to the homes of imagined listeners and non-listeners:

> NARRATOR: Are they ready? Are they listening? Here, the house is empty – there, the set is switched off – but here, Licence number 865432, Mrs Moss, is she listening?
>
> OLD LADY: Turn up the wireless, Mrs Moss.
>
> MRS MOSS: Yes, dear, it is chilly tonight, let's turn up the wireless a bit…
>
> PRODUCER (*anxiously*): Yes, but is she really going to listen?
>
> NARRATOR: On to another radio set. Where are we now? Let's look in at the window of Baltimore Gardens.
>
> MAN: It's your call.
>
> WOMAN: I said four clubs.
>
> MAN: Four clubs… I say, could we have the radio down a little please? (Carpenter 27-8)

The fanciful sweep from household to household sends up the relationship between broadcaster and audience, and acknowledges the very real anxieties within the BBC about quantity[27] but also quality of listening. The Third Programme, as Bowen went on to express, did "*not* desire hypnotised non-stop listening" but "plan[ned] to be planned for" (Bowen 207). Potter and Grenfell's opening program is certainly not meant to encourage distracted domestic listening; at the same time, the listener to the opening of this live broadcast is taken out of their isolation and made to imagine other nationwide listeners. The fact that these listeners may be only partially attending to the radio, although troubling to the producer, completes the portrayal of the hypothetical listener as an individual; lives go on being lived while the broadcast plays out. Third Programme material (and the rest of the first evening's transmission provided the anticipated "serious" culture after Potter and Grenfell's satire) would not be imposed upon a vacuous public, but would be offered for acceptance into the living domestic soundscapes of its potential listeners. Attentive listening by deliberate audiences, however desirable to network planners, would not be presumed.

Other radio features drew the listener into imagined immersive aural spaces in which the gaps between private listeners are bridged. In Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*, for example, the listener is urged to participate in radio's characteristic penetration of domestic boundaries. Thomas's "play for voices" begins with a narrator (called only "First Voice" in the script) repeatedly petitioning the listener to *listen* and *look*:

> *Time passes. Listen. Time passes.*

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[27] The *Daily Mirror*, reviewing the Third Programme's first evening of broadcasting, alleged that staff within the BBC were referring to the venture as "Haley's Third symphony, for orchestra and two listeners" (Carpenter 31).

Come closer now.

Only you can hear the houses sleeping in the streets in the slow deep salt and silent black, bandaged night. Only you can see, in the blinded bedrooms, the coms and petticoats over the chairs, the jugs and basins, the glasses of teeth, Thou Shalt Not on the wall, and the yellowing dicky-bird watching pictures of the dead. Only you can hear and see, behind the eyes of the sleepers, the movements and countries and mazes and colours and dismays and rainbows and tunes and wishes and flight and fall and despairs and big seas of their dreams.

From where you are, you can hear their dreams. (Thomas 4)

The First Voice leads the listener from bedroom to bedroom across Thomas's sleeping fictional Llarreggub village, where we listen in on the dreaming inhabitants before similarly eavesdropping on their waking chatter across a day in the life of the community. Thomas's essentially plotless "play for voices" grew out of the traditional documentary feature that typically explored slices of life from actual locations: Thomas's own *Return Journey to Swansea*, first broadcast in 1947, was an example of the townscape documentary; Peter Sellers' spoof piece "Balham: Gateway to the South," first recorded for the 1949 Third Programme series *Third Division,* parodied this form. Such aural explorations of place – documentary or fictional, serious or parodic – connect the listener to actual or re-constructed soundscapes. The final line in the passage from *Under Milk Wood* quoted above: "*From where you are*, you can hear their dreams" places an emphasis on the *listener*'s own location. For Walford Davies, these passages are symptomatic of the mid-1950s cultural moment when "the wireless still had a visionary if visionless confidence in its outreach." This outreach, for Davies, stretches to include the listener in pluralistic cultural spaces: "just as within the work dreams are co-inhabited by villagers

otherwise separated by streets, mistrust, class, respectability and even death, so we too as listeners cross a physical space closed only by voices" (W. Davies xlii).

Whereas *Under Milk Wood* draws the listener into a community of domestic voices (although these voices are rarely speaking to one another),[28] other key radio works from this period feature isolated characters and address similarly isolated listeners. *Night Thoughts*, a 1955 radiophonic poem by the former teenage Surrealist poet David Gascoyne in collaboration with the composer Humphrey Searle, begins with three anonymous voices (identified only as "nightwatchers") speaking both *of* and *to* the listener, apostrophizing rather than welcoming:

> Let those who hear this voice become aware
>
> The sun has set. O night-time listeners,
>
> You sit in lighted rooms marooned by darkness,
>
> And through dark ether comes a voice to bid you
>
> All be reminded that the night surrounds you. (Gascoyne 207)

This gloomy opening was broadcast to the nation at 9.40 on an early December evening. Three more voices, speaking as harassed listeners, respond to the nightwatchers:

> [*Voice B*]: A war goes on within against the shadows.
>
> [*Voice D*]: *Who speaks tonight of war and battle? Go to bed!*
>
> [*Voice E*]: *The war? What war? We've had too many wars.*
>
>   *The last War's over.*

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[28] Raymond Williams remarks: "the people, in the end, hardly talk *to* each other; each is locked in a world of dream or a convention of public behavior" (Williams 26).

[*Voice F*]: *Go to sleep. Put out*

That light. The War is over now. It's late.

Why don't those people go to bed?   (Gascoyne 208)

The poem oscillates between pessimism and optimism, and between isolation and communication. A dialogue emerges between an "Anonymous Mass Voice" full of "fear of failure or of being found a fool, / And fear of anything that might contrast with me / And thus reveal my insufficiency" and enlightened voices trying to forge connections between distant listeners:

Yes, neighbour, I can hear.

I too have heard those ominous night voices. I hear yours,

You are my neighbour, not a crowd, I'm not afraid of you,

Although I cannot see your face. Then let us not

Mistrust each other. (Gascoyne 213-4)

The listener to *Night Thoughts* engages with sound and music as well as text; Humphrey Searle, learnt *musique concrète* techniques especially for the poem, using the as-yet limited electronic music facilities at the pre-Radiophonic Workshop BBC (Niebur 18). The listener, especially in the poem's phantasmagoric middle section which leads us through a nightmarish "megalometropolitan carnival," is exposed to clashing voices (the slick, capitalistic voices of the marketplace and mass communications) and alienating sounds (percussive sounds are played at quarter-speed, a jazz dance band is folded in on itself with the rhythm played backwards). The act of creative radio listening (by which the listener constructs meaning from the sound signals) becomes harrowing. By the poem's conclusion, however, the listener is invited to hear *silence*.

The encounter with silence, experienced in the poem by a figure referred to as "the solitary" who is a surrogate for the wireless listener, is ultimately transformative: here is found "the consolation of profound Serenity"; here is a metaphorical "Virgil" to guide us (232). The solitary listener "goes back to his house, he returns to his wife and children," as the anonymous voices tell us:

> [*First Voice*] The primary division of the human family at night is that which sets those who are alone from those who are together. And yet all are alone … and all those who are isolated in their solitude are really alone only because they do not actually realize the presence of other beings like themselves in the world.

> [*Second Voice*] Greetings to the solitary. Friends, fellow beings, you are not strangers to us. We are closer to one another than we realize. Let us remember one another at night, even though we do not know each other's names. (233)

This transformation at the poem's conclusion is attributed to the encounter with silence ("Silence had delivered its essential message to him, and he had responded" (233)). However, the poem has already questioned the existence of true silence; "silence," that which transforms and consoles the solitary at the poem's conclusion, is held in the poem as an invitation to deeper attentive listening:

> [*Narration Two*] There is seldom experienced anywhere on the inhabited earth, for more than a moment or two at a time, such a thing as silence … What we usually call silence is most often no more really than a confused medley of diminutive sounds to which it would be too tiring to pay conscious attention.

[*Narration Three*] Everywhere about us, day and night, goes on the eddying stream of murmur: little drifting sighs and rumblings, whispers, coughing, whistles, moans.

These diminutive sounds – some of them replicated in Searle's electronic accompaniment – are peripheral sounds, existing just within or just beyond the listener's auditory horizon: "A window rattling in the wind … That everlasting rear-exhausting, gear-exhausted car … Bark of a mongrel … An infinitesimal insect's lovesong, scarcely a second long." Attention to these peripheral "outside" sounds is mixed in Gascoyne's thinking to a deeply intimate internal body-sound, the "velvet-padded hammering of life-blood's changing pulse" (229). This reference, along with his general account of the non-existence of silence, suggests either an awareness of or a coincidence with John Cage's well-known account of seeking silence in an anechoic chamber and hearing instead "two sounds of one's own unintentional making (nerve's systematic operation, blood's circulation)" (Cage 13-14).

These examples do not definitively answer the question of *how* to listen. They do, however, stand as instances of creative radio inviting the individual listener into an aural sphere; they point ways towards resolving the problems of how to broadcast intimately, to socialize the public sphere, to connect the centrally-positioned listener to peripheral details and the centrally-positioned broadcaster to peripheral listeners.

The Radio Form

And how are we, *as critics*, to listen to radiophonic writing? Radio drama criticism traditionally emphasized the perceived inherent limitations of the radio form, noting the

supposed blindness, transience, placelessness and immateriality of the medium. Lance Sieveking, the early radio playwright, spoke in 1934 of radio's "ghastly impermanence" (Sieveking); Louis MacNeice described radio as "ephemeral work" (*AS* 31). Rudolf Arnheim, assessing the medium in its nascent form, commented "in praise of blindness," but did not challenge the belief that "the ear alone gives an incomplete" picture of the world (Arnheim 135). Radio, writes Alan Beck, is "incomplete, elliptical, metonymic" (qtd. in Stanton 96). Beck, however, goes on to describe this incompleteness as providing the possibility for new forms of expression. Other recent critics have questioned whether we should speak of "incompleteness" at all. Martin Shingler observes that according to traditional accounts of the form's blindness, "radio would appear to be both a deficient (incomplete) medium and one obsessed by its own limitations and inadequacies … the notion that all its formal characteristics are essentially compensatory devices for its blindness, perpetuates this view of an inadequate (even neurotic) medium, robbing it of any potential virtue or strength it may have as a purely auditory form" (Shingler 75). Daniel Albright refers to advanced radio's "Disunity of Space, Disunity of Time, Disunity of Action" (Albright 100); however, what radio *does* have the ability to present, Albright reminds us, is a "Unity of Sound" (100). Critics willing to embrace the aurality of radiophonic texts have arrived at a new way of understanding the supposed limitations of the medium as producing an openness (between the writer and their work, and between the radio creator and the radio listener) that is commensurable with the "resonant" aural sphere: in Albright's "Unity of Sound" we see a confluence of mental landscapes, constructed by the participating listener; in Tim Crook's outright rejection of the notion of radio blindness, we encounter the alternative notion of "imaginative spectacle" with the "power to recreate a full sensory spectrum of experience" (62). Other critics – Jonathan Raban, Elissa Guralnick – have joined with Crook in dispelling the "myth" of radio blindness.

The strongest answer to the charge of incompleteness is provided by a phenomenological approach to radio, which has been most fully described by Clive Cazeaux. Cazeaux crucially distinguishes his account of the "positive 'invitational' quality" of radio from the more general point that "the imagination is invited to 'fill in the gaps' left by the absence of imagery" (Cazeaux 158); his account is grounded in a specific enquiry into the nature of auditory perception. In contrast to classic accounts of radio such as Arnheim's praising of blindness, Cazeaux begins by challenging the notion that radio is impoverished by its sightlessness, referring to the work of the philosopher Martin Milligan, who questions our understanding of the sensory experience of pathologically blind people as *qualitatively* impoverished. The phenomenological perspective on sensory experience (Cazeaux draws heavily on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty) posits that the senses operate as regions of an overall unity rather than as discrete channels. With this unity in mind, the phenomenological enquiry into radio aesthetics offers an account that is essentially aural, without succumbing to the absolute separation of senses of which Sterne disapproves. Experience, according to the phenomenological perspective, has "a questioning character" so that "sensory receptivity is the 'bringing into being' of stimuli" (Cazeaux 160). Summarising a common phenomenological account of art, Cazeaux writes that "the work of art is perceptually significant because it manipulates and displays the cognitive structures through which perception in general is organized" (164); he finds this to be especially true of radio art, where "the state of 'calling for completion'" is an especially vital component (158). The sounds of a radio play, then, sustain the work "as a coherent whole through a series of 'beckoning' or 'opening onto' relationships *with other elements in the work and with elements in the world*" (167). Cazeaux's identification of two types of relationships – "with other elements in the work *and* with elements in the world" – is significant. The materials of the radiophonic

broadcast, both verbal and non-verbal, invite the listener's participation in radio's aural space –

which encompasses both the listener's world and the soundworld of the play or program.

These more recent critical challenges to the idea that radio is in any way limited are

valuable. They allow us to take radio writing seriously; they rely on an understanding of radio as

an aural experience, and therefore encourage us to *literally* listen to productions wherever

recordings of programs are still in existence;[29] they help us to understand radio as a broadcast

event.

However, I remain cautious about overstating the ability of radiophonic experience to

create or recreate complete worlds in sound. The world-making model of radio listening might, if

over-simplified, fail to adequately convey the often strange, difficult and troubled nature of

certain radio sounds, and the worlds constructed by them. Whereas a radio production like *Under

Milk Wood*, as we have seen, draws the listener into a series of recognizable domestic locations,

using an expository voice to assist the listener in constructing this territory, other productions

have a more vexed relationship with the question of physical space. I am not speaking only of the

difference between naturalistic worlds and fantasy settings – critics like Frances Gray have noted

that the radio form is never more fit for purpose than when representing impressionistic fantasy

worlds (Gray 1981: 50) – rather, I am speaking of the opportunity for the radio-writer, by

mistake or by design, to interrogate the confused ground between different types of sound and

listening, specifically when we consider radio's non-verbal sounds. Elizabeth Bowen, assessing

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[29] Habitual recording of transmissions came relatively late to the BBC; once the majority of programmes were pre-recorded on magnetic tape, the BBC's attitude towards archiving was either cavalier or resourceful (recording over old tape), depending on your perspective. Nevertheless, the Sound Archive at the British Library has proved to be an invaluable resource, and some key recordings from the postwar period have startled to trickle into public availability.

radio listening in 1947, claimed that "we have listened for sense too much and for sound too little" (205). What is the exact relationship between sense and sound, and what would it mean to listen *for* (not *to*) sound? Melba Cuddy-Keane, in her analysis of the representation of sound in modernist narrative writing, distinguishes between reading for "semantics" (where the described sound conveys a meaning, as metaphor or analogy) and "reading for sonics," that is, reading sound *as* sound (Cuddy-Keane 2005: 395). This important distinction, related to the inscription of sound in narrative, can be applied to the non-verbal sounds written into radio productions. Not every radiophonic sound is intended to convey meaning in the sense of advancing dramatic plot, or constructing a knowable world. Our understanding of radiophonic productions requires us to appreciate critical distinctions: between diegetic sound (sound literally present in the play or feature) and non-diegetic sound (sound coming from outside the world of the play or feature); between sounds denoting the soundscape in which the characters exist, and the sounds denoting an internalized space, referred to variously as the "skullscape" (Perloff 1999: 247) and "mind-space" (Connor 2009b: 274); and, most fundamentally, between sounds created for mimetic purposes and sounds to be heard as non-representational. Advanced radio frequently blurs such distinctions, undermining the ear's attempts to intelligently construct worlds.

The development of acoustic technology in postwar radio had two contradictory effects on radio and its supposed "completeness." The pre-recording and editing of programs on tape, along with advanced production techniques, and better-equipped studios, provided a means of better harnessing the mimetic potential of radio. Authors and producers had more means at their disposal to suggest spaces through sound, completing the attempts of radio producers in the 1920s at creating an "immersive sonic totality" so that sounds would now seem to come from a space, not just from the "acoustic vacuum of the studio" (Lacey 65-6). Lacey assesses this movement towards denoting spatiality as a paradigm shift in radio art comparable to the

discovery of perspective in European Renaissance painting (Lacey 66); this "aural distancing" (Rattigan 2) increases the mimetic potential of the sonic materials used in radio.[30] So the spherical nature of aural space (the *spatiality* of sound), as well as determining how radio is perceived, could also be mimetically reproduced.

Tape, as well as functioning as a means of better capturing and focusing the representational processes of radio production, also became a creative material in its own right, whose use often suggested a divergence from mimetic intention. *Musique concrète*, the compositional mode developed by the former Radiodiffusion Française worker Pierre Schaeffer, involves the manipulation of sounds recorded onto tape. These methods were a foundational influence on members of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop (although the Workshop largely avoided applying the word "music" to its creations). Electroacoustics contributed to a new type of listening, attentive to sonicity; by requiring acousmatic listening (listening to sounds separated from their sound-source), electroacoustics produces "sonorous objects" [*objets sonores*] (Schaeffer 79). The "sonorous object," to Schaeffer, includes the active ear's perception of the sound. Schaeffer adopts a phenomenological disregard of the subject/object distinction, focusing instead on the content of experience: "It is the listening itself," he writes, "that becomes the origin of the phenomenon to be studied" (77); in this respect the use of electronic sound in postwar radio complements the phenomenological account of radio described earlier. In other respects, the sense of "completeness" is more tenuous. We saw that Cazeaux explained the coherent whole of the radio play as comprising "relationships *with other elements in the work*

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[30] In recording practice, achieving a sense of acoustic perspective meant either using production techniques (mixing sounds in separate channels to create relative loudness) or managing the actual space of the studio (using multiple microphones and creating a sense of distance by placing the recorded object at various distances from the microphone).

and with elements in the world" (Cazeaux 167). A BBC note circulated to explain the early

Radiophonic Workshop production *Private Dreams and Public Nightmares* claimed that when

used properly, "radiophonic effects have no near relationship with any existing sound" (Briscoe

22).[31] When I refer to the sonic character of many radiophonic productions as alienating, strange

and uncanny, I do not do so out of servitude to old clichés about strange sound (a *Daily*

Telegraph response to the recently established Workshop was that "[n]one of these radiophonic

noises seems to suggest anything but misery" (Briscoe 28)) but out of respect for the self-

consciously challenging nature of the works.

One instance of *musique concrète* on the Third Programme, although treating the subject

comically, exposes a fundamental difficulty associated with the form: that of the *location* of

radiophonic sound. Henry Reed's series of Hilda Tablet features, following the progress of the

fictional modern "composeress" Dame Hilda and her reluctant biographer Herbert Reeve, were a

reliable indicator of the artistic fads and fancies considered conspicuous enough for gentle

mockery throughout the 1950s. Hilda is a serial exponent of new trends. In the fourth Tablet

play, *Through a Hedge, Backwards*, Dame Hilda has a go at *musique concrète* (this play was

broadcast in February of 1956, at a time when dedicated Third Programme listeners were

acquainted with current experiments in electronic sound). In this case, Hilda's *musique concrète*

is being produced as part of a theatrical collaboration. "You tape it," she tells the

uncomprehending Reeve,

> … and dub it to disc after. (*instructively*) Of course, most of the johnnies who do it rely
>
> on pure sound, amplified and speeded up and reversed and so on. Needless to say, I have

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[31] Fittingly, this work – a radiophonic poem with text by Frederick Bradnum – offers no point of resolution between the "public" and "private" realms denoted in its title.

my own little line on the thing. For one thing, I think the discerning listener could probably tell you almost at once that my *musique concrète* is very much louder than anybody else's. (Reed 130)

In and amongst their puns and parodies, Reed poses practical and aesthetic questions about electroacoustic form. The self-regarding Hilda's insecurity about having her "own little line" is related to her worrying about the presence and *position* of her music. With characteristic force, she bristles at the suggestion, made by her theatrical collaborator, that her music might be used as "background":

> NEVILLE: And then the Sphinx's opening monologue suddenly *booming out* (you know?) with the music in the background.
>
> HILDA (*alertly*): I thought you said the music was going to be in the foreground?
>
> NEVILLE: Well, it'll actually be everywhere, really (you know?). (130)

Hilda has a composerly concern for the preeminence of her own music, and her rejection of the "background" status of her *musique concrète* is perhaps more a question of personal vanity than aesthetic form. Nevertheless, the solution of having the music "everywhere" expresses two differing fundamental qualities of electroacoustic sound: its heightened ability to traverse space, and its potential disconnection from fixed place.

In the following chapters, I intend to hold onto the idea of radio's limitations; I intend also to confront the dread possibility of the medium's obsolescence, which grows towards the end of period I am assessing. Certainly the three writers whose work I will be assessing approached radio with a critical ambivalence (Steven Connor agrees that Beckett's radio plays

are "about radio", and a similar case could be made for the radio works of Louis MacNeice and Giles Cooper) (Connor 2009b: 279). The characters introduced in these works are frequently listeners – often highly sceptical listeners – who interrogate the nature of perception and their own status as products of radio's aural space. The technologies of radio production, heightened by the radiophonic and electroacoustic turn in the 1950s, serve to portray *dis*function as much as function, as Ricky Mondal comments on Samuel Beckett's work: "the function is often times to be dysfunctional; characters and machines are calibrated to be on the perennial brink of collapse" (Mondal 175).

Chapter previews

Each of the three principal radiophonic writers featured in this dissertation is selected because they write with an attention to both the possibilities and the difficulties of the radio form. Each writer deals in his own way with the medium's limitations: meaning either the aesthetic obstructions of working in sound, or the institutional obstacles particular to broadcasting, or the supposedly diminishing cultural significance of radio. And yet each writer was compelled by something beyond basic necessity to maintain a lasting working relationship with the BBC, connected to a collaborative working environment and a listening public. The problems posed by these works are problems of sound; the pleasures provided are sonic pleasures. These three writers are selected, finally, because their works are rich listening experiences, requiring attentive listening for their completion.

Chapter 1 is devoted to the radio career of Louis MacNeice. This 20-year career, throughout which the technical character and cultural significance of radio changed,

encompassed the transition from wartime to post-war broadcasting, including the formation of the Third Programme, and the challenge to the BBC's radio stations from television and commercial broadcasting. In contrast to the writers featured in subsequent chapters, MacNeice's involvement with the BBC was total: MacNeice was one of the chief exhibits among the BBC's salaried literary professionals in the post-war era, a poet who worked as script-writer, playwright and producer. His ties were not to a particular network, but to Features Department, and the breadth of MacNeice's work speaks of the hybrid, multipurpose, experimental nature of Features. MacNeice produced all types of work for radio: creative plays, literary and historical studies, translations and adaptations, documentaries, occasional scripts. I mean "produced" in a literal sense: he created with the pen, but also with the technical apparatus of the sound studio. MacNeice appreciated the aurality of the radio medium; the institutional apparatus of the BBC, however, posed greater challenges. A characteristic uncertainty – regarding the nature of his work, and his faith in the project of cultural distribution through state-assisted channels – is a keynote in MacNeice's writing. I will demonstrate how the problems explored thematically in MacNeice's radio plays – the problem of individual will, the problem of matching creative impulses to public demand, the problem of personal dependency on collective or institutional structures, the problem of sound as a reliable container for meaning – follow from MacNeice's essential ambivalence.

When MacNeice wrote for different BBC networks, there was a clear logic to the "placing" of his scripts on the Home or Third; the case of Giles Cooper, discussed in Chapter 3, is more one of plain placelessness. I use Cooper's plays as a case study in a wider discussion of radiophonic experimentation at the BBC from the mid-1950s. My analysis of Cooper (an "outside" writer with no permanent departmental position) is, more completely, a study of radio peripheralness, which I discuss in terms of the culturally and sonically *weird*. In terms of theme,

genre and execution, Cooper's works suggest an alternative approach to creative radio, beyond the highbrow/populist binary that comparisons of the Home Service and Third Programme tend to enforce. The weirdness of Cooper is manifested radiophonically. The cluster of plays featuring in my analysis – *Mathry Beacon*, *The Disagreeable Oyster*, *Under Loofah Tree* – are written specifically to be "realised" using electronic sound, and the latter two are among the first plays using the newly-created Radiophonic Workshop. This chapter will attempt a cultural study of the Workshop by considering phases of its history – the phases of novelty, familiarization, obsolescence, and return as revenant – and mapping these phases to an ontology of electronic sound – sound recorded, played back, restructured, synthesized, broadcast, archived, misplaced, degraded or restored. The aesthetic and ontological questions posed by the newness and decline of radiophonic sound are also explored thematically in Cooper's radio plays. In these works, there is an interrogation of notions of physical degradation, obsolescence and embarrassment. *Embarrassment* here refers to uneasiness about one's place – either through not knowing how to *be* in the world, or through feeling the placelessness that is characteristic of Cooper's plays in general.

The radio plays of Samuel Beckett, which I will analyze in Chapter 4, similarly use the radio medium to negotiate the problem of physical territory. Beckett's works play on what I call the whereabouts of radio, exploiting electroacoustic technology to convey a delicate ambiguity between exterior landscape and interior space. Oddly, his first radio play, *All That Fall*, is a landscape (perhaps even pastoral) piece, heavily committed to the representation of place. This commitment to specific place is contrary to the general shift in Beckett's career towards placelessness, and the use of radio to describe solid land is also at odds with the nature of the medium as an instrument of diffusion. But Beckett, exploring the limitations of significant sonic form, makes radio *difficult*, as he explores an ambiguity between interior and exterior space. *All*

That Fall dramatizes the perception of a soundscape, as the play's protagonist, Maddy Rooney, apprehends the surrounding soundworld via her typically untrustworthy human sensorium. In *Embers*, this phenomenological enquiry is turned inside out: the mind of the protagonist, Henry, is a container of remembered sounds (some welcomed, some not), and Henry becomes a producer of his own soundworld attempting to assert control over the sounds that will and will not play back in his own enclosed consciousness. The ambiguity of sonic territory, I propose, resonates as well in Beckett's collaborative relationship with the BBC (like Cooper, he used the nascent Radiophonic Workshop), not least during discussions about the use of radiophonic craft to fabricate soundscape. My analysis of the sonic aspects of Beckett's plays and their representation of place connects to the field of soundscape studies, and accompanying concerns such as acoustic ecology, the aesthetics and ethics of field recording, and the phenomenology of *musique concrète. All That Fall* and *Embers* are, ultimately, plays that dramatize a point-of-listening; I attempt to *hear* as well as *read* these works.

Chapter 2
The Professional's Progress: the acoustics of professionalism and precariousness in the radio features of Louis MacNeice

Introduction: A Plea For Sound

Louis MacNeice produced over twenty years' worth of work as a radio professional throughout a critical era in the BBC's history. The time-span of MacNeice's radio career included substantial changes to the nature of broadcasting: writing nostalgically in 1963 of the age of "steam radio," he reflected that "rarely has such an up-to-date medium matured, and indeed aged, so rapidly" (*SP* 3). MacNeice's career also spans significant changes to the corporation's departmental structures. His BBC career began on the wartime Home Service, and continued through the post-war period of reorganization that included the creation of the specialist Third Programme in 1946, an innovation that signaled a change in the corporation's approach to defining national (and international) identity. MacNeice's career as a radio writer, then, was born from the expressly political requirements of wartime broadcasting but developed through the later, more gently parental era of cultural welfare statism that the Third Programme came to exemplify. He stayed with the BBC during the period in which the challenge from television and commercial broadcasting caused a rethinking of the purpose of creative literary radio.

The range of MacNeice's radio texts, and the recurring references in his writing to institutional pressures, help us to understand the development of cultural broadcasting in Britain from wartime to the postwar era. MacNeice, who was already established at the BBC when the corporation became in effect a cultural extension of the state-planned project of social welfare

after the war, was well-positioned to register both the benefits and the difficulties of this change.

The postwar re-interpretation of the BBC's prewar Reithian paternalism – the first Director-

General's approach to broadcasting as a public service for the betterment of the people – was that

dedicated cultural programming on the Third Programme (and ideally, in time, on other

networks) should bring about a nationalization of cultural wealth, coinciding with the social

democratic program of industrial nationalization and welfare state building initiated by Clement

Atlee's Labour government. The Labour M.P. Anthony Crosland, writing in the 1950s, named

the BBC alongside the Coal Board and the Trade Unions as one of the bodies comprising the

"enlarged bureaucratic state" of newly social-democratic Britain (Crosland 21); Tony Judt, in a

recent summary of the age of social planning, lists the BBC alongside the Royal Ballet and the

Arts Council as a public provision resulting from the influence of the economist John Maynard

Keynes in the age of a "uniquely successful blend of social innovation and cultural

conservatism" (Judt 53).

From his joining the corporation in 1941 to his death in 1963, MacNeice received a BBC

salary for his contribution as a playwright, poet and producer. Undoubtedly, MacNeice's attitude

to the *work* of radio remained ambivalent throughout the twenty years in which he was a BBC

employee. As a poet-producer, the moderately leftist MacNeice explored through text and sound

the relationship between the individual and the state, between culture and society and, on a more

immediately personal level, between artist and employer.

MacNeice's works express the anxieties of the apologetically bourgeois-backgrounded

artist in an era when state institutions, the BBC among them, were assumed to be in service of a

social democratic consensus – a consensus less blatant than that of wartime broadcasting. His

early radio labour was a contribution to the war effort. His prolonged postwar career was simply

effort. Cultural distribution (the business of broadcasting) is not the same as cultural production (the act of putting programs together in the first place). This is especially true of an age in which radio programs were increasingly prepared on tape, in studios, rather than performed as "live" broadcasts. The (re)distribution of culture through broadcasting was ideologically sound in principle to MacNeice; the practical stages of cultural production – sweating in studios in service of the growing state – posed consistent problems to his artistic sensibility. The full parameters of MacNeice's career at the BBC, however, extend beyond his uneasy positioning within his institutional home to the medium in which he worked. That medium was sound, and his commitment to sound was unwavering and lifelong, as the following biographical sketch in four episodes intends impressionistically to convey:

(*one*)

In a short prose piece titled "Experiences With Images," MacNeice recalls how his "childhood's mythology" revolved around the sea which was "not visible from our house but registering its presence through foghorns" (*SLC* 158). "Image" in this piece is being used in the sense of "meaningful emblem," whether visible or audible. MacNeice goes on: "the noise of the trains – and this goes for the foghorns and the factory hooters also – had a significance apart from what caused that noise; impinging on me before I knew what they meant, i.e., where they came from, these noises had as it were a purely physical meaning which I would find it hard to analyse" (159). Such sound emblems, MacNeice posits, "form an early stratum of experiences which persists in one's work just as it persists in one's dreams" (159). The use of the sonic emblem, often occurring in dreams or dream-like states, became a crucial structuring principle in MacNeice's radio plays.

(*two*)

In 1953, in his long autobiographical poem *Autumn Sequel*, MacNeice revisited the year before

the outbreak of the Second World War, first recorded in *Autumn Journal* (published in 1939).

MacNeice recalls having lived in hearing distance of London Zoo:

> Those fifteen years ago when I devised
>
> My journal within earshot of all this
>
> (Lions, sea-lions, gibbons, unexorcised
>
> Reproaches, emblems of the night's abyss)
>
> I lay awake and listened on Primrose Hill
>
> Indulging my own heart's paralysis. (*AJ* 15)

Here sound-as-emblem is plainly sound subjectivised at will, and the poetic memory *as*

recording device drags peripheral or atmospheric details into meaning, registering the animal

sounds as both demonic ("unexorcised") and as the voice of the all-condemning fool: "A gibbon

whirled his clown-call at the age." Naturally, this passage tells us more about the listening ear,

and the auditory memory that records and re-plays, than it does about the acoustic qualities of

lions, sea-lions or gibbons. When he actually needed to fashion the sound suggestive of a room

full of devils for his adapted Russian folk tale *The Nosebag*, MacNeice turned turntablist, mixing

ape and human voices: "the bestial noises of the devils were achieved by a mixture of discs on

the turn-tables and voices in the studio; my key disc was a recording of jabbering apes" (Coulton

68).

(*three*)

By the nineteen-fifties, MacNeice was, like most radio producers, using portable tape recorders, recording street voices in India for inclusion in the 1955 Christmas Day broadcast, "The Star We Follow." The focus of this program was a presentation of the new science of radio astronomy, with noises received through radio telescopes operated by the pioneering physicist Bernard Lovell at the Jodrell Bank Station in Cheshire worked into the program to give a modern scientific frame to the celestial Christmas theme. The sounds of moon echo and radio waves were presented alongside MacNeice's explanatory script and interspersed with the field recordings made in India and elsewhere, to form a sonic collage in which pan-global humanity is set in the yet wider context of outer space.

(*four*)

In 1963 MacNeice, who for two decades was the usual producer of his own radio plays and features, traveled to Yorkshire to record environmental sounds in caves ("a nice underground stream … a waterfall, … general drippings" (*Letters* 8 Aug 1963)) for use in his play *Persons From Porlock*, in which spelunking is the painter-protagonist's hobby and a metaphor for retreat into an interior world. MacNeice's painstakingly gathered sound effects were intended to be a naturalistic element of an ultimately fantastical final scene in which the dying painter-potholer is visited by a parade of "persons from Porlock," to use the name borrowed by MacNeice from the reported interrupter of Coleridge's unfinished visionary poem "Kubla Khan." The "persons from Porlock," in this play as in Coleridge's poem, stand for the people and incidents conspiring to keep the artist from his true work – the final person from Porlock in the play being Death itself.

As it turned out, MacNeice's field recording trip led to his own premature death from an illness caught during exposure to the damp environment.

As my brief impressionistic biography suggests, MacNeice's career was given over to the production of sound; his life was finally spent (quite literally) in the pursuit of sound. In the introduction to the published text of his 1942 play *Christopher Columbus*, written as he was still refining his approach to writing for radio, MacNeice's direct advice to the aspiring radio writer is "to forget about 'literature' and to concentrate on sound" (*SP* 395). MacNeice is being blunt here – we should read his advice with an awareness that sound is very much part of what MacNeice understands by *literature*, as he outlines in his "Plea for Sound," written in 1953 to defend radio broadcasting against the competitive threat of television: sound "is part of [literature's] meaning" (*PS* 131).

MacNeice's radio plays interrogate from the artist's standpoint the mechanics and logistics of the assumed postwar consensus. He writes *from*, and writes *about*, the realities of a stifling, state-serving bureaucracy; further into the postwar era, his works show the new social arrangement to be a compromised welfare-capitalism well capable of hindering cultural production. As I will show in discussing MacNeice's engagement with both the frustrations of radio professionalism and the possibilities of the radiophonic form, MacNeice persisted with the *idea* of literary radio production. For him, the democratic potential of literature lay in poetry's oral roots; his engagement with the postwar era of statism, then, is an especially acoustic matter. In the radiophonic form, MacNeice found a medium whose very vulnerabilities he could exploit in order to express his fundamental doubts about the conditions under which he was working. The manifestation of these doubts in two works from opposite ends of MacNeice's radio career –

The Dark Tower (1946) and *Persons From Porlock* (1963) will be the basis of extended analyses of these plays.

Part 1. Creative Labour at the BBC

War to postwar: MacNeice as poet-producer

MacNeice's first radio scripts were war work, broadcast to large civilian audiences on the Home Service. By reputation (and by self-admission) a politically moderate member of the cluster of leftist nineteen-thirties poets grouped around the *New Verse* magazine and the influence of W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Cecil Day-Lewis, MacNeice spent the war writing gently propagandistic plays and features in praise of Britain's wartime allies. *Christopher Columbus*, his first radio drama, was written to mark both America's entry into the war, and the 450th anniversary of Columbus's initial voyage across the Atlantic. With *Sunbeams in His Hat* and *The Nosebag*, a Chekhov biography and an adapted Russian folktale respectively, MacNeice celebrated the cultural life of Russia, without implying support for the modern Soviet regime. He wrote features on the Renaissance and the French Revolution for a series exploring European "freedoms," and contributed a measuredly patriotic English St. George's Day program. He drew on his earlier professional experience as a lecturer in classics to write "The March of the 10,000," a script about Xenophon's Athenian army that was broadcast in support of beleaguered modern Greece, and contributed to *The Stones Cry Out*, a series about bombed buildings representative of British heritage. For the Forces network, MacNeice wrote slightly less subtle propaganda: he wrote a *Salute to the Red Army*, and a script explaining Hitler as "World Enemy Number One." The war – unlike Auden and Isherwood, MacNeice chose to return from America

to Britain, although this may have been as much to do with the breakdown of the romantic affair that led to his staying in America in the first place – drove MacNeice into one of the "para-literary occupations" (Sinfield 61) newly available to writers. As a salaried employee rather than an occasional "outside" writer, MacNeice was involved in the daily life of the BBC and as a propagandist displayed a talent, to borrow his biographer Jon Stallworthy's phrase, "not for propagating lies … but for memorably reinforcing aspects of the truth" (Stallworthy 292).

MacNeice's employment at the BBC continued into the postwar era and until his death in 1963, during which time he remained a prominent member of Laurence Gilliam's innovative Features Department, rather than the more limited Drama Department. (Neither Features or Drama were tied to a particular network; each produced material for both the Home Service and the Third Programme.) At the time when MacNeice was learning his craft, drama on the BBC was largely tied to more traditional theatrical programming; under Val Gielgud's stewardship the majority of Drama Department broadcasts were adaptations of stage plays or dramatizations of novels. In the nineteen-thirties, radio drama in the truest sense – drama written specially for radio – was created by Lance Sieveking and Tyrone Guthrie, writers of what Guthrie called "microphone plays": crucially, Guthrie's label draws attention to the technical apparatus that is, along with the pen, the joint instrument of composition. These innovations aside, the prevailing expectation of the Drama Department was that the medium itself should remain unobtrusive while facilitating the broadcasting of "drama" in the theatrical sense.[32] Radio broadcasting, it was assumed, was meant to *reproduce* or provide a substitute for the experience of theatre-going

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[32] Val Gielgud's short publication *How To Write Broadcast Plays* (1932), evolved from a series of pieces published in *The Radio Times*, is a to-the-point summation of Gielgud's assessment of radio drama's purpose.

or reading, acting as what Kate Lacey calls a "redistribution medium," (Lacey 68) rather than *producing* a new kind of radiogenic experience.

The Features Department – initially a component of Gielgud's Drama Department, before becoming a unit in its own right – was initially responsible for developing documentary programming, and later came to be a home for dramatic and semi-dramatic radio works that had no obvious connection to staged theatre. In P. H. Newby's novel *Feelings Have Changed* (1981), based on the author's own experience as a colleague of MacNeice and Gilliam, the protagonist works in Features, writing and producing "elaborate programmes making use of every ingredient from *vox pop* to verse. And music" (Newby 15).[33] Christopher Holme, for some time MacNeice's colleague, succinctly describes a "feature" as "an information programme which used dramatization" (Holme 38). Lauren Gilliam, as department head, proved enormously popular amongst his writers (his "caged lions," as Marilyn Butler memorably puts it), who he repeatedly protected against administrational accusations of indolence or obscurity (Butler 6). Gilliam himself provides the broadest definition of his department's purpose in theory and in practice:

> Once broadcasting had got over its initial intoxication with its own existence, it started to wonder what it was for. It spent its first ten years happily cutting and adapting works created for other forms of art, entertainment or instruction. But slowly, obstinately, and with growing success, a group of writers and producers insisted on exploring the possibilities of the radio medium itself … The significance of the feature programme is, then, that it is the form of statement that broadcasting has evolved for itself, as distinct

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[33] Beyond his time as MacNeice's colleague, Newby became the Controller of the Third Programme and, later, Managing Director of BBC Radio.

from those other forms which it has borrowed or adapted from other arts or methods of

publication. (Gilliam 9-10)

The feature as a form grew out of a need to write creatively for radio despite – or because

of – technical limitations. Tape recording, a German innovation discovered and adapted by

Americans after the collapse of the Reich, was not used in British radio until significantly after

the war; the BBC administration's delay in accepting this new technology, due to skepticism on

the part of managers, is remembered by the Features producer D. G. Bridson (Bridson 120-1).[34]

The BBC's slowness in adopting tape caused a greater necessity for creative script-writing or

dramatization in compensation for the absence of recorded voices of documentary subjects, field-

recordings of specific locations, and other "actuality" details; the stylized script-writing of poets

like MacNeice was therefore treated as part of the technological arsenal available to the

department. When field-recording eventually became possible and affordable, script-writing did

not become obsolete, but was put into productive dialogue with sound-recording. If anything, the

success of the pre-tape feature determined that when tape recorders did become available, they

were used carefully and with attention to shape and style (rather than being a machine for simply

reproducing whole chunks of real acoustic life). The creative combination of a staff-poet's script-

writing and the sound-writing done by tape-recorders became a special compositional task

required of the program's producer.

Upon recruitment by the BBC, MacNeice was formally educated in the technical aspects

of radio production, by means of a training course that he reported as being "[j]ust like being at

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[34] Bridson, a fixture of Features Department both before and after the war, is especially drawn in his memoirs to the importance of the tape recorder in documenting folk culture – as exemplified by his friend and occasional collaborator, Alan Lomax.

school – sitting on hard benches – but technically fascinating though in places difficult for me with my unmechanical mind" (Stallworthy 304). MacNeice apparently overcame this difficulty: throughout his radio career he produced the majority of his own plays, and non-dramatic features by himself and others. MacNeice learned how to direct actors around a microphone and create a sense of space in sound, how to use "multiple studio" techniques, how to "cross-fade" between scenes, how to make the best use of a library of sound effects discs, and how to incorporate new or existing music and create original sound effects. It is through formal instruction and practical experience that MacNeice developed a sense of what kind of written material is "radiogenic," as he called it – before offering an immediate and characteristic apology for this use of jargon (*DT* 12). MacNeice's radio scripts cannot be understood separately from the technical facts of their production; the broadcasting studio – or at the very least MacNeice's knowledge of the studio – is a compositional tool.

In addition to introducing MacNeice to the technical skills of radio production, his work as poet-producer acquainted him with the BBC as a professional environment. Employment at the BBC put MacNeice in daily contact with both the communal comforts of the small department and the administrative pressures of the large corporation. Remarkably, throughout this period the MacNeicean radio morality play maintained much the same *shape* from one script to the next; it is the *persistence* (and hardening) of the same themes of individual agency and administrative frustrations, rather than any sudden turn in the form or content of MacNeice's writings, that marks the tautening nature of MacNeice's relationship with the radio medium on the one hand, and with the BBC as a corporation on the other.

MacNeice's discontentment with working at the BBC should be weighed against the comforts and privileges of being a star exhibit amongst Features department's "caged lions."

MacNeice's complaints were shared – enough so to suggest that the stated problems were real, but also indicating that MacNeice had allies and protectors, and those who envied his privilege. Rayner Heppenstall, the poet and producer, surpasses MacNeice in the bitterness of his complaints against BBC administrative procedures – Heppenstall was, as he says, "lesser brethren" to MacNeice (Heppenstall 27). Elsewhere, Dylan Thomas complains about his lack of funding in working on a translation to *Peer Gynt*, comparing his case to that of MacNeice who received a special fee for comparable work (a translation of Goethe's *Faust*) *on top of* his BBC salary (Thomas 1991: xv). And this is before we get to the "outside" writers like Julian MacLaren-Ross who toured around trying to sell both radio scripts and vacuum cleaners in order to pay his rent (MacLaren-Ross 16). Laurence Gilliam himself was an important ally to MacNeice in his difficulties with administrators; Gilliam himself saw network planners as "inverted Micawbers … waiting for something to turn down" (Newby 29).[35] Tempered by the pleasures and mutual sympathies of the small department, MacNeice's attitudes to career-work wavered. The targets of MacNeice's complaints against BBC life were usually unspecific, but he spoke with gratitude about his own departmental peers. His immediate colleagues, as he took the time to inform readers of his published plays, were "on the whole quicker-witted, more versatile, less egocentric, less conventional, more humane" than any hypothetical salon of literati; this opinion he offered as a direct rebuttal to the "popular assumption that all radio professionals resemble civil servants" (*DT* 15). In 1946 MacNeice felt strongly enough about the burdens of professional life to write and produce *The Careerist*, a morality play about the unsubtly-named cipher Jim Human passing through various malign professional institutions; he was also good-humoured enough to work as producer on Laurence Kitchin's comic parody of the play, *The Life*

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[35] The source for this quotation is a work of fiction, but P. H. Newby insists that the dialogue of MacNeice and Gilliam in his novel is based as far as possible on remembered conversations.

of Sub-Human, two years later.[36] Heppenstall, Newby and others portray MacNeice doing a significant amount of his day's work from The Stag, the BBC's local pub (Newby 32, Heppenstall 102, Whitehead 44).

Institutional structures

I am discussing MacNeice as a radio writer whose career is inextricably connected with Features Department – as Butler records, the deaths of the department's "two most substantial figures," MacNeice in 1963 and Gilliam the following year, provided the BBC administration with the opportunity to bring Features, its experiments in the avant-garde now matched or eclipsed by those of the rejuvenated Drama department, to an end (Butler 6). MacNeice was recognized within the BBC as *essentially* a Features figure, and Features provided material for both the Home Service and the Third Programme. To others on the outside, however, MacNeice was seen as a quintessential Third Programme writer, and the archetypal broadcaster of what Ved Mehta called "intellectual sound" (Mehta 29). Reporting on "The Third" for a *New Yorker* article in 1963, Mehta selected MacNeice as the sitter for a written portrait of a poet-producer at work, so as to provide his American readers with an example of the creative work done at the Third Programme. The tone of Mehta's report is one of reverence for Britain's dedicated highbrow radio network, and MacNeice is characterized as an important figure in the daily business (Mehta describes him rehearsing and *producing*, not just writing) of that network.

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[36] Kitchin's parody response to MacNeice, the *Radio Times* listings tell us, was also "a parody of highbrow radio in general, with its 'stylisation,' its poeticisms, and its technical stunts" (*Genome*: 24 Sep 1938).

After the formation of the Third Programme, the Third tended to become the channel through which MacNeice's plays were broadcast, whilst his documentary features (programs like *The Birth of Ghana* (1957), marking Ghanaian independence, and *Health in their Hands* (1958), on the tenth anniversary of the World Health Organization) were aired on the Home Service. MacNeice didn't fully accept the segregation of broadcasting according to the "intellectual" or "popular" appeal of different types of program. Crucially, since MacNeice's radio career pre-dated the creation of the Third, his position gave him reasons to be skeptical about the introduction of a specialist arts network. His concerns are understandable. As Christopher Holme recalls, the creation of the Third Programme meant that more air-time in total would be available for creative writing, which provided an incentive for new "outside" writers to submit scripts, but the benefits of increased air-time on a focused "cultural" network were less obvious to established radio writers such as MacNeice, Francis Dillon and D. G. Bridson who established themselves in the early-1940s and were already guaranteed large audiences on the Home Service. To these writers, the placing of their works on the newly-created intellectual program would only result in a "specialized" (that is, smaller) listenership (Holme 45).[37] Segregation was not absolute. A common practice at the BBC was "diagonalisation" – the airing of a selection of successful Third Programme pieces on the Home Service a week or two after their original broadcast date. However, drama was less likely than music to be "diagonalised" (Carpenter 58-9).

Is listenership quantifiable? The statistics assuring an author that many more people *heard* work on the Home and Light services, as opposed to the Third, do not take into account the *depth* of listening that was going on. Peter Needs, defending the Third Programme against

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[37] See introductory chapter, pages 12-13 for listenership figures.

the cuts made in 1957, urged a distinction between "listener" and "hearer": "Ninety-nine per cent of Light Programme listening is on tap; it's a background" (Whitehead 217).[38] MacNeice himself acknowledged, in his written introduction to *The Dark Tower*, that "for the first time, I believe, in radio history," the Third Programme "assumes that its audience is going to *work* at its listening" (*DT* 17). Later, remembering the early Home Service broadcast of *Christopher Columbus*, MacNeice reflected that "the public for a sound play like *Columbus* is perhaps five per cent of what it was during the war but, because it would now be pigeon-holed in the Third Programme … it would contain a large number of highbrows, not only relatively but absolutely" (*SP* 3). The assumption of *effort* on the part of the listener is crucial to the transaction between broadcaster and public described by Ved Mehta as "intellectual sound." So, MacNeice clearly appreciated the benefits of an intellectually serious departmental atmosphere, allowing him freedom from playing "for safety and to the gallery" (*DT* 17), but he also maintained a habitually non-elitist view of broadcasting. His democratic approach to the medium was a natural extension of his idea of art in general, typified by his conviction that "man … is born poetic" and his refusal "to believe that men and women in the street are as insensitive or as emotionally atrophied as is sometimes assumed by the intelligentsia" (*SP* 395). For MacNeice, the aurality of radio as a medium was fundamental to connecting with the latent poetic instincts of the man or woman on the street.

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[38] This distinction between attentive and non-attentive listening is crucial to Theodor Adorno's critique of "music for entertainment," which "seems to complement the reduction of people to silence … If nobody can any longer speak, then certainly nobody can any longer listen" (Adorno 30).

"Tales Told in a Chimney Corner": the spoken word

More fundamentally, MacNeice insisted that radio was a means by which literature could regain "those literary virtues which [it] has lost since it has been divorced from the voice" (*SP* 394). The reception (perfect or otherwise) of literature as *heard sound* is, for MacNeice, "how literature began – the Homeric or Icelandic bard shouting over the clamour of the banquet, the 'tale told in a chimney corner' while tankards clatter and infants squawl and somebody makes up the fire and old men snore and cough" (*SP* 394-5).[39] The radio professional seems to have accepted that literature as oral production does not guarantee unadulterated attentive listening (tankards clatter, the washing up wants doing, the signal is bad) but in appealing to the Homeric or Icelandic bards MacNeice managed to strike a notably more optimistic note than his fellow-producer Rayner Heppenstall, who expressed a distinction between *listeners* and *hearers* with profound cynicism: "none of us could influence the level to which people turned up their sets at the receiving end … At the receiving end, I could only regard the invention of broadcasting as a disaster to the human race … a leaking wireless nearby was the sound of somebody else's boredom, and I often wondered if it were not a mistake to get the arts mixed up with the plumbing" (Heppenstall 60). MacNeice's appeal to the Greek and Icelandic bards and their semi-attentive listeners is his reminder that the aural arts have always been "mixed up" with one thing or another.

MacNeice was not alone in his bardic preoccupation. Amplifying the implication of T. S. Eliot's conception of the "auditory imagination… returning to the origin and bringing something

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[39] Donald McWhinnie similarly claims that in "listening to Sound Radio, we find ourselves back in the chimney-corner, listening to the minstrel; every syllable is important, provided it has been exactly calculated to fulfill its purpose"(McWhinnie 61-2).

back" (Eliot 118-9), Herbert Read used the Autumn 1938 issue of *New Verse* as a forum for a masterfully open letter to Frederick Ogilvie, the recently-appointed Director-General of the BBC, insisting that the corporation's duty was no less than to prevent the general extinction of poetry: "We must forget that poetry was ever printed. Poets must return to the babbling stage, and from that stage slowly evolve a speaking technique … Call it a bardic vision, call it what you will – I am convinced that this side of a complete social revolution it is the only chance of saving poetry" (11). Somewhat less dogmatically, MacNeice celebrated the egalitarian potential of broadcasting, hoping that a hypothetical common listener who may be put off "by the sight of verse on the page (like a menu printed in French)" would be more receptive to verse emanating from a radio set, which would "not strike him – at least not too aggressively – as *verse*; instead of prejudging it as a piece of highbrow trickery he will, like the audience of the primitive bards, listen to the words, or rather to the sounds, as they come and will like them or not according to their emotional impact" (*SP* 396). MacNeice's feature "From Bard to Busker," broadcast in 1955, reinforced this point by tracing a connection between contemporary busker families (one of whom, the Cutlers, were recorded for the program), Irish wandering storytellers and the "hand-to-mouth entertainer" Homer (*Letters*: 27 May 1955).

To MacNeice – admittedly more interested in poetry than in planning – it is the *aurality* of radio that is key to his understanding of its egalitarian potential. But while possibly egalitarian by nature, radio is also related through the BBC to the changing relationship between society and artist in an era of social (including cultural) planning. It is in the works of writer-producers like MacNeice and sympathetic department heads like Gilliam, then, that we can come to understand the BBC as part of the national project of postwar state-planning. Radiophonics and the acoustics of broadcasting, as I will go on to discuss, are intrinsically related to the parental relationship between the state and the individual. Left-wing radio workers from MacNeice and Read to D. G.

Bridson, Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker saw in the medium the possibility of a newly sonic folk literature; however, their leftism is emphatically *not* the leftism of the bureaucratic state. Anthony Crosland's *The Future of Socialism*, published in 1963, identified competing strands of traditional socialist thought in Britain, with William Morris's medievalist anti-commercialism quite distinct from the Welfare State's "paternalist tradition" and the "doctrine of planning" (45-51). Within these varieties of left-wing sensibilities, we encounter figures who embrace the fundamental aurality of radio, despite the reservations they may have about state structures: for the documentary maker Philip Donnellan, the adoption of the portable tape recorder so crucial to Features was "a radicalizing experience, technically, politically and socially" (Donnellan 11); for the producer Charles Parker, the "liberal dispensation" standing apart from the "themness" of the BBC included figures such as Gilliam and Bridson and *especially* MacNeice (Long 2004: 1938). When the pressure of the administrator and the planner is registered in MacNeice's radio works, it is the very sonicity of these works that conveys the tension between creative expression and statist broadcasting; his dramatic pieces enact a conflict between the idea of sound (ancient and bardic), and the organization of sound (modern and statist).

Clearly, the orality of radio meant a great deal to MacNeice, providing him with the opportunity to modernize and re-shape the literary forms to which he was already typically drawn. This important point contradicts Marilyn Butler's assessment of MacNeice and his colleagues' own culpability in the decline of the Features department: "they had slid into making radio a medium for the written rather than the spoken word," claims Butler (Butler 6). Rather, I hope to show that MacNeice's interest in his material *began* with the spoken word – and at times nonverbal sound – and the requirements of "writing" (in the strict alphabetic sense of the word) created a large portion of MacNeice's doubt and anxiety.

In the first place, the matching of MacNeice's radio material to oral forms is far too frequent to be coincidental. MacNeice's understanding of his radio writing as belonging to an ancient tradition of oral literature led him to explore the radiogenic qualities of the saga, the ballad, the parable and the morality play. His plays *The Burning of Njal*, *The Death of Gunnar* and *Grettir the Strong* (all 1947) are reworkings from the Icelandic sagas; *Trimalchio's Feast* (1948) is a translation of Petronius; *They Met on Good Friday* (1959) and *The Mad Islands* (1962) dramatize ancient Celtic tales. Beyond these explicitly historical works, the literatures providing MacNeice with his dramatic template are varying forms of folk tale, morality play, allegory, parable and romance. He used each of these forms almost always in conjunction with a qualifying term – "psycho-morality," "radio parable," "sceptical historical romance," "modern morality" (*SP* 149, 262, 351) – to label his plays. MacNeice's use of genre types in describing his own work is imprecise (consistent only in the habitual use of a modifying term). It is true that, as Kathleen Luanne McCracken has noted, in the lecture series published as *Varieties of Parable* MacNeice deliberately offered "a theory by which his own work can be enjoyed" (96); it is also true that his use of "parable" is largely unspecific and used interchangeably with "allegory" and "morality." The key texts at the beginning of the "parabolic" tradition to which MacNeice is self-consciously heir are the medieval morality play *Everyman* and *The Faerie Queene* by Spenser, "the great mediator" who "saved us from the catastrophe of too thorough a renaissance" (*VP* 42);[40] then comes Bunyan, who MacNeice asserts was "not influenced by literature" and "must have been a good listener" (*VP* 44). Whatever the resolution to these questions of genre and sub-genre, MacNeice repeatedly forged stylized plots concerned with the progress of a single protagonist who inhabits the "special worlds" of fantasy (*VP* 71) or whose

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[40] Here MacNeice is quoting approvingly from such a card-carrying medievalist as C.S. Lewis. MacNeice pushed for, and produced readings of the unfashionable Spenser on the BBC in 1953.

daily business is interrupted by fantastical, often disturbing, episodes. In pursuing the "special worlds" of parable in radio, MacNeice confesses that

> Here it was the medium itself propelling me. For, where television is more likely to propel one in the opposite direction, to an extreme, if limited, form of naturalism, sound radio, thanks to the lack of any visual element, is very well able, when attempting fantasy, to achieve the necessary suspension of disbelief. Many traditional fairy stories, for example, have been successfully dramatized and produced in this medium, as has *Everyman*. (*VP* 9)

One might add to this that the greatest of mid-century medievalist moralities, Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal* (1957), began life as Bergman's own radio play, *Wood Painting* (1954). Allegory and parable are types of double-level or "sleight-of-hand" writing (to use MacNeice's preferred expression), communicating at the level of symbol and emblem, but in MacNeice's hands the vehicle is rarely made subordinate to the tenor; if in parable the story is the means and the *meaning* of the story is the end, MacNeice is apparently more interested in the means than the end, as if the parabolic potential of the medium itself is his starting point.

Now, it is through this fixed attention on the medium that MacNeice's radio writing runs into trouble. For *the medium*, to MacNeice as a professional, means not just the summoning of sound at will, but all of the processes – writerly, administrative, collaborative, technical – involved in the realization of these sounds as broadcast productions. As we have seen, his parables are never *just* parables, his romances never *simply* romances; they are "radio parable[s]," "sceptical historical romance[s]". The medium itself, or more accurately MacNeice's attitude toward it, is doing the modifying, is tempering and distempering. Similarly, when MacNeice wrote a narration for the broadcast of Purcell's *King Arthur* opera in 1959, critics

found his contribution too "mocking" (Simpson 26). In the age of public, statist broadcasting, MacNeice's ideal poetic aurality is facilitated on the one hand by the technical possibilities of the medium, but hindered on the other hand by the bureaucratic state apparatus. Given the (initial) need to write for large radio audiences, and the sparseness of plot associated with the parabolic mode, one might expect that radio writing led MacNeice to simplicity and clarity of meaning. However, MacNeice's radio works come less and less to achieve the "extreme, almost primitive, simplicity" that Donald McWhinnie noted in the work of Peter Gurney, another radio-allegorist (McWhinnie 61);[41] MacNeice writes *through* simplicity until he encounters complication. Admittedly, these complications are at least partly of MacNeice's own making – Marilyn Butler is wrong to claim that MacNeice attempted to make radio a medium for the written word, but almost certainly correct in identifying him as "an introvert trying to be an extrovert" who "badly needed to feel he belonged to a group, and at the same time … hated institutions" (Butler 6). But the starting point for MacNeice's hindering is his own fundamental doubt – political, ontological – about his position as a creative professional.

From propaganda to parable

The contrasting written introductions to the texts of *Christopher Columbus* (broadcast in 1942; the play was published in 1944) and *The Dark Tower* (broadcast 1946; published 1947) demonstrate a refinement of attitude towards radio throughout the earlier years of MacNeice's

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[41] The producer Donald McWhinnie, writing in the late nineteen-fifties, praised Peter Gurney's "modern morality play" *The Masque of Falsehood*. McWhinnie elaborates on the conventions upon which the play expands: "It is hardly surprising that the early mystery and morality plays were so successful when broadcast in the Third Programme series, *The First Stage*. The combination of extreme, almost primitive, simplicity with direct imaginative appeal – as to a child – broke down sophisticated barriers and drew us unprotesting into a different world" (McWhinnie 61).

broadcasting career. Introducing *Christopher Columbus*, he was dogmatic in his insistence that the function of all radio writing is communication, and that communication (here MacNeice equivocates skillfully) encompasses self-expression: "if compelled to communicate with a fair-sized public, the writer may sometimes find himself expressing bits of himself that he had lost" (*SP* 398). Here MacNeice bridges the schism between the public message and private expression by hinting at a variety of selves, including a public self discovered in collectivity.[42] There is more than a hint of the subtle propagandist in MacNeice's ushering a prospective radio novice away from conventional modes of self-expression; the double-level concept of arriving at self-expression through a certain self-abnegation (or by simply changing or finding a new meaning for "self," assembling "lost" bits of the self that are discovered in the process of mass communication) is connected to the quests or allegorical journeys that the heroes of his radio plays are obliged to undertake; these quests are frequently quests in search of identity, or in pursuit of a meaningful substitute for identity.

So, during the early stages of his radio career – during wartime, at least – MacNeice did not find the dissolving of self into type to be a problematic simplification. Indeed, part of MacNeice's job as wartime propagandist was to find creative ways of assuring the public of the need for self-sacrifice. Did MacNeice himself believe in this message? According to MacNeice's initial formula for radio-writing, "the objective elements will preponderate over the subjective, statement over allusion, synthesis over analysis. We are at a far remove not only from Proust or Joyce but also from Shaw's conversation plays and the middlebrow 'psychological' novel … My own opinion is that the radio play … can only reach its heights when the subject is slightly

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[42] In *Autumn Journal*, MacNeice acknowledges "my various and conflicting / Selves I have so long endured" (*Collected Poems* 162: *Autumn Sequel* XXIV); in his early poem "Snow" he describes the "incorrigibly plural" nature of the world (*Collected Poems* 24).

larger, or at least simpler, than life and the treatment is to some extent stylized – when, we might say, it is competing with the Soviet art-cinema rather than with Hollywood or the standardized news-reel" (*SP* 398-9). According to MacNeice's early theory of radio, the simplification of character and the shearing of psychological conflict in the name of objectivity facilitates the sureness of meaning and didacticism associated with parable.

What kind of propagandist was MacNeice to begin with? It would be an overstatement to suggest that the BBC ever attempted to train MacNeice in dealing out unadulterated propaganda. MacNeice was subtle enough to recognize that the type of propaganda that became his wartime job was not wholly distinct from a particular academic dilly-dallying (let's say, persuasion by diversion). In the long biographical poem *Autumn Sequel* MacNeice recalls a certain Harrap, a MacNeicean equivocator with a gentle and scholarly manner "who spoke in parentheses"; Harrap is in fact the fictional analogue for Archie Harding, an Oxonian who became the Chief Instructor at the BBC's Staff Training School. Here he reasons with his new recruits:

> 'On the one hand – as a matter of fact I should
>
> Say on the first hand – there is daily bread,
>
> At least I assume there is, to be made good
>
> If good is the right expression …' (*AS* 29)

Despite the delicate indecisiveness, MacNeice goes on, "what Harrap half / Or three and a half times said, he singly meant." Harrap goes on to instruct MacNeice that

> … you will have to set
>
> Traps for your neutral listeners, Yank or Turk,

> While your blacked-out compatriots must be met
>
> Half way – half reprimanded and half-flattered;
>
> Cajoled to half remember and half forget;
>
>
> For that is propaganda. (*AS* 30)

The approach to propaganda described in MacNeice's poem – an approach based on meeting the public "half way" – is somewhat Reithian in its suggestion of a benevolent rulership. In an explanatory note to his wartime play about Chekhov, MacNeice drew an explicit connection between Features Department and the business of propaganda: "'Feature' is … the BBC name for a dramatized broadcast which is primarily either informative or propagandist (propaganda here being taken to include the emotive celebration of anniversaries and gestures of homage – or of hatred – to anyone or anything dead or alive)" (69). The propagandistic feature, then, is imprecise, emotive, wide-reaching in purpose.

The conditions of war-time broadcasting at least provided MacNeice's writing with a pre-determined purpose; after the war, this sense of purpose was altered if not vanished. Horror at the writer's obligation to offer meaning and explanation in the immediate aftermath of a war is expressed at the end of *They Met on Good Friday* (1959), a history play about the Norse-Irish war of 1014. King Brian's harper and poet, who each provide commentary throughout, are allowed the play's final words. But, in keeping with MacNeicean uncertainty, there is now a grave skepticism about language, and the poet envies the harper's freedom to work in sound alone. The harper and poet's status as official representatives of the Irish nation make this passage all the more telling:

HARPER: Why are you not reciting? This is our farewell to Brian.

POET: I am tired of words. I spoke my farewell on the battlefield. You are lucky, harper.

HARPER: Why lucky?

POET: Words must be true or false; what you say on those strings is neither.

HARPER: I must do it alone then? The Farewell.

POET: My words might flatter the dead – or they might malign him. Yes, my friend; this time you must do it alone. (*SP* 300-301)

MacNeice did not sit comfortably in the propagandistic posts of the 'thirties poet, or of the war-time broadcaster; his writing indicates *at least* restlessness, at most "moral exhaustion," as Amanda Wrigley has it (Wrigley 2014). His post-war radio writings extend his interest in the shape of didactic forms such as the morality play, but as he bedded in at the BBC (and freed from the wartime necessity of the appearance of conviction) his writing tends more and more towards uncertainty. His reaching further towards uncertainty corresponds with a refinement of his understanding and interest in the production of sound as a nonverbal language – a language that, like the harper's music, is able to say things that are neither true nor false. The tenuousness of significance through sound as an ephemeral event is accepted and even cultivated in MacNeice's dramatic works, and his writing moves away from solemn morality towards a contrived – even camp – evasiveness.[43]

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[43] Clair Wills speaks of MacNeice's post-war position, and how it relates to his long poem *Autumn Sequel*: "We can think of the BBC as a modern-day court, the poet as propagandist of the welfare state, but at the same time inspired "maker" and entertainer all at once" (Wills 193). However, this description does not account for MacNeice's many strategies for evading the obligation to be a postwar propagandist in any truly didactical sense of the word.

Given his prewar reputation for moderation – less resolutely Marxist, for example, than his peers in the "Auden generation" and colleagues like George Derwent Thomson in the Classics department at Birmingham – it is unsurprising that MacNeice should have made the postwar transition from propagandist to anti-parablist. As MacNeice's radio career progressed, and the wartime cause was replaced by a less specific state-building project, meanings became less certain. By the time he published the text of *The Dark Tower* (itself subtitled "a radio parable play") in 1947, MacNeice had considerably modified his opinion that the radio writer "must move on a more or less primitive plane" (*SP* 395). The heroes of his plays continue to be simplified Everyman types, but the process of their whittling down to a universal type is (if the behaviour of the characters in the plays they inhabit is anything to judge by) an unsurgical and painful job. The previous claims to objectivity are complicated a great deal by a closer consideration of the aurality of radio work. The objective-subjective dichotomy is now useless to MacNeice: on radio, he writes, "when no character can be presented except through spoken words, whether in dialogue or soliloquy, that very *spokenness* makes this distinction between subjective and objective futile" (*DT* 10). Apologising again for "a horrible piece of jargon," MacNeice concludes that in radio speech "the subjective is objectified" (*DT* 10). Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* is quoted as an example of "subjective writing *par excellence*" whose narrative method would be feasible on the air, and indeed MacNeice did produce an adaption of the novel, broadcast in 1955. The implied closeness of his concerns to those of Woolf's "subjective writing" demonstrates the extent to which MacNeice chose to complicate the simplified world of morality and parable. The deliberate *difficulty* of MacNeice's postwar works is that his heroes are expected to act as if they were protagonists in morality plays, even though the very atmosphere in which they are now placed is one of high uncertainty; hence the modified genre-labels such as "psycho-morality." Kathleen Luann McCracken has introduced the idea of

"anti-parable" to summarize MacNeice's complicated approach to genre, and his various means of circumventing naturalism; McCracken has helpfully noted that the *manner* and *process* of parable writing – double level, even oblique – appealed to MacNeice, even though he turned away from the ultimate instructive end. In this sense complications – the complication of character, but also the complicating tensions of the work itself – contribute to the creative grain of MacNeice's work.

The development of MacNeice's theory of radio involved a realization – not so much that sound is suited to subjective modes of expression, but that drama existing *immaterially*, as sound alone, tends to erode the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. In his later works, MacNeice begins to give greater thought to the questions of acoustic perspective, of inner voices and breaks with realistic reportage. As we shall encounter through hearing of Beckett's radio "skullscapes" and the fragmenting of personality in Giles Cooper's plays, radio writing is always by implication psychological; a clear distinction between the external world and the external world *as perceived* does not exist. Since MacNeice's plays typically deal with one man (or one March Hare) and his interaction with the sound-environments through which he passes, the erosion of the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity brings about the smudging of all sorts of certainty (parabolic, moral or otherwise) from MacNeice's writing: inhabiting phenomenologically dubious worlds, the heroes of these plays attempt quests without conviction, careers without commitment.

It is more than mere *spokenness* (as alluded to by MacNeice in the passage quoted above) that fosters this uncertainty. All drama, on radio or on stage, is spoken. In radio broadcasting, however, spoken words are distanced from their source; from the speaker (actor) to the microphone to the speaker (of the radio set), processes of separation occur. The radio critic from

The Listener, reviewing MacNeice's final play *Persons From Porlock*, objected to the play's use of disembodied voices – ghost voices heard as the protagonist dies – by arguing that "they contradict the proper business of radio drama, which lies in *giving body*" ("Persons From Porlock" 361). The critic is quite right in saying that these voices don't precisely represent the inner consciousness, since *all* radio voices are ghost voices. But, as I will show, I don't believe that MacNeice had much interest, in this or any of his previous plays, in giving body or "fleshing out" his characters and distinguishing clearly between present and absent voices. His interest was in the uncertainty of objective discourse.

Lack of certainty was natural to MacNeice's poetic voice. His refusal to identify what "ism" is illustrated or what "Solution" is offered by *The Dark Tower* (*DT* 22) is consonant with the lack of "moral basis" in his pre-war poetry that Julian Symons noted in his review of MacNeice's 1938 volume *The Earth Compels* (Symons 91). Against the backdrop of the extreme political polarities of the 1930s, which gave rise (on the left) to a modern variety of dramatic parable writing of the sort adopted by Auden via Brecht, MacNeice was assumed to be quite convictionless. Another of Auden's enthusiasms – and therefore an enthusiasm of a whole generation of younger poets – was Freudian psychoanalysis, a developing science similarly attempting to "objectivise the subjective," from which MacNeice disassociated himself. MacNeice took care in making disapproving noises about psychoanalysis each time he mentioned the discipline in his critical writing, just as he took care to deny that his broadly leftist socio-political beliefs could be reduced to an "ism."

As MacNeice became less directly propagandistic, his works pay an increased attention to the medium, to the *matter* of radio. To the propagandist, radio presented the possibility of language as loud-spoken, persuasive sound, penetrative of private spaces; radio for the

propagandist "happens" in the certainty of sound received in the domestic or work-place radio set. But, as we have discussed in the introductory chapter, all that really "happens" in the radio set is *diffusion*. The construction of meaning in radio requires *auscultation,* acts of listening. And MacNeice, we have seen, had faith in listeners. To the MacNeicean anti-parablist, radio presented the possibility of language as sound of hidden origin and concealed meaning, ephemeral in nature; radio for the anti-parablist "happens" in the *uncertainty* of sound broadcast through the aural atmosphere, the space in which listening happens. The change is a fundamental one. When MacNeice turns his focus on his own work as a producer, he does so with ambivalence.

Production: "What was in print / Must take on breath"

Criticism and literary biography dealing with Louis MacNeice's time at the BBC has tended to focus on written texts – texts both good and bad, creative and obstructive. The familiar narrative perpetuated by critics is one in which mountains of administrative paperwork were an obstacle to the creative writing that would otherwise have spilled from the poet's pen. Jon Stallworthy's thorough biography, for one, repeatedly insinuates that MacNeice's real business was poetry, and that poetry (despite MacNeice's own remarks about poetry's oral origins) is a thing published in small volumes by Faber and Faber. Again, Derek Mahon holds MacNeice's broadcast plays in such little regard that in his essay "MacNeice, The War and the BBC" he approaches the topic of MacNeice and broadcasting by selecting readings purely from MacNeice's published poetry. Simon Workman declares MacNeice's time at the BBC valuable because it caused him to think about sound, but suggests that the ultimate use of this experience was the resulting influence on MacNeice's published poetry (Workman 64-6); similarly, Clair

Wills bases her conclusions about MacNeice's radio career entirely on a reading of his poem *Autumn Sequel*, without attention to any of the radio texts. Recent scholarship has tended to lean towards reading the plays as the product of MacNeice's training as a classicist,[44] as if to stress that MacNeice bore the indignity of labour by relating the work to his academic learning. Apparently few critics have realized that MacNeice was not detained at the BBC against his consent. In my discussion of the plays, I hope to move beyond texts and towards sound itself – as critics of MacNeice's radio career we must train our ear to hear repeated sound-emblems, gathered with a poet's sensitivity to image. To make sense of these sounds, however, we must first acknowledge the *work* of radio – with what effort did this production of sound take place?

There is a gap between sound-emblems the writer-composer hears or imagines and the sounds finally broadcast back into the atmosphere; in this gap the *work* of radio happens. MacNeice left his readers and critics under no illusions as to the amount of administrative labour involved in putting sounds and voices onto the airwaves under the authority of a national broadcasting institution. Before there is audible sound, there is the too-visible mass of paperwork, described in detail in *Autumn Sequel*:

> To found
>
> A castle on the air requires a mint
>
> Of golden intonations and a mound
>
> Of typescript in the trays. What was in print
>
> Must take on breath and what was thought be said.

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[44] As in Amanda Wrigley's nevertheless useful *Louis MacNeice: The Classical Radio Plays* (2013).

In the end there was the Word, at first a glint,

Then an illumination overhead

Where the high towers are lit. Such was our aim

But aims too often languish and instead

We hack and hack. (*AS* 28)

The proximity of radio to older, oral poetic forms (to something as natural and organic even as "breath") is all very well, but here MacNeice reflects on a disingenuity of means: whereas the bardic and ballad traditions hold that sound precedes transcription, radio professionalism requires that paperwork precedes sound.[45] Before the printed word "take[s] on breath," multiple gaps must be closed: the gap between hearing and writing the sound; the gap between writing and producing the sound – both together constitute the sound-writing work of the poet-producer. The material tools of writing itself – stacks of paper, pens and pencils – come to stand in the radio worker's imagination for something rather crude and annoying. Rayner Heppenstall, the poet, novelist and Features producer who in his biographical account of his working life, *Portrait of the Artist as a Professional Man* (1969), far surpasses MacNeice in his bitterness towards radio work, recalls the growing number of corporation bureaucrats as a race of "harmless-looking little men whose breast pockets bulged with pens and coloured pencils" being loosed on the corporation premises (Heppenstall 75). These "bug-eyed monsters … invented new

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[45] MacNeice's languishing aim of an organic, unforced orality, frustrated by the mechanics of bureaucracy is a telling parallel to his preference for an organic socialism, frustrated in turn by the reality of a bureaucratic state.

forms for producers' secretaries to fill in," leaving the department with a gnawing "sense of insecurity" (75). Heppenstall was writing after the collapse of Features, and could afford to be direct in his complaints. MacNeice tended to rely on his own "sleight of hand" – parabolic, satirical, allegorical – strategies. In a satirical mood, MacNeice gave a speaking part in *Salute To All Fools* (1946) to an object listed in the script as "Little Bit of Paper," which interrupts the characters' dialogue.[46] What separates the radio worker from the bard (apart from several centuries of text-obsessed literary history) is the technical preparation involved in "precalculating microphone and knob / In homage to the human voice" (*AS* 28); we might call this conspicuousness of the medium, in which the "precalculating" apparatus is used to express loyalty through "homage" (the word comes from medieval feudal society) to the voice. MacNeice's mastery of radio production also tells us that nonverbal sound is not only the incidental atmosphere in which the piece is received (the coughing or clinking of jugs amongst the bard's audience); nonverbal sound is equally *written*, if we accept that the studio's microphones, gramophones and tape recorders are sound-writing tools, and the mixing desk an instrument of composition. The conventionally musical aspects of MacNeice's plays, supplied by a variety of collaborators, are also more than plain setting or stock accompaniment, but are written *into* (not alongside) the scripts – Britten's music for *The Dark Tower*, discussed below, is an example of this. The point is that in the allegedly "ephemeral work" (*AS* 31) of radio, as MacNeice experienced it, the relationship between sound and writing is always complex, and usually troubled.

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[46] The "little of bit of paper" phrase appears in MacNeice's correspondence, standing as shorthand for bureaucratic requirement: as in the "little bit of paper authorizing me to do so for Corporation purposes" (*Letters*: 17 April 1945).

The institutional pressures of working at the BBC certainly didn't help to uncomplicate this relationship. Christopher Holme, a BBC colleague of MacNeice's, chose to end an otherwise valuable essay on MacNeice's radio drama with the fairly damning conclusion that "we cannot doubt that from the end of the war until his death the BBC, however warm and indulgent and justly grateful to MacNeice, was the biggest 'person from Porlock' of them all" (71). The hack, the reluctant administrator, the compromised commercialized artist: these figures appear repeatedly as the hardly-heroic protagonists of MacNeice's dramatic works. Roger Mallivant in *One Eye Wild* (1952) is a "half-Homer" radio sports reporter, an "ephemeral bard of the heroics of sport" who embellishes his cricket commentaries where he can with "highbrow" touches (*OE*); Jerry King in *The Administrator* (1961) is a contrarian physicist who feels "like an artist" and postpones accepting an offer of a job in a stifling and morally dubious Institute (*MI* 76); Hank in *Persons From Porlock* is a painter who forsakes his creative work and submits to a career in commercial illustration; and so on. Whatever pressures the BBC as an institution exerted on MacNeice, it is clear that the resulting frustrations were fed into the recurring parabolic pattern, repeated with variations, that his dramatic works assumed. Indeed, these frustrations are key to the formation of the MacNeicean anti-parable: MacNeice does not attempt resolution, but rather writes *towards* indecision and inconclusiveness as his body of radio writing accumulates. In the broadcast production of *The Administrator*, for instance, MacNeice had his protagonist Jerry accept the dubious job at the Institute at the play's close. Even this concluding decision, however, is undermined as the published text of the play has Jerry refuse the job; the act of *decision* seems in effect to be deferred through the playwright's own indecision.

At the level of economic necessity, the BBC also stands for the relationship between an individual and the wider body upon which he is dependent; this manner of being in the world – decidedly precarious – is also key to the shape of MacNeice's parables. It is tempting to

conclude, with Christopher Holme, that the BBC was MacNeice's ultimate Person from Porlock. Reflecting on his day job in *Autumn Sequel*, MacNeice laments "this filing cabinet crammed / With ancient history," and "[t]he hours I have spent / Nagged by those two black telephones on my desk" (34).[47] Indeed, outside his scripts, MacNeice made occasional but unambiguous complaints: as when he told Laurence Gilliam, the sympathetic Head of Features, that he could "do some hackwork all of the time, and all hackwork some of the time but not all hackwork all of the time" (Stallworthy 335). When MacNeice refers in his correspondence to "hackwork" he tends to be referring to the his documentary pieces, which in turn tended to be broadcast on the Home Service, whilst his plays and literary translations ended up on the Third: for example, his *Mosaic of Youth*, a report based on interviews with teenagers, is referred to by MacNeice as "hackneyed" (*Letters*: 6 November 1959).

Beyond the comradeship of the Department, there were bureaucratic requirements to be met. Humphrey Carpenter's book on the history of the Third Programme describes the "indignity" of annual reports on the productivity of staff writers (59), whilst Julian MacLaren-Ross's *Memoirs of the Forties* contains a chapter recounting the frustrations (reading panels, rejection letters, lost manuscripts, unwanted alterations and all) suffered by an "outside" writer attempting to get a script on the air. BBC administration was a common enough annoyance to be something of a literary in-joke. The narrator of Muriel Spark's semi-autobiographical novel *Loitering With Intent* is interviewed for a job with the post-war BBC, without success. "I sat at a long board-room table with many men and women to ask me questions," remembers the

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[47] MacNeice writes as if the inconveniences of his BBC office are new to him. Like many of his peers, he had previously taught in a university. Presumably academic employment in the 1930s hadn't the same bureaucratic demands as it has today.

protagonist Fleur, a hopeful *para-literary* worker, caricaturing the official manner of the corporation's managerial class:

> and, said the most elderly of the men, did I realize that the six pounds a week that I was asking was three hundred pounds a year? I said I thought it was three hundred and twelve … A little later on in my life, when my fortunes had changed and I was writing for the B.B.C., my new friends on the production side fell upon the official file in which that interview was duly recorded and we all made merry of it. (Spark 1981: 135)

Jon Stallworthy has noted the irony of MacNeice's taking a job "dominated by the stop-watch" (331), given his nervous obsession with the marking of time, a fixation that accounts for the multitude of clocks, hour glasses, bells and sirens that sound in his poetry and his radio work. Stallworthy is half-right; his remarks are perhaps true of the BBC as MacNeice found it on joining in 1942 (Virginia Woolf expressed reservations about the time limits imposed on her broadcasts (Cuddy-Keane 2003: 235)), but the Third Programme, once established, was notoriously unpunctual in its programming, (in)famous for a refusal to edit plays or music to fit convenient half-hour blocks; radio "continuity" was an inexact science (Carpenter 28-9).[48] Nevertheless, when reviewing the painter Augustus John's book *Chiaroscuro* in 1952, MacNeice predicted the coming of "a puritan and punctual age where everyone, artists included, must settle down to work at once," before reaching the comforting thought that "sitting about and self-indulgence may be necessary for an artist" (*RM*).

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[48] Admittedly, the freedom initially given to the Third was lessened when, in the later 50s, the BBC was invaded by "creatures from outer space" who were perhaps rightly hostile to the economic and punctual inefficiencies of the intelligentsia (Heppenstall 75).

"Self-indulgence" is the key word here, perhaps more so because MacNeice isn't an obviously self-indulgent writer. "Indulgence," of course, always sounds pejorative; in arguing in favour of indulgence, however, MacNeice is really foregrounding the relationship between self and environment by talking about the specific conjunction of an employed artist and his place of work. If the creative artist belongs in a workplace environment, they do so amorphously and unpunctually, in the manner of MacNeice in the (perhaps apocryphal) story of his response to an administrator asking what he had been doing during all the time that he had not spent producing programs: "thinking," was MacNeice's reply (Butler 6). In *The Administrator*, the protagonist Jerry King is subjected to a phantasmagoric courtroom trial, in which his tendency towards "creative" work is counted as a stain on his character: "the administrator manages other people. The creative types get on with things on their own," his friend testifies. "In other words the creative types are more selfish?", the judge infers (*MI* 99). This grotesque scene, played out in the courtroom, is of course the exact opposite of "indulgence" (in the original sense of forgiveness for a sin, in this case the sin of "sitting around" or "get[ting] things done" on one's own); this is a typically MacNeicean scene of self-prosecution, if not self-persecution, in which this willingness to interrogate smears the splendid simplicity of allegory.

MacNeice's earlier quibble over the inexact relationship between self-expression and communication is another example of his caution when considering the self's being in the world – specifically his characters' being in the world, like *The Administrator*'s creative types, "on their own." His plays typically explore interior worlds, "inner voices" (*Letters*: 7 February 1957), dreams and psychologised projections. However, he repeatedly denied being at all interested in either Freudianism or Surrealism (in both cases, the older MacNeice was maintaining a distance between himself and the intellectual fashions of the 1930s); this despite embedding enough explicit or hidden mother figures in his work to set a whole department of Freudians off on an

analytical adventure, and despite the importance of dream narratives and the strange collisions of images in his plays.[49] The dream-world is never simply a space for self-indulgence; the "inner voice," as C.D. Blanton has noted in discussing passages about radio broadcasts in *Autumn Journal*, involves the ears "not of a single auditor but rather of an entire collective memory attuned to a single object" (Blanton 272). A similar technique is used in David Gascoyne's radiophonic poem *Night Thoughts* (broadcast in 1956): "Greetings to the solitary," says the dream voice at the end of the poem, "let us remember one another at night, even though we do not know each another's names" (Gascoyne 233). While the personal memories of MacNeice's protagonists often matter profoundly, the dreams and recollections that occur in MacNeice's writing through the standard radiogenic technique of the flash-back are part of a collective rather than an individual reverie; these dreams reveal more about archetypal patterns than they do about the psychology of the individual dreamer. In this sense MacNeice is closer to a Jungian understanding of a collective unconscious; MacNeice is in sympathy with the centre-less community at dream in the opening minutes of Thomas's *Under Milk Wood.* His references, reflecting on his own poetic technique, to "meaningful emblems" in sound and image persisting in the artist's work and dreams (*SLC* 159), speak of the unconscious as a productive mental space, not necessarily specific to an individual.

The protagonists of MacNeice's radio plays, emblems of the harassed artist, oscillate between self-indulgence and self-abnegation. This oscillation, a symptom of the fundamental MacNeicean uncertainty, is suited to the characters' radiophonic condition and depends on their being performed as voices coming in and out of silence. The world to which these voices belong

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[49] The 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London provides the backdrop to part of Hank's artistic education in *Persons From Porlock*.

is equally uncertain. Some of the plays' characteristic ambivalence is certainly to do with MacNeice's attitude to himself; I more or less agree with Marilyn Butler's assessment of the *problem* of MacNeice – his "difficulty in coming to grips with anything outside his consciousness" (Butler 7) – but where Butler intends this as condemnation, I propose this difficulty as interesting in its own right, and the basis for a valid radio aesthetic. Certainly the more compelling of his radio plays are the ones that more fully explore these uncertainties.

The wartime feature *Christopher Columbus*, for example, subjects its protagonist to some uncertainty; exploiting the blindness of the radio medium, MacNeice presents Columbus's voyage not as an accomplishment of enlightened reasoning and technical knowledge, but rather as a blind excursion into an unseeable void. *Christopher Columbus* is radiogenic in the sense that radio facilitates the vast geographical shifts necessary in the play, but also in the sense that radio dramatizes the situation of being unable to see what is *coming into view*. Land, for Columbus, and the Dark Tower for Roland do not "come into view"; they are arrived at, perceived as sound–emblems, all at once. A fairly conventional classical chorus is used in *Christopher Columbus* to give voices to Faith and Doubt, but of course the result of that particular quarrel is preordained. In MacNeice's postwar work, a series of factors – a prolonged creative involvement with the radio medium, a prolonged personal involvement with a broadcasting corporation, and a wider sensitivity to the aspirations and vulnerabilities of the postwar state's rebuilding project – ensure that doubt is less easily dispelled.

Part 2. *The Dark Tower*

The Dark Tower, the first of MacNeice's major postwar plays, is set up as a Quest

narrative; however, MacNeice, who wrote the play "in a state" as he would later admit (*Letters*: 6

November 1959), goes out of his way to undermine the Quest narrative by exploiting at every

turn the precariousness of the protagonist's existence as an isolated speaking voice. I will discuss

how the play is thematically connected to the uncertainties that MacNeice felt about his own

working environment, as described above; I will then go on to show how MacNeice exploits the

radiophonic form in order to speak creatively of these uncertainties.

The unfinishable quest

The play is MacNeice's dramatization (and considerable extension) of Robert

Browning's poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." In Browning's medievalist poem

the knight Roland journeys through a ravaged and hostile landscape, compelled for unconfirmed

reasons to arrive at a Dark Tower, "[a]fter a life spent training for the sight" (Browning 99). The

poem, called by MacNeice a "freak product" (*VP* 71), is something of an aberration in

Browning's *oeuvre* in which dramatic narrative is, if not completely absent, then certainly made

indistinguishable from the description of the grotesque landscape through which Roland travels.

Banished from the centre of the poem, narrative consists in Roland's tormented perception of the

peripheral environment. Faced with the task of making his way through "starved ignoble nature,"

Roland is instructed by Nature to "[s]ee / Or shut your eyes" (Browning 95). Far from being

mere scenery, landscape and atmosphere become a matter of psychological crisis. It is not

difficult to imagine why MacNeice, who began writing the play in the concluding months of the

war, should have been drawn to such a blasted poetic landscape. Beginning with the knight-errant's suspicion of having been misdirected by a "hoary cripple" at a cross-roads ("My first thought was, he lied in every word"(93)), the poem traces around the edges of an unforthcoming narrative. The title of the poem is in turn taken from a line spoken in feigned madness by Edgar in *King Lear*; by its origin, Browning's poem is involved with disguise and a calculated simulation of the irrational.

MacNeice's play expands on the uncertain Quest of Browning's knight. The play, categorized by MacNeice as a "radio parable play," is more about a static condition than the dynamism suggested by the journey or Quest. The point of interest is not whether Roland will complete his Quest or not, but rather how much of the naïve fantasy world to which the protagonist believes himself to belong will remain intact by the play's conclusion, given MacNeice's aggressive complication of the parable form by radiophonic means. The Browning poem from which the play germinated is dream-like; MacNeice eschews the outwardness of the Quest narrative in favour of the radiophonic quality later noted by the Drama department producer Martin Esslin: "concentrated listening to a radio play is thus more akin to the experience one undergoes when *dreaming* than to that of the reader of a novel: the mind is turned inwards to a field of internal vision" (Stanton 95).

Whether a pun was intended or not, MacNeice's hero is more *Child* Roland than Childe Roland; when we first hear him he is the lisping youngest of seven brothers who listens to his older sibling Gavin receive final instructions from a sergeant-trumpeter before being sent away on the same quest that was previously assigned to each of the elder brothers, plus the father, grand-father and so on. No one has returned. It's not clear whether MacNeice realized that the chronology of Roland's ancestors makes no sense (a brother is supposedly sent off on the quest

every seven years, which would make the time span from first brother to Roland something like forty-nine years); possibly MacNeice is deliberately using dream-state logic. The father of the boys disappeared on this young man's quest sometime between Roland's conception and his birth, which would have been some time after the first four or five brothers had already completed their training and gone away. The male members of the family amount only to crazy mathematics, careless expenditure of human resources and the repeated, unpoetic line: "Michael and Henry and Denis and Roger and John." The constant centre of this arrangement, an element not suggested in Browning's original poem, is the boys' mother, who directs each child's course of instruction and insists that each fulfils his obligation. The opening scenes from Roland's childhood tell us nothing about Roland as a character, but crucially present Roland in a condition – of *having been born*, but some way short of being certain of any particular purpose in the world – that remains his natural state. His education offers little help in this respect. The moral world of the play is one in which "honour," according to Roland's tutor, is an obsolete word but "duty" and "necessity" are understood (28), although moments earlier MacNeice either carelessly or pointedly has the tutor claim that instructing Roland's brothers was "an honour" (26). The Mother, imposing purpose, burdens Roland with a red-stoned ring that will burn on his finger for as long as she retains her purpose in sending him on the quest: "that small circle of fire / Around your little finger will be also / The circle of my will around your mind" (38).

The courses of instruction in Latin and ethics and trumpet-blowing that Roland undergoes at his mother's behest lead Christopher Holme to suggest that the Mother "stands for the educational *alma mater*, the public school that played such an overwhelming part in the lives of children of MacNeice's class" (Holme 60). The formative control of that particular institution over those of MacNeice's class and generation who went on to become precocious literary

celebrities of the 1930s has been well documented.[50] These Child(e) Rolands belonged not to a Dark Tower, but a Leaning one. Virginia Woolf, addressing the Brighton Workers' Educational Association in 1940, considered MacNeice to be representative enough of the self-abnegating leftist Oxbridge writers to single out his *Autumn Journal* for extended criticism in her talk, 'The Leaning Tower'. *The Dark Tower* continues the 1930s protest against the bourgeois schoolroom and nursery that Woolf detected amongst MacNeice and his contemporaries: "[t]hey cannot throw away their education," said Woolf; "they cannot throw away their upbringing" (Woolf 1967: 172). Likewise, Roland.

British cultural and social discourse in the immediate pre-and post-war eras was busy with images of childhood and parentalism. Woolf's image of the "leaning tower" writer as a child throwing his "little box of toys out of the window" (177) is a chastising caricature of those writers' own fitful fixation on youth, perpetuating the naughty camaraderie of the common room and dormitory, whilst kicking the old social order that placed them in such privileged environments to begin with: MacNeice in his *Modern Poetry* publication of 1938 celebrated Auden's poetry for correcting the older generation, those who "thought brothels or champagne poetic but not changing-rooms or playing fields" (*SLC* 86). In MacNeice's radio work this 30s leftist preoccupation with youth, centred on a middle-class upbringing in which the public school and bourgeois home are the key parental institutions, and poetry and games provide the opportunity for boyish heroic adventure, is mixed up with war-time and post-war notions of the state as *parental*. The Welfare State established by Labour is often called "paternalistic," but in more accusatory discourse a leftist zeal for social planning is frequently derogatorily feminized

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[50] For a full account of literary youth-worship in the nineteen-thirties, see the chapter "Too Old At Forty" in Valentine Cunningham's *British Writers of the Thirties*.

(certainly in comparison to the macho poses of neo-liberalism). Elizabeth Bowen, for example, wrote to William Plomer: "I can't stick all these little middle-class Labour wets with their Old London School of Economics ties and their women. Scratch any of these cuties and you find the governess" (Glendinning 166). In the postwar period the BBC itself, according to the Third Programme controller William Haley, had "gained a name for being didactic, arbitrary and something of a governess" (Briggs 1979: 76). The criticism of Welfare Statism (and its cultural equivalent provided by the postwar BBC) in terms of "nannying" or "spoon-feeding" has its roots in a hostility to an infantilized middle-class.[51] Although in Bowen's terms MacNeice was culturally one of the "wets" (the term became a favourite of Margaret Thatcher's when disparaging the softer elements of her own Conservative party), the radio writing that he did inside the supposedly nannying state apparatus still consistently registered his own more considered anxieties about a newly childish, parental society.

The instances of motherhood and infancy in MacNeice's plays also have a resonance beyond the metaphorical. As Jon Stallworthy has described in detail, MacNeice lost his own mother to a terminal illness when he was seven years old. Mothers in MacNeice's radio plays are unhappily pervasive in the hero's imagination, whilst being physically elsewhere; as atmospheric half-presences, they become ubiquitous. It is little wonder that MacNeice bristled at even the suggestion of Freudian interpretations of his dramatic work, even though the dying Hank in *Persons From Porlock* is tormented by childhood recollections of the bar of marzipan given to him as a gift by his mother's new lover. Details such as the spelunking enthusiast

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[51] Fear of "nanny state culture" persists in popular culture: in a 2007 cereal advert, the manly east-end actor Ray Winstone, trousering a Kellogg's paycheque, told the nation that "when it comes to food there's a bit of a [sneering] *nanny culture* fing going on: 'do this, don't do that. That's bad for you.'" Neo-liberals such as the economist Eamonn Butler published widely on the "rottenness" of the nanny state during the New Labour years of government either side of the millennium.

Hank's willful self-immersion in the womb-like caves that eventually end his life (*wet*, indeed), or the mother's ring forced upon Roland's finger almost *demand* psychological analysis. But this is to dwell on the personal and neglect the institutional: over-present institutional *alma maters* and ubiquitously half-present family mothers stand in combination as forces that keep MacNeice's radio heroes in a state of child-like dependency, pained by the facts of their own entry into existence. This anxiety is both institutional *and* personal.

MacNeice's questionable sense of persecution at the hands of administrators should not be too easily conflated with his dislike of "institutions" in the sense of established foundations of society like the Church and the public school. In *The Dark Tower* Roland is menaced by tradition. The tutor explains why tutoring Roland's family has been an "honour":

> TUTOR.	Before your mother engaged me to tutor John
>
> I was an usher in a great city,
>
> I taught two dozen lads in a class –
>
> The sons of careerists – salesmen, middlemen, half-men,
>
> Governed by greed and caution; it was my job
>
> To teach them enough – and only enough –
>
> To fit them for making money. Means to a means.
>
> But with your family it is a means to an end.
>
> ROLAND (*naively puzzled*).
>
> My family don't make money?
>
> TUTOR.	They make history.

ROLAND.   And what do you mean by an end?

TUTOR.   I mean – surely they told you?

I mean: the Dark Tower. (*DT* 26-7)

In this exchange the tutor's relief is analogous to that of a former grammar-school master who has taken a position in an esteemed public school; Roland plays the role of the public schoolboy assessing the entitlement that comes from being born into a privileged family. Like MacNeice and many of his schoolfellows (and the whole "Leaning Tower" generation) Roland considers the value of the elevated position he has inherited, dubiously privileged to be on the side of "history." Obsolete "honour" in this medievalist play is equated with a feudal tradition that is compromised by the reported threat of a rising lower-middle class made of "careerists" in great cities. Are we supposed to listen in agreement with the tutor's sneering at "salesmen, middlemen, half-men," products of the Renaissance's new merchant societies?[52] It would be hard to sympathize with MacNeice's dislike of materialist government if his preferred order of things was a valorization of "history" that sounds rather too close to the remnants of feudalism and its system of given titles, inherited land and entrenched conservative traditions. It would also be difficult to sympathize with a revulsion against "administration" that in essence expressed a feeling that administrators are vulgar "half-men" who make money because they are not sufficiently entitled to "make history." Thankfully, MacNeice was too careful a thinker to allow these impulses to lead to fully feudalist fantasy. His sympathies, as Valentine Cunningham has shown, were with a left-wing pastoralism that is *in some respects* distinct from the more familiar

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[52] The tutor himself is not such a man, of course. He belongs to one of the few true accepted para-literary *professions*; schoolmastering came naturally and apparently effortlessly to the Auden generation, with only a brief stay at Oxford separating the schoolboy Auden/Isherwood/Spender from their later schoolmaster incarnations.

conservative version of pastoral (the "great city" of urban modernity is in both cases an evil).[53]

He was aware that social planning might make demands on the individual as grave as those associated with industrial capitalism. This is why, in the comic *March Hare* saga, MacNeice playfully but pointedly skewers in turn social democratic bureaucrats, hypocritical Members of Parliament of all creeds, persistent and pedantic Irish language campaigners, doctrinaire trade unionists, befuddled old country chaps, complacent and unprincipled Oxbridge dons. Heard in isolation, any one of these attacks may sound either extremely reactionary or extremely radical; taken in total, MacNeice's attacks constitute a consistent and general distrust of institutions and a suspicion of "projects." *The Dark Tower*, written and produced in the same year as the first two *March Hare* plays, takes the aggregate of his specific complaints and casts them as a single abstraction. In *The Dark Tower* MacNeice arrived at a means of undermining the profitless entitlement – in reality a hereditary curse – that Roland is supposed to accept.

Precarious wireless: the radiophonic quest

The condition I've described, essential to *The Dark Tower*, is related to MacNeice's memories of – and anxieties about – public school education and the privilege that formed him and his peers. On another level, the play is also about MacNeice's being employed at the BBC as a radio writer – as if MacNeice has discovered to his horror that his current working situation (privileged, but unhappy; dissatisfied within an institution) is a continuation of his childhood. What I mean to show now is how MacNeice nevertheless exploited the radio medium in order to

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[53] Cunningham connects MacNeice's pastoralism to that of Orwell, who found égalité in village cricket matches (Cunningham 2012: 85).

express this condition. His development of the radiophonic form is essential to the uncertainty that he fosters.

Having been instructed in the details of a family tradition that amounts to the puppet parade of "Michael and Henry and Denis and Roger and John," and having been processed and filtered through the correct institutional channels, Roland is sent off in search of an abstraction, obliged to challenge a Dragon that no-one has seen and is more accurately a "nameless force" (27). As in the wartime play *Christopher Columbus*, Roland is pursuing something that may or may not exist; radiophonically speaking, nothing exists with any certainty until it announces or voices itself. Whereas in the earlier play Columbus is challenged by Spain's government and by the interjecting voice of Doubt (balanced by that of Faith), in *The Dark Tower* Roland is undermined in a more fundamental way. His anxiety is that of the radio voice, half-aware of the facts of his production, who comes to realize that he might be turned off at any point; here MacNeice is pre-empting Beckett's radio characters, who tenuously exist in hostile sound-worlds. Roland's proto-Absurdist instructor/tormentor in these matters is the old Soak, a character tripped across on the journey, of whom MacNeice says in a footnote, "I should have called him Solipsist if that word were known to the public.[54] His alcoholism is an effect rather than a cause" (*DT* 197). Another way of putting this would be to say that the Soak is a study in *self-indulgence*; for him the world beyond himself is "projection" and its inhabitants are his "puppets" (40). Assuming the role of producer/conductor, the Soak is candid about his subjective ordering of the world external to him:

SOAK. If you won't come to the Tavern, the Tavern must come to you.

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[54] There is an irony in a distance from the public re-emerging in MacNeice's thought when speaking of this solipsistic figure.

Ho there, music!

(*The orchestra strikes up raggedly – continuing while he speaks*.)

SOAK. That's the idea. Music does wonders, young man.

Music can build a palace, let alone a pub.

Come on, you masons of the Muses, swing it,

Fling me up four walls. Now, now, don't drop your tempo;

Easy with those hods. All right; four walls.

Now benches – tables – No! No doors or windows:

What drunk wants daylight? But you've left out the bar.

Come on – 'Cellos! Percussion! All of you! A Bar!

That's right. Dismiss!

(*The music ends*.)

Swinging, flinging together structures out of sound, the Soak draws the listener's attention away from the solemnity of Roland's Quest and towards the deeply unstable nature of the world in which he exists. The Soak, like other antic characters in MacNeice's plays whose role is to undermine or pervert the hero's Quest, is in direct conversation with the technical framework of the radio medium. The Soak throws light on the very fundamental deception that occurs when a radio producer tries to convince the listener that sound *represents something*, whether that be a person, an object or a landscape. In *The Dark Tower* MacNeice, who believed that music written for radio should be "structural" (*SP* 4) (it should support the soundworld of the play, it should enhance the play's shape), had Benjamin Britten's music at his disposal to suggest the construction through sound that the Soak conducts. Britten's music for strings

pretends to pull in the same directions as the Soak's puppet strings ("A pull on the wire – the

elbow lifts" (40)) and swaggers jazzily in defiance of the rigid military challenge call that Roland

was made to tediously learn as part of his childhood education.

The inspiration for the Soak might easily have come from the drinking culture at the BBC

which we know from Carpenter and Whitehead's respective accounts of creative labour at the

BBC (Carpenter 40, Whitehead 44). In this milieu, in which MacNeice undoubtedly participated

local pubs like The George and The Stag became a type of creative annex, an unofficial

department of the BBC that operated – at least according to the drink-fueled bravado and fancy

of the participants – beyond the bureaucratic demands of the corporation proper. The Soak

flaunts his ability to create without restriction. This character – one of many of MacNeice's radio

tricksters – should be understood as a component in an allegory of impatience with institutional

pressure, an embodiment of those doubts (personal, political, philosophical) about the whole

business of broadcasting that might be more pragmatically repressed during sober moments.

MacNeice himself had these doubts. And yet, the Soak is solipsistically self-indulgent; not for

the last time in his radio plays, MacNeice is indulging but accusing himself at the same time.

MacNeice's earlier theory of radio, expressed in his introduction to *Christopher

Columbus*, was based on a craftsman's earnest belief that "the first virtue of a radio script is

construction" (*SP* 5); growing more exploratory, MacNeice showed a willingness to introduce

characters who, like the Soak, are willing to fool with the process of construction. For instance,

in *The March Hare Resigns*, a nonsense bit of picaresque from the same period, the dependency

on sound as an unreliable signifier is similarly exposed. The March Hare "quests" through

British society in an attempt to garner support for his proposal to halt the calendar at March (so

postponing the termination of his *raison d'être*), seemingly unaware that the sound-world in

which he exists is only one switch-flick away from obliteration. Attempting to catch a ride in the aeroplane of the old army duffer General Debility (voiced unstoppably by Peter Ustinov) the Hare and his tour are exposed to the limitations of the radio studio:

> GENERAL.   Come on there! Contact! Contact!
>
> Where are those blank effects? Where's that gramophone girl?
>
> GRAMS GIRL.(*cooingly*). I'm sorry, General. The censor sat on the disc.
>
> GENERAL.   Oh all right; take it as played …
>
> (*Pause*.)
>
> Gentleman, we are now air-borne.   (*DT* 159-60)

Air-borne, or dissolved in the air? This type of joke, in which ostentatiously *produced* sound (or in this case the showy *absence* of produced sound) is integral to a radiophonic vaudeville routine would become a staple of *The Goon Show* throughout the 1950s, as much as it would be a familiar feature of the Absurd radiophonic worlds of Beckett and Pinter.

This type of radio demands critical listening. The Soak poses a challenge not only to Roland but also to the listener, who is snapped out of complacency. MacNeice certainly knew of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, if not by direct influence then certainly through MacNeice's involvement with the Group Theatre in the thirties. Like Brecht, MacNeice exposes the contrived nature of the dramatic plot, but his attention is plainly not on the potential of such self-examination to instruct the audience in critical thinking. Estranging techniques in MacNeice's radio plays are used, rather, to make the hero's very existence – and by extension the *experience* of radio, for producer and listener alike – precarious. The radio critic Philip Hope-Wallace,

perhaps lacking an appreciation of MacNeice's real intentions, objected to the use of disembodied voices in the later play *Persons From Porlock*; in a sense, none of the voices in *The Dark Tower* are fully embodied. MacNeice is still practicing the simplification of character that he suggested was the proper practice for radio writing in his introduction to *Christopher Columbus*, but he uses the Soak to do deliberate mischief to his earlier theory that "the objective elements will preponderate over the subjective" (*SP* 398). "Don't be so objective," the Soak tells Roland. "One would think, / Looking at your long face, that there's a war on" (39). The purpose – the *object* of broadcasting, if you will – that wartime necessity provided to MacNeice's radio writing is cast aside in *The Dark Tower*. The Soak continues, his words filling living rooms and kitchens throughout postwar Britain: "There is no war – and you have no face. / Drink up. Don't be objective" (*DT* 39).

It is the listener's newly critical attitude, encouraged by the insidious Soak, that will eventually be the end for Roland and his naïve Quest. Like Roger Malivant, the radio sports commentator in MacNeice's later play *One Eye Wild* who is literally *turned off* by his listening wife and child shortly before they vacate the family home, Roland is threatened with obliteration. This obliteration is a consequence of his having been cast into the world by his mother, in comparison to his tormentor who faces no such difficulty: "I wrote this farce before I was born, you know - / This puppet play. In my mother's womb, dear boy – I have never abdicated the life of the womb" (*DT* 40). Were the conventions of allegory or morality narratives intact, this difficulty with the Soak would be an episode that Roland eventually passes by, emboldened and improved, like Christian emerging from the Slough of Despond in *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

However, the Soak's influence on the play is not cast off; even as he sleeps, the Soak taunts Roland with a suggestion straight out of *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*:[55]

> ROLAND.   If I were something existing in his mind
>
> How could I go on now that he's asleep?
>
> SOAK (*muffled*).
>
> Because I'm dreaming you. (41)

Following the Soak's appearance, the certainty of Roland's existence in the world is lost and the production takes on a sonically dubious nature to reflect this lapsed objectivity. His education will no longer be of any use: the clear assignation of meaning to sound that Roland learned in practicing the challenge call with his Sergeant Trumpeter is compromised; his instruction in Latin will not help, either, as the distinction between verbal and non-verbal sound is also lost. Roland's sound-world is now one of *reduced listening*, rather than *semantic listening*, to borrow Michel Chion's terms for sound heard for its own sake rather than with an attention to the sound's source (by "reduced," Chion does not mean a *lesser* form of listening, but *distilled* or *separated* type of audition (Chion 26)). Following the havoc worked by the Soak, objects begin to have voices; speaking voices become atmospheric utterances, or assume the consistent rhythm of mechanical objects.

The sound-world that Roland meets in the latter stages of his journey, then, is one of atmospheric spaces fabricated though a confluence of sounds. That radio would specialize in

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[55] MacNeice acknowledges the debt to Carroll in a footnote (*DT* 197).

creating such confluence was predicted by Rudolf Arnheim, an early theorist of the medium. "By

the disappearance of the visual," Arnheim suggested, "an acoustic bridge arises between all

sounds: voices, whether connected with a stage scene or not, are now of the same flesh as

recitation, discussion, song and music. What hitherto could exist only separately now fits

organically together: the human being in the corporeal world talks with disembodied spirits,

music meets speech on equal terms" (Arnheim 126). MacNeice, admired by Christopher Holme

as a "master of transition" (Holme 58), excelled in the construction of such acoustic bridges:

these bridges in MacNeice's work do more than simply *connect* one scene and the next – they

describe the collapsible geography of the play, in a world where environment permeates self and

everyone apparently overhears everyone else. The script for *The Dark Tower* calls for verbal

transitions to bridge temporal, spatial and ontological gaps:

SERGEANT-TRUMPETER.

I recommend that you pay a call on Peter.

And his house is low; mind your head as you enter.

(*Another verbal transition.*)

BLIND PETER (*old and broken*).

That's right, sir; mind your head as you enter. (30)

These transitions, given a sense of spatial shifting by the producer's use of "cross-fading"

techniques, are also written in non-verbal sound, as in the passage describing Roland's arrival

with his would-be bride Sylvie at the woodland chapel. The preceding passage is accompanied

by the tolling of a bell (something of a key-note sound throughout the play,[56] recorded with artificial emphasis by Britten's orchestra so as to achieve a stylized acoustic quality): "*The bell continues but is gradually submerged by orchestral chapel music. The latter swells to a definite close, leaving Roland and Sylvie in the Haunted Chapel. The voices echo in the emptiness*" (53). These merging, submerging sonic episodes, directed by MacNeice from the control panel, enact the same condition of unity that the Soak says is the result of his alcoholic inebriation: "… unity is my motto. / The end of drink is a whole without any parts - / A great black sponge of night that fills the world / And when you squeeze it, Mabel, it drips inwards" (41). This dripping inwards, signifying the solipsistic appetite of the Soak as he collapses all the peripheral details from the world exterior to him into his own dream, is reversed later in the play by Neaera, the otherwise uninteresting seductress who Roland meets aboard a ship and whose sound emblem – again a type of audible string play – is at first internal but then becomes heard, in a dripping outwards:

    STEWARD (*pimpishly*).

        Do you hear that lady playing the fiddle?

    ROLAND.   Fiddle? No. I don't.

    STEWARD.   Ah, that's because she plays it in her head. (43)

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[56] MacNeice notes, in his essay "Experience with Images" (1949), that church bells are a key sonic emblem. He recalls his Protestant minister father's "haunted" church: "Which is one reason, I think, though I would also maintain that the sound is melancholy anyhow, why church bells have for me a sinister association" (159).

"Fiddling" here also suggests idle interference (as in *fiddling about with*) and attempts to swindle (*on the fiddle*), as well as implying casual sexual play.

These examples of soundplay and wordplay complete the challenge to semantic listening, and complement MacNeice's approach to the parable form. We know from *Varieties of Parable* that MacNeice did not believe that all allegorical writing should deal in "one-for-one correspondences"; such simplified allegories are "no more double-level than algebra" (*VP* 33). Writing about signification in poetry, MacNeice asserted that the poet "must take the rough and ready symbol of a general A and mould it to stand for his own particular *a*; that is at his least ambitious – sometimes he will mould it to stand for *b* or even *x*" (*SLC* 155). Throughout *The Dark Tower*, MacNeice creates a world in which language itself "drips inwards" or outwards, to the point that even the "sleight-of-hand" devices of allegory fail, and the play becomes "anti-parable" (*VP* 33). The sparseness and clarity of language associated with parable or morality writing is fiddled with as meanings multiply, and the dialogue is adulterated with verbal play. Although the verse throughout the play is not conventionally rhymed, the Soak – whose motto is *unity* – brings words together so as to possess them, making himself rich in consonance and internal rhymes:

There is no well about it. Except the well

That has no bottom and that fills the world.

Triplets, I said. Where are those damned musicians?

Buck up, you puppets! Play! (40)

The tendency to pun proves catching, as in Roland's "how he lies!" as the Soak drifts into sleep. In the *March Hare* plays, which should be heard as slapstick companion pieces to *The Dark Tower*, puns similarly run amok.

Puns emphasise likenesses in sound, if not in literal meaning. Punning is the essence of Joyce's dream language in *Finnegans Wake* – "the language of the night," as Louis Menand has claimed (Menand). Other strange, nightmarish meetings of signifiers with unlikely signifieds are enacted in *The Dark Tower*. The scenes representing Roland's journey on the ship and his being played upon by the pimpish steward and the seductress Neaera are punctuated by the voices from the tombola game being played in the ship's lounge. The Officer in charge of the tombola game draws numbers and announces them in the manner of the bingo caller, reciting the expected analogue or half-verbal sound symbol for that number: "Clickety-click: sixty six … / Kelly's Eye: Number One…". In the bingo hall, the caller is also a performer, and the calling of numbers itself is a pantomime-type group entertainment in which certain numbers are met with stock responses from the crowd, whose response is on cue – the relationship between the number and the analogue being a fixed convention (for example, "Two little ducks: twenty-two" draws the group response "quack quack"; "legs eleven" might elicit a camp wolf-whistle). In this popularly understood system of numbers and their enacted "meanings," audience participation is *part of the game*. In MacNeice's play, however, the Officer calling the numbers perverts the commonly agreed relationship between number and emblem by too violently shaking the symbolic order. His calls go rogue, summoning unknowable associations: "Key of the Door: Twenty-One! / Eleventh Hour: Eleven! / Ten Commandments: Nine!", and the players (all apparently losing) respond not with conventional approval, but with a stock complaint: "Shake the Bag!" (44-5).

Free word play – really a play of sound and symbol – is counterpointed with the mechanical rhythms of speakers who have been whittled down to isolated phrases. Such voices as the Ticket Collector on the ship that Roland takes could not exist in any other medium; to put a ticket collector onstage, to *give him body*, would be to assign to him a bodily presence. His meaning, however, is not as a presence but as a rhythm, a ticker, an arrangement of sound, marking Roland's boarding and disembarking of the ship: "This way: thank you – This way: thank you – / This way: thank you – This way: thank you" (*DT* 50). Equally mechanical are the voices of the Parrot and Raven that taunt Roland as he wanders through a forest. The parrot in particular is a bird that appears repeatedly through MacNeice's writing: the parrot does not speak so much as recite – that is, it plays back sound. The taunting of Roland by these particular recording devices recalls MacNeice's apologetic fussiness, expressed several times in writing on radio, about using "jargon" (that word's older purpose being to describe birdsong). The birds mock Roland with the unpermissive voice of professional life – "You can't do *that*! You can't do *that*!" (56).

Such ornithological passages, in which birds are emblems of counterfeited or reproduced speech, are frequent in MacNeice's writing. In *Persons From Porlock*, the imitating – and imitable – habits of birds stand for the problem of finding significance in sound posed for Hank during wartime service in Burma:

(*Fade up jungle night bird*)

SERGEANT. What was that, Mr. Hankey?

HANK.   Some bloody bird, Sergeant.

SERGEANT. Not a Jap imitating a bird?

> HANK.　　　　Could be a bird imitating a Jap.　　　(362)

Hank later speaks against the "parrot cry" of Maggie, his mothering but adulterous lover (377); the musical ditty that is used in several of the transitions between scenes is called "Have you seen the *mocking*bird?" (376, my emphasis). In MacNeice's poetry parrots and budgies are technologies for counterfeiting human speech, recording and reproducing (*playing back*) language. As much as this is analogous to the machinery of radio production, the motif of the reciting bird is more plainly used by MacNeice to signal that the *writing down* of poetry is itself an act of recording, an attempt to capture what begins, in essence, as an oral event. So the long poem *Autumn Sequel* begins, in homage to John Skelton (another poet, like Spenser, belonging to the valuable gap between Middle Ages and Renaissance), with the instruction "Speak parrot" (*AS* 11); and "Budgie," a poem from MacNeice's posthumously-published collection *The Burning Perch*, uses the domestic bird to speak of the poetic vocation confused with other media, both present and (by strange coincidence) future:

> Its cage is a stage, its perks are props,
>
> Its eye black pins in a cushionette,
>
> Its tail a needle on a missing disc,
>
> Its voice a small I Am. Beyond
>
> These wires there might be something different …

In a flight of fancy, MacNeice (apparently still thinking of the radio telescopes recorded for his Home Service Christmas Day broadcast in 1955, in which he commingled outer space sounds with personal voices) sends the budgie from Home to space ("beyond those wires" expressing

the wish for both a cageless existence, and an atmospherically wireless existence). The caged world, to the budgie, is a space-ship, a capsule in vacuum:

> … *Earth, can you hear me?*
>
> *Blue for Budgie calling M For Mirror:*
>
> *Budgie can you hear me?* The long tail oscillates,
>
> The mirror jerks in the weightless cage:
>
> *Budgie can you hear me*? The radio telescope
>
> Picks up quite a different signal, the human race
>
> Recedes and dwindles, the giant
>
> Reptiles cackle in their graves, the mountain
>
> Gorillas exchange their final messages;
>
> But the budgerigar was not born for nothing.
>
> He stands at his post on the burning perch –
>
> I twitter Am – and peeps like a television
>
> Actor admiring himself in the monitor. (*CP* 602)

Here outer space has become a signifier of intense human loneliness – MacNeice is further away from the universal connectivity suggested in his 1955 Christmas broadcast and closer to isolated space age figures like Major Tom, protagonist of David Bowie's early song "Space Oddity" (MacNeice's poem predates Bowie's early hit by only six years; he also pre-empts the "can you hear me" refrain). Like Major Tom (and any other number of Bowie *personae*, for that matter) MacNeice's budgie is made alien and isolate by his mediatization, *monitoring* himself (the poem

packs in convoluted references to gramophones, radio signals, television and even prefigures the *twittering* of online networking); he is fixed in a pose where *signaling* is not the same as *meaning*. Here MacNeice speaks of wireless isolation.

Like the budgie, MacNeice's radio heroes recognize that they are in a wireless world. According to the radiophonic vernacular of the time, a heavy layering of artificially-synchronised supporting voices tends to mean trouble for the play's hero, so when Roland is taunted by the voices of a clock, the Soak, the ship's steward chanting phrases in clockwork rhythm ("Tick Tock," "Left Right," "Golden days" and so on) he does indeed have – to use the title of Denis Johnston's clever parody feature from 1938 – the *Multiple Studio Blues*. The climax of this cacophony leads Roland to wonder about the absent voice of his mother, "the voice that launched me on my road" (59), and to realize that his mother's ring is pallid in colour and had ceased to burn on his finger; MacNeice here conjures the mother's voice "*in a different acoustic*" to confirm that this means that the Quest is aborted and Roland is free from his obligation. At this point Roland refuses both the string-pull of his puppet-master the Soak and the umbilical pull of his mother ("Mother, don't pull on the string" (63)), and resolves to complete the journey for his own sake, although the landscape offers no hope of a tower. The status of Roland as radio-voice is essential to his understanding the facts of his own production. Mothered into the world, "pushed … to this point" (61), muttered or uttered (that is, sent *out*), Child(e) Roland is only an atmospheric presence on the airwaves; severing the umbilical attachment and embracing his wirelessness allows Roland to accept the radiophonic condition that in radio drama landmarks – and people – exist only in so far as they make a sound. This condition is confirmed by a disembodied child's voice expressing in riddle the ephemerality of a voice whose sending-forth into the world is also its death:

You will never find us if you go forward –

For you will be dead before we are born.

You will never find us if you go back –

For you will have killed us in the womb.

Only once he accepts his own status as a sound-image does the tower reveal itself to Roland. Surveying the landscape shortly before the tower "appears," Roland hears himself:

Forward, Roland … into the empty desert,

Where all is flat and colourless and silent.

> (*He pauses; the orchestra creeps in with a heart-beat rhythm.*)

Silent? … Then what's this?

Something new! A *sound*! But a sound of what?

Don't say that it's my heart! (63)

Roland *just* avoids obliteration. The new sound of his heartbeat, discovered in a flat and colourless and silent landscape, may tenuously signal a return of the self, but this self is still permeated by, and sonically mixed with the surrounding environment. Compared to another radio heartbeat that we'll hear – that of the protagonist in Giles Cooper's *Under the Loofah Tree* – Roland's heartbeat has no obvious positive associations; the play does not resolve its ambivalence.

Part 3. Precarity, Professionalism and *Persons From Porlock*

In works written further into MacNeice's radio career – such as his last creation *Persons From Porlock* – the protagonist's circumstance is more specifically related to MacNeice's own

position as a liberal artist in the culture industry's public sector. *Persons From Porlock* is named, of course, after the "[p]erson from Porlock" who interrupted the writing of Coleridge's dream-vision-poem "Kubla Kahn." MacNeice's protagonist Hank, a painter interrupted in the pursuit of his own artistic vision by material necessity and professional obligations, expresses sympathy with Coleridge and recognizes a procession of persons from Porlock in his own life. (The play's broadcast was preceded by an announcement briefly explaining the significance of the title.) Matching the bittiness of Hank's career, the artist's life is sketched episodically, in the manner of the pre-war biography plays written by Tyrone Guthrie, or Lance Sieveking's *Kaleidoscope* plays. The play follows Hank through his time at art college, his wartime service in Burma, his attempted resumption of his career as a painter, and his succumbing through financial need to an unfulfilling job as a commercial illustrator. Alongside all of this, Hank develops a mania for spelunking or pot-holing. The accumulation of this enthusiasm (one of two related "Quests," the other being the pursuit of an obscure artistic vision) is an attempt at entering the notoriously unreachable Skrimshank's cave – the name of which is a variant on the military phrase "scrimshank" (to shirk work). Invigorated by the Skrimshank challenge (the challenge of idleness), Hank neglects his commercial work and begins painting obscure canvases which he exhibits, meeting disdain from the public and financial ruin as a result. Introducing the published text, MacNeice notes that his play "involves some implicit comments on the conditions in which artists live in this country today" (*SP* 353).

As if to underscore the consistency of MacNeice's dramatic pattern, Hank is tormented throughout by an umbilical pull similar to that felt by Roland. Like Roland, Hank is dragged through a series of institutions upon which he is ultimately dependent, though they compromise or deface his sense of individual purpose. The art school with its externally-imposed critical fashions, the army during wartime, and the commercial animation companies where he finds

work in later life: the structural pressures and bureaucratic requirements of these bodies are a poor parental replacement for Hank's absent mother. As with Roland's mother *The Dark Tower*, Mrs. Hankey's absence from her son's life gives her a ubiquity that colours the play. Mrs. Hankey never speaks directly to Hank, though we hear her in private conversation with Hank's partner Sarah, and again as an auditory hallucination. A childhood memory of his mother throwing away a dead mole supplies an image (realized in oil in Hank's later painting) of the play's themes of blindness and dependency.

Hank broods about having, like Roland, "abdicated the life of the womb" (*DT* 40). Spelunking – his serious hobby, his difficult play – is a surrogate Quest, the psychological implications of which are spelled out by Hank's initial subterranean impressions: "Talk about back to the womb! Difference is the womb was soft" (358). Again, Hank responds to the stock joke replayed automatically by his guide Mervyn (he "*used* to be a Welsh Nationalist" (my italics) and spelunking is for him a parental substitute, compensating for the presumably lost land of his fathers) who addresses his fellow cavers repeatedly as "old mole" (358, 367, 385).[57] "Moles," Hank thinks aloud, "[t]hat tiny dead one on its back. Holding up its hands like a supplicant nun. Mummy took it away, threw it in the dustbin" (358). It is in this way that MacNeice's last play, with its conflated images of maternalism and death, plays symbolically on the postwar state's promise, set down in the Beveridge Report, of welfare "from the cradle to the grave." Let down by neglectful parenting in childhood, the adult Hank opts out of the statist parental arrangement with its accompanying bureaucratic obligations and retreats to a solipsism symbolized by the liquid pursuits of alcoholism and spelunking. Unlike the guided Everyman,

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[57] Speaking of inter-generational haunting and filial obligations, "Old Mole" is Hamlet's manner of addressing his dead father.

and unlike the state-assisted post-war citizen, Hank is not accompanied to the grave. Fittingly for a middle-class "wet," he meets Death in a womb-like subterranean world.

This environment is both enticing and terrifying to Hank. It is a world in which vision is replaced by sound and touch. Once touch – the contact supplied by the safety rope that connects him to his fellow cavers – is also lost, Hank is alone in the ephemeral world of sound, his status as a material presence temporary; he dies in the flooded cave with only prolonged auditory hallucinations for company. Just as Roland waits for (then refuses) the pull on the umbilical string from his mother that will signal the end of his Quest, Hank waits for but does not receive the "tug on the line" that signals his connection to his guide and "lifeline man" (387). In both plays the hero ends up wireless; in each case wirelessness – the word's radiophonic implications fundamental – signals a wider condition of precariousness.

The wireless precariousness of MacNeice's radio characters is what their unmothered, immaterial condition "means," more fundamentally than the results of any Freudian poking about. The uncertainty about being-in-the-world is made clear in the play's opening conversation between Hank and Sarah:

SARAH. What I don't understand … is your mother dropping you cold like that?

HANK. Well, my father insisted, you see.

SARAH. No doubt. But seeing how small you were and how much you depended on her –

HANK. I couldn't compete with this out-of-the-blue Don Juan. I forgot to tell you the first time he came he gave me a bar of marzipan. Marzipan! That was him. (360)

What is established from the play's very beginning is the fact of the hero's unattended-to-dependency, which the scant compensatory marzipan from the out-of-the-blue Don Juan (*of course* he is out-of-the-blue – that is, from the sky, through the air-waves – for who in a radio world is not out-of-the-blue?) makes a proper mockery of. This condition of dependency is manifested in several relationships dramatized in the play: the relationship between mother and infant, employer and employee, citizen and state, artist and institution, the "suppliant" dead mole and whatever her supplication was directed towards; finally, radio voice and radio producer. So the crisis resulting from *having been created* is on a philosophical level a phenomenological one; in practice the crisis is specifically radiophonic.

Hank himself, faded in and out of the broadcast in MacNeice's rapid and frequent transitions, has an "out-of-the-blue," or rather out-of-the-*darkness*, kind of existence. Like Harold Pinter's radio play *A Slight Ache*,[58] *Persons From Porlock* is paradoxically a play about *vision* (note that Hank, brooding on his harassed existence, recites the full title of Coleridge's poem, "Kubla Khan: or, A Vision in a Dream" to Sarah) produced for an allegedly blind medium.[59] In MacNeice's play as in Pinter's, vision is elusive. Moments of vision, spurred by the ability to "really see things" (366) are what initially determine Hank's standing as an artist, although this status is only fully validated by an ability to determine the price of his own labour. The drifting voices of *viewers* at his unsuccessful gallery exhibition – "[h]ow's he got the nerve to ask three hundred for that?" (381) – confirm Hank's obliteration. Hank does sell some

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[58] In Pinter's play, Edward, who suffers the "slight ache" of the title behind his eyes, describes his trouble with vision as "the airs between me and my object … the space between me and my object … the quivering, the eternal quivering" (Pinter 38). Just as Hank takes refuge in his subterranean caves, Edward tells of sheltering from this "quivering" in a nook, which, as Elin Diamond has noted is a "womblike space" (Diamond 43).

[59] In a 1953 article for the *BBC Quarterly*, "A Plea For Sound," MacNeice selected "Kubla Kahn" as his example of a poem that would be better read on radio than on television.

paintings, but "not at the prices in the catalogue" (381). Surrendering control of the value of his own work, price is shown to be an unfixed thing; in fact, the price is detached from the painting in much the same way as the calls of the tombola caller in *The Dark Tower* are separated from their expected meaning; the *value*, the signifier, is not right. Similarly, the bar of marzipan is absurd compensation for the loss of a mother. The unfixed nature of value is subsequently travestied in the absurd barter conducted between Hank and Sarah, and the thoroughly Dickensian bailiff – with MacNeice's favourite bit-part player, the "bit of paper," supporting the bailiff's cause whilst Hank's own bit of paper – a dud cheque – has no authorized meaning:

> HANK.   Suppose I write you a cheque?
>
> SARAH.   Hank, you know you can't!
>
> BAILIFF.   I'm sorry, sir; I couldn't accept a cheque. I am only allowed to take payment in cash.
>
> SARAH.   Show me that bit of paper. Good God! Never mind, I'll be back with the cash in an hour or two. (381)

In MacNeice's radio allegory it is not Death but the bailiff who first comes to fleece the Everyman protagonist of his worldly goods. The bailiff has a go, for good measure, at the assumed fixity of professional status. "I can *see* they are paintings," he equivocates maliciously, "but I thought it might just be your hobby" (382, my emphasis). We are pleased to hear that when asked what being a bailiff is like, the bailiff confirms that "[i]t is rather … an ambivalent feeling" (383, his own studied ellipsis).

Hank's moments of vision occur during moments of sightlessness. The "blind bloody war" that he fights in Burma (362) is connected through its blindness to his enthusiasm for pot-holing, a hobby whose emblem is the blind mole. The mole and the elusive Skrimshank's cave

are subjects that Hank portrays, painting in "black on black," before his unsuccessful exhibition (380). The final episode in which Hank dies in the cave (the length of time it takes for Hank to die is deliberately unclear, and the listener is none-the-wiser as to whether they are hearing a dying or a dead man throughout the lengthy last scene) puts the play in the tradition of radio dramas set in darkness.[60] This retreat is prefigured in the play by Hank's black-on-black paintings – both are acts of self-obliteration by which the artist resigns (I stress: invalidates, re-*signs*) from the absurd sight-driven world of commerce with its fraudulent system of signs and values. Through this blinding of his art, MacNeice manages to make his character's career in a visual medium equivalent to his own art in the blind medium of radio. *The Listener*'s radio critic, reviewing *Persons From Porlock* shortly after the play's broadcast and MacNeice's death, seems to have sightlessness – of the play, of the medium – in mind when he writes that "[t]he death of Louis MacNeice means a great loss to radio … He had the touch" (Furbank 1963b: 361). *Touch*, the reviewer elaborates, will embolden the artist against blindness, against precariousness: "in the precarious mixture of naturalism and allegory he worked in, touch was almost everything." The contemporary reviewer is alluding – in a way that few of the more recent critics of MacNeice's radio work have cared for – to the *matter*, the material of produced sound. This is the material through which MacNeice came to embrace the ambiguities existing in the space between professionalism and precariousness.

The working conditions under which MacNeice finalized *Persons From Porlock* were not the conditions under which *The Dark Tower* was created. Radio, in danger of redundancy in the

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[60] Works such as Richard Hughes's *Danger*, a piece about a mining disaster written for the BBC in 1924, dramatizing a mining accident, set the precedent for plays set in actually blind worlds.

fact of the popularity of television (from both BBC and the recently-created ITV),[61] was

managed more closely than ever for efficiency; in this sense the BBC's cultural welfare statism

preceded the social institutions of the welfare state in giving way to managerial structures of

organization.[62] The Conservatives had regained and held office throughout most of the nineteen-

fifties, and although Labour's postwar reforms were too significant to overturn, Aneurin Bevan's

worry for the industries nationalized by Labour – that "we have to ensure that they are taking us

towards democratic Socialism, not towards the Managerial Society" – must have been mirrored

by those working within the similarly nationalized sector of the culture industry (Bevan 102).

MacNeice's fear, expressed in plays such as *Persons From Porlock*, is of personal obsolescence

when faced with what Bevan called "the worst feature of the Great Society – its impersonal

nature" (102), but equally of the obsolescence of the very medium whose contradictions he had

learned to exploit, if not master, to express his condition.

The general theme of precariousness encompasses the more specific concept of precarity,

in the Marxist sense of the insecurity of the intermittent worker. Of course MacNeice's radio

protagonists are almost always *at least* middle class: they are broadcasters, English teachers,

physicists, art school graduates (but precarious nevertheless). By the early 1960s, a more typical

Third Programme character was the working class protagonist as written by Bill Naughton,

Brendan Behan, and Joe Orton; a character in Rosemary Tonks's novel *Businessmen As Lovers*

objects to turning on the Third Programme and hearing "another working class play" (27). As a

maker of culture about and for the bourgeoisie, MacNeice under these conditions could only

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[61] Hank's work as an illustrator for TV commercials reminds us that MacNeice is acknowledging commercial, as well as public broadcasting as an uncreative source of income for artists.

[62] The shift from welfare to managerial models is recorded in John Clarke and Janet Newman's book, *The Managerial State* (1997).

hope to perfect an effete standing that was in itself an emblem of a wider condition of personal vulnerability. And despite the apparently elevated social class of MacNeice's radio characters, they are equally part of the ongoing cultural conversation about the relationship between individual and state. MacNeice's treatment of this theme is particular and personal because, like his characters, he is a self-consciously bourgeois culture-producer (this acute self-consciousness was learned in the thirties, as we have seen), and for this reason he habitually writes the medium itself into his work. By *the medium* I mean both sound, and the professional arrangement of a Corporation salary and the obstructions posed by management and administrators.

Chapter 3

The Weird Programme: The Radiophonic Workshop and the plays of Giles Cooper

Build-up of the transient: pursuit of the weird

"Slight, Drone and Weird": this is how a mischievous BBC comedian renamed the Light, Home and Third radio networks established as part of the corporation's postwar restructuring (Carpenter 73). By 1956, when the Third Programme celebrated its tenth birthday, the network was still considered sufficiently *weird* to attract comment: an *Irish Times* article from that year, excavated by Kate Whitehead in her work on the Third, notes approvingly that "the courage, enterprise and high mindedness of the Third Programme are unassailable. Its incessant pursuit of the rare, the wierd [*sic*] and the unheard of amounts to a positive fetish" (qtd. in Whitehead 211). Another newspaper felt moved to reassure its readers with a headline stating that "The Third is not so Weird" (Whitehead 211).

Whether intended as praise or censure, the word "weird" in these cases is being used a little glibly. But what if we look for substance in these claims of weirdness made for or against the Third Programme? In this chapter I will discuss the rise of "special" radiophonic sound through the 1950s in general, before analyzing the radio plays of Giles Cooper in particular, focusing on Cooper's cluster of sonically adventurous plays produced in the later 1950s as examples of weird radio material. Cooper wrote with a special attentiveness to the techno-sonicity of radio; his plays *The Disagreeable Oyster* (1957) and *Under the Loofah Tree* (1958) were two of the first BBC Drama productions to make full use of electronic sound, and were

"realised" at the nascent BBC Radiophonic Workshop. The special approach to sound required

by these plays created work for the newly-established Workshop, a unit for creating original

sound effects and incidental music through experimental techniques. The growth of the

Radiophonic Workshop itself – jointly fostered by the exploratory attitude to radio programming

on the Third Programme and the anarchic fun perpetrated by Home and Light Service

comedians—stands as an example of a cultivated weirdness, inherently dramatic in nature,

specific to the radio form.

Weird, evidently, in several senses. The *Irish Times* article connects the Third's weirdness

to a principle of "high mindedness"; the network's weirdness in this respect consists in its

apartness from facile populism (the "Slight" content of the Light network), as if this apartness

were a tolerable or even commendable eccentricity, especially in contrast to the implied

monotone "Drone" of the Home Service. Following this thought, we might identify the

aspirationally eccentric Third as an ethically necessary challenge to centric models of

broadcasting; *perhaps*, but I have already shown in my introductory chapter that the common

understanding of the Third Programme as an aloof highbrow channel should be complicated and

challenged. The later sense of the weird as conjoined with the *unheard of*, or the simply *unheard*,

comes closer to expressing a uniquely radiophonic condition: sound, the very material of radio, is

made weird. For the purposes of the current discussion, "weird" has less to do with the height of

minds or brows, and more to do with creative explorations of radio's sonic material.

The 1956 *Irish Times* piece on the Third is contemporaneous with the era of new sonic

experimentation at the BBC. This was also the year in which Cooper, already a prolific

playwright for radio, began writing his sequence of best-remembered plays. Cooper's plays and

their institutional context illustrate the changing position of the "weird" in broadcasting and the

culture industry in general; these works also offer specific examples of a weirdness of combined dramatic theme and form presented through the medium of electronic sound. Cooper's plays for sound—sounds hitherto unheard—are *radio* plays in the fullest sense: their meaning is intimately involved in the technology upon which they rely for their production and distribution. In a taxonomy of broadcast programs, the corporation classified several of Cooper's works as "Fantasy for Radiophonics" (Brooker 18), alert to their status as technocultural products; by which I mean both culture produced technologically, and the culture of technologies. Beyond further unnecessary conjecture about the height of brows, which is ultimately a topic of little relevance to Cooper's writing, the weirdness of his work is best discussed as a jointly acoustic and technological matter. For this reason, I will begin by attending to the BBC Radiophonic Workshop's significance to progressive radio drama: the Workshop provided Cooper with the technological means of fashioning a type of radio play that is fully radiophonic, both in theory and in practice.

I am assessing the sound of Cooper's work, of course, retrospectively—I am listening to these works apart from their original historical context. My purpose in reciting such a base truism is to draw attention to the temporal dimension in which these sonic materials, and sounds in general, exist; and to acknowledge by extension the dynamic processes to which these sounds are subject: their production, their decay or fading out, their reproduction and perpetuation, their reaching the point of silence or the point of being silenced, their rediscovery and re-playing. Acoustic technology does not permit us to think only in terms of "live" sonority, but causes us to re-think aural presence as a thing that continues to flicker, turning our attention to the areas between the life, death, and return of sound. Furthermore, sound technologies themselves are equally subject to broader cultural cycles of novelty, obsolescence, and excavation: my own discussion of Cooper and the medium in which he worked, then, is necessarily from the

perspective of reflection, rediscovery, re-play—that is, *revenance* and its weird, hauntological implications. At the level of specific sounds uttered *and* at the level of broad cultural contexts, temporal disjuncture is key to my discussion. I will be assessing Cooper's radiophonic fantasies as weirdly novel in their own time and then, to us—on the other side of the sound's dying—as weirdly archaic. Some degree of meta-commentary on critical and historical perspectives will be necessary to make sense of this temporal disjointedness. Sounds sound differently depending on how acclimatized a listener is to certain timbres.

Jeffrey Sconce, in his book *Haunted Media* (2000), provides an account of the weirdness of electronic media that recognizes hauntedness primarily from the perspective of novelty, from the position of the radio signal's first coming into being. Sconce casts doubt on the ability of mature, developed national radio networks to convey the same qualities of strangeness that he recognizes in the medium's nascence and infancy. The loss, as Sconce expresses it, is a natural result of the medium's growth and "normalization": he traces the transformation in the meaning of "electronic presence" from the early days of radio amateurs transmitting and receiving surprising signals to the "eventual normalization of radio reception through the network broadcast schedule" in the mid-1920s (Sconce 15-16). Sconce's reading of the development of radio is that "as the term *network* implies, listeners who once 'fished' for stray signals in the ether were now caught themselves by the sweeping nets of NBC, CBS, and other national broadcasters" (15). The content as well as the quality of the signal is "normalized" as the medium comes into maturity. Sconce's examples are profoundly American. He illustrates his account of radio's lost strangeness with a passage from a contemporary article on the demise of the American radio amateur in the early days of radio, imagined as a heroic individualist and furious reactionary who "finds himself jostled and trampled upon by a horde of common folks who want to hear a concert or something . . .. He is in about the same predicament as an aristocratic old

family when a real estate operator surrounds the ancestral estate with a development full of $4,000 houses. He is just as heroically trying to maintain the old traditions and live the old life, and with about the same chance for success" (104). Despite his affinity for the new technology of wireless communication, this imagined radio amateur does not belong to modernity. His resistance to the "networks" of broadcasting is imagined as a resistance to all kinds of civic and social connection; the developments that threaten him and his private, effete strangeness, although commercial in reality, are imagined as a type of social democratic progress (the "common folks" being provided with shelter and culture through affordable housing and radio concerts). Connected through organized networks, radio wavelengths no longer seem to teem with alien, ethereal signals to be picked up by chance or by personal ingenuity; the *cultural atmosphere* surrounding this most atmospheric medium has been standardized.

In the history of European broadcasting, of course, the supposed normalizing advances are typically statist rather than commercial. However, as an alternative to Sconce's account of a wireless strangeness known only to freedom-loving mavericks before network normalization, I propose a networked, nationalized (even statist) strangeness exemplified by the postwar BBC, which gains in retrospect what Simon Reynolds has called an "institutional aura" (341). "Nationalized" need not mean "normalized." Cooper, and the Radiophonic Workshop by which his work was realised, belonged to a cultural atmosphere marked by the institutional reach of the BBC, and the wider post-war trend toward social and cultural engineering: similar forces to those that challenged the imagined early-century amateur hero. The formative influence of these conditions is responsible for two typical Cooper protagonists: the remnant of empire, now in decay; or the unheroic but intellectually curious product of midcentury, public sector modernism, who flickers in a middle space between non-heroic individualism and modern collectivity.

Part 1. The Radiophonic Workshop

This section is about the connections between varying states of novelty and obsolescence: of the Radiophonic Workshop as an institutional unit; and of the sounds which the Workshop was required to create. The analysis here is jointly cultural history, and aesthetic theory.

Attack/Decay/Sustain/Release

Before we consider the strange sounds produced by the Radiophonic Workshop, we encounter the circumstances under which these sounds were crafted; the analytical gap between transient soundwaves and the institutional mechanisms of cultural production is the weird theoretical space through which we listen. As such, I will attend to the question of what it means to hear the British postwar sociocultural moment *in retrospect*. Simon Reynolds uses the phrase "institutional aura" to denote a reflective attitude to postwar Britain's public sector in general, and the BBC Radiophonic Workshop in particular. In his book *Retromania* (published in 2011), Reynolds discusses the Workshop as a "not so much state-funded as state-underfunded" cultural entity rediscovered and reappraised by recent "hauntologist" culture-critics and casual observers (more of whom later); the *aura* he identifies accounts for some of the excitement of assessing the Radiophonic Workshop retrospectively (340). Technoculture (technologised culture, and the culture of technology) passes through three phases: novelty, obsolescence, and excavation – with perhaps a moment of relative "normality" between novelty and obsolescence. The Radiophonic Workshop, according to Reynolds's account, has passed fully into the third of these phases.

The Workshop was created in 1958,[63] on the recommendation of the Drama and Features departments, to fill a void left by the Music Department's lack of interest in establishing an electronic music studio to explore the electronic sound techniques recently pioneered in Paris and Cologne. In the Workshop's case, the space between the first two cultural phases, novelty and obsolescence, is slight. In a recent interview, founding member Dick Mills recalled that from the beginning the Radiophonic Workshop made new sounds from "very, very antiquated" machinery; the Workshop was always more "garden shed" than state-of-the-art (MacAuliffe). In 1962 Mills and fellow member Desmond Briscoe appeared at the annual Radio Show at Earls Court billed as "Weird and Wonderful" (Briscoe 40). At this point, less than five years into the Workshop's existence, the cultural meaning of the advertised weirdness was shifting. Briscoe remembers that the pair's appearance "was, in its way, a return from the high art endeavour of European concrete and electronic music to the music hall" (Briscoe 40). The nostalgic return to the music hall—the cultural form announced by John Osborne to be "dying" only five years earlier (Osborne 7)—is telling. Away from Biscoe and Mills' weird and wonderful sideshow, the main attraction at that year's radio show was a demonstration of colour television, recently approved by the government and scheduled for introduction in 1964. Television's challenge to the radio medium, much-discussed in BBC radio departments from the mid-1950s, was now gathering pace, urged particularly by the Tory-devised commercial station ITV. The Radiophonic Workshop provided sound for television as well as radio,[64] but by the mid-sixties radiophonic art, in the truest sense

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[63] What I'm calling the "creation" of the Workshop amounts to the unit being provided with a room in the BBC's Maida Vale studios and the sum of £2,000 "for minimum purchase of essential equipment not obtainable from redundant plants" (Briscoe 28).

[64] A BBC Engineering Monograph on the Radiophonic Workshop from 1963 reports that of five hundred programs making use of radiophonic effects during the first five years of the unit's existence, 52% were sound programs (including both national and regional radio), whilst 35% were television programs. A

of a purely sonic artistic form unattached to the televisual image, faced the threat of

obsolescence. *The Listener* celebrated the Workshop's seventh birthday in 1965 by paying a

back-handed compliment to "an art which is particularly suited to what is nowadays frequently

regarded as the 'old-fashioned' medium of sound radio" ("Radiophonics" 476). Two years earlier

Features Department—the department credited with developing a specifically radiophonic form –

–was dismantled during further institutional restructuring, and the key Features writer-producer

Louis MacNeice died; the Department's former head, Laurence Gilliam, perished the following

year.

This alignment of the Radiophonic Workshop with the "old-fashioned" is striking, given

that the unit had been officially established only five years earlier with novelty and innovation as

its declared purpose. Related to the Third Programme's reaching, as the *Irish Times* put it, for

"the rare, the wierd and the unheard of," the Radiophonic Workshop "deliberately created

combinations of sound that had never existed in the world before," as Marghanita Laski recalls

(Briscoe 7). The later Workshop member Roger Limb, interviewed in the documentary film

Alchemists of Sound, defines Radiophonic material as "sound or music that you don't hear

normally" (*Alchemists*). The creation of the Workshop depended on a sensitive negotiating of

public and administrative appetites for new sound. The Music Department's refusal to commit to

experimentation with electronic sound in the early 1950s was an extension of the corporation's

shift in music policy during the 1930s, when the administration committed to a repertoire of

classical modern "greats," selected to appeal to less initiated listeners. The restructuring of the

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further 8% were "external" sound programs (pieces for use other than by the BBC) and the remaining 5%
were demonstration pieces at national or international exhibitions.

BBC in the postwar years was meant to address the problem of mixed cultural programming by creating the Third Programme as the designated channel for challenging works; however, as Louis Niebur has shown, the Third Programme's musical output "maintained the entrenched attitudes of the administration rather than the more progressive elements within the Music Department. By the mid-1950s, many within the Music Department itself had been largely converted to the more modest aims of the 'music appreciation' attitude that dominated the midcentury BBC" (Niebur 7). The push for the *unheard*, then, came largely from Features and Drama.

Features, as noted in the previous chapter, had emerged in the 1930s as a special radio form combining script and sound, requiring creative use of one or more radio studios for the "live" combination of the spoken word and sound effects before magnetic tape became widely used at the BBC in the postwar period. Programmes such as D. G. Bridson's *The March of the '45* (a verse play broadcast in 1936 about the Scottish Jacobite rising of 1745, described by Bridson as "radio with all the stops out—crowds, pipes, orchestra, choir and gunfire adding their quota to the whole effect") and *Steel* (a Soviet-modernist-style "Industrial Symphony" fashioned from recordings made in a Sheffield steelworks) combined spoken verse and prose with sounds both musical and non-musical (Bridson 60-1). Features, which emphasised the creative role of the producer and the studio manager, and demanded dexterity of the "grams operators" in charge of pre-recorded sound effects, became an original radiophonic art, liberating radio from its role as an inadequate substitute for the live experience of the concert hall or the theatre. In dramatic radio, non-verbal, non-musical sound became not just an incidental feature of the transmission, but a material to be shaped as a vital component of the produced piece. With this new attentiveness to sound came an attentiveness to new sounds: Bridson's features in the 'thirties, for example, took as raw material the sounds of industrial modernity. Bridson followed up *Steel* with a programme

called *Coal*; Rayner Heppenstall, meanwhile, recalls his initial involvement with radio stemming from an invitation to write a dramatic feature about frozen meat (Heppenstall 11). Bridson's description of his *Steel* programme as an "Industrial Symphony" suggests a fully modernist transgressing of the distinction between music and noise that is entirely in keeping with the radio feature's egalitarian disregard for the hierarchical divisions between voice, music and non-verbal, unmusical sound.

These industrial sounds were *new* in that they mimicked the sounds of modernity. The BBC Features department in the post-war era helped to develop sounds that were new in another, non-diegetic sense. The use of magnetic tape recording in place of live studio broadcasting made possible the preparation and careful editing of programmes, leading to an increasingly stylized, structuring approach to sound-engineering. This move towards stylized sound production created an alternative to the plain naturalism of unshaped field recordings on the one hand, and the ineluctable emotional associations of traditionally musicalised sound on the other. Electronically manipulated sound, itself a product of the age of magnetic tape, presented itself as a new radiophonic material. Free from both the old associations of tonal music and the plain representations of straight phonography, electronic sound was novel, unheard (of), *weird*. The ambiguous syntax in Roger Limb's description of the Workshop's output – "sounds you don't hear normally" – seems appropriate.

Electronic sound reached the BBC via the twin European innovations of Parisian *musique concrète*, as evolved by Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry, and the *elektronische Musik* techniques developed by Herbert Eimert, Karlheinz Stockhausen and others in Cologne. (Both of these movements in electronic composition have their origins in radio – Schaeffer, a former broadcaster and radio engineer, composed in the Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française facilities,

while the Cologne school grew in the Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk studios.[65]) *Musique concrète*

is based on "found" sounds, which are typically recorded onto tape and edited, subjected to

multiple filtering, echo or reverberation effects, changes in pitch and tempo. The German

elektronische technique uses sounds that are electronically generated, synthesized from the

signals produced by sine tone generators and electric instruments such as the melochord. The

Radiophonic Workshop used elements of both *musique concrète* and purely electronic music,

combining the manipulation of "found" sounds with electronically generated sound sources from

sine tone and white noise generators. What came to be known as "radiophonics" at the BBC was

a fusion of recent European techniques.

The Features producer Douglas Cleverdon, a celebrated importer of continental culture,

formed an acquaintance with the Parisian pioneers of *musique concrète*. In 1955 Cleverdon urged

the composer Humphrey Searle to learn *concrète* techniques on the hoof for use in his setting of

Night Thoughts, the long poem by another renowned conduit for the continental avant-garde,

David Gascoyne[66] (Niebur 18). The penultimate section of Gascoyne's poem is set to a creeping

rhythm created from treated metallic percussion, reversed tape sounds and low-frequency

electronic pulses; the piece is subtitled "A Radiophonic Poem." In the same year, Henk Badings'

"Radiophonic Opera" *Orestes* was broadcast on the Third, and Tristram Cary composed mixed

electronic and percussive music for use in the programme *Japanese Fishermen*. Donald

McWhinnie, a rising force in the Drama Department, took an investigative trip to France in 1956

and returned with a report intended to convince the BBC of the merits of the *concrète* approach to

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[65] Similarly, the Radio Audizioni Italiane studio in Milan provided the space in which Luciano Berio
developed electroacoustic techniques.

[66] As a precocious teenage poet, Gascoyne published fully Surrealist volumes of verse and was part of the
group who organised the 1936 London International Surrealist Exhibition.

sound (Briscoe 27). Further interest in electronic sound percolated within the BBC, through studio engineers such as Desmond Briscoe and Daphne Oram, who would become studio managers of the Workshop upon its creation.

Crucially, the Radiophonic Workshop differed from the continental studios in that its purpose was ultimately utilitarian; programmes featuring Radiophonic sound were said to be "serviced" by the Workshop. "[W]e aren't calling it *musique concrète*—in fact, we've decided not to use the word music at all," explained an introductory note sent out to overseas broadcasters along with the tape of Frederick Bradnum's radiophonic poem *Privates Dreams and Public Nightmares* in 1957 (Briscoe 22).[67] In the absence of involvement from the Music Department, the Workshop—as its name implies—became a place for crafting custom-made *bruitage*, in keeping with the intra-departmental "cottage industry" feel of the postwar BBC.[68] In this respect the Workshop was unlike the European electronic studios, which had been especially anxious that their music should not become subservient to the spoken script or the televisual image. However, aside from the signature tunes and jingles that the Workshop created (as a kind of public service to underfunded regional programmes), radiophonic sound at the BBC—especially on radio—was typically *not* background or incidental, but properly dramatic in its own right. In properly radiophonic drama, *bruitage* should not imply the secondary or tertiary importance of non-verbal "sound effects."

The sound effects wrought in the Radiophonic Workshop, according to an explanatory note published to introduce the unit formally, would "have no near relationship with any existing

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[67] Daphne Oram did leave the Workshop to pursue a career as a more purely "musical" electroacoustic composer.

[68] Nesta Pain, for example, described Features Department as a cottage industry (Heppenstall 158).

sound" (Briscoe 22). Radiophonic sounds were meant to be strange, unknown, "free of irrelevant associations" with "an emotional life of their own" (22), offering an alternative to "the use of 'real' music for brainwashing us into such moods of receptiveness as the programme producers wanted to induce in us" (7). A BBC Engineering Monograph on the Workshop, published in 1963, explains that the BBC maintained a library of all sounds and music produced for transmission, but "not with the object of using the material again. . .. Whilst the *techniques* may be used for different programmes, it is generally the best practice to create afresh for each new production rather than try to use 'second-hand' sounds" (Brooker 17). Free from the familiar, turning up weird content to newly complicate the "normalization" of radio technology that Jeffrey Sconce describes, radiophonic sound was weird in a sense more profound than that of the rarefied or intellectually ambitious. Louis Niebur notes the happy coincidence of the development of electronic sound techniques alongside the Third Programme's embracing of Absurdist drama: radiophonic pieces matched the anti-realist aesthetic of the Absurd by "alienating their audience through the removal of the sounds of a familiar reality" (Niebur 8). Influential Third Programme producers such as Donald McWhinnie in the Drama Department and Cleverdon in Features were partly responsible for importing, roughly contemporaneously, the twin continental innovations of Absurdist drama and electronic music and forging a meaningful connection between these two fashions; an earlier example of anti-realist drama in combination with electroacoustics is the Radiodiffusion Française dramatic recital of Jean Genet's prison poem *Le condamné à mort*, accompanied by creeping, low-frequency tape music by André Almuro, from 1952. The suitability of the Radiophonic Workshop as an apparatus for realizing the Absurd aesthetic, as will be discussed in the following chapter on Samuel Beckett's radio plays, consisted in its ability to begin with sound itself, the raw material of radio, and make it strange.

The BBC Engineering Monograph on the Workshop expands on this point, explaining that the Workshop's aim was "neither to produce *natural* sound effects nor to produce conventional music; it is to produce an evocation of sounds to fit the needs of the particular programme, forming an integral part of it and heightening its intensity and meaning" (Brooker 16). Interestingly, this most technical of guides, concerned with specific descriptions and diagrams of the Workshop's banks of equipment, still expresses the production of effects as an *evocation,* a weird summoning forth of sounds, as if the technology itself cannot be adequately explained without first expressing an almost fetishistic attitude towards the means of sound production. What is being unknowingly represented here is the fundamental uncertainty of electronic sound as a signifier of presence. The radio medium, as I have discussed previously, already opens up a gap between the received sound, and the sound source; in radio broadcasting, *all* voices are disembodied voices; *all* sounds are wrenched from their source, becoming the object of what the *musique concrète* pioneer Pierre Schaeffer calls acousmatic listening – that is, listening that entails hearing a sound whose source is hidden or unidentifiable (the term is derived from the Pythagorean teaching model in which the teacher addresses the disciple from behind a screen) (Schaeffer 77).[69] The *manipulated* radiophonic sound refigures sonority in such a way that this acousmatic gap is widened. The distancing of mediation (the gap between the speaking voice or sound object in the studio and the loudspeaker of the home radio set) is joined with a distancing of signification: the sonorous object, being neither a naturalistic reproduction of an identifiable sound, nor recognizable as the voice of a conventionally musical instrument, has an

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[69] Michel Chion, previously an assistant to Schaeffer, has developed the "acousmatic" into the concept of the *acoustmêtre* (a portmanteau including *être*, "being").

indefinite meaning.[70] Examining the noise-making machine alone is not, at this stage of non-acquaintance, enough. The BBC Monograph quoted above goes on to describe and illustrate the workings of the apparatus—sine- and square-wave signal generators, oscillators, ring modulators and all—housed in the Radiophonic Workshop's Maida Vale studios. But identifying, say, a sine-wave generator as the source of the sound of the "Deflector" heard in Cooper's *Mathry Beacon* is not as cognitively satisfying as identifying a piano as the source for the sound of a Chopin Prelude. Even looking the sound-making apparatus squarely and scientifically in the face does not expel the feeling that the Workshop-crafted sound is after all *evoked*; this ambiguity about the sound's coming-into-being remains an essential property of electronic sound. The *writing* of sound—the working of the relationship between written word and wrought nonverbal sound—is expressed similarly. Describing Frederick Bradnum's radiophonic poem *Private Dreams and Public Nightmares*, McWhinnie insists that "the words were designed to *evoke*, and be reinforced by, new sounds, sounds never heard before" (McWhinnie 87, my emphasis).

This doubtfulness about sound's coming-into-being amounts to a making weird of the assumed sonorous presence. Sonorous presence, as Jean-Luc Nancy proposes in his meditation on listening, "*arrives*—it entails an *attack*, as musicians and acousticians say" (Nancy 14). The voltage-controlled analog synthesizers pioneered by Dr. Robert Moog in America, Hugh Le Caine in Canada, and Electronic Music Studios (including early BBC contributor Tristram Cary) in England, allowed the musician to precisely control the *ADSR envelope*; that is, the duration of

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[70] Phenomenologically speaking, Pierre Schaeffer insists that the "sonorous object" *includes* the construction of meaning by the listening ear.
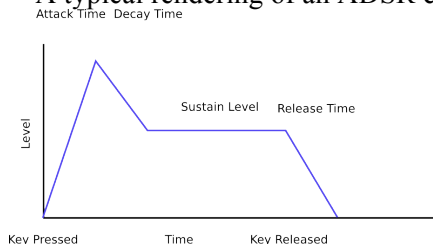
a sound's *attack*, *decay*, *sustain* and *release*: the time the sound takes to arrive and to fade, the sound's overall duration and the point at which the sound fully recedes into silence.[71]

The emergence of Moog, EMS and ARP modular synthesizers as integrated instruments[72] was prefigured by the growth of electronic sound studios; the Workshop operated on the principle that the *studio itself*, the studio at large, is an instrument for directing these dynamic processes that constitute the coming and going of a sound.[73] The Workshop member Ron Geesin remembers how "tape seemed to offer endless possibilities … you could make these strange combinations of the past and the future when you played with it" (Rogers). The point before a sound's swelling and after a sound's dying is theorized by Daphne Oram, a founding Workshop member, as the "*beyondness*" of sound (Oram 12). Giles Cooper scripted his sound-plays with an attentiveness to his producers' ability to create ADSR shapes: *The Disagreeable Oyster*, for example, ends with "*Church bells up, jangling and clashing. Some are tiny little tinklers, some massive great Bourdons. They come to a peak and then fade*" (Cooper 124). The acousmatic presence—where does it come from? at what point does it ultimately arrive?—plays on the inherent ephemerality of sound; radiophonics made possible a more complicated shaping of

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[71] A typical rendering of an ADSR envelope, as generated by a keyboard-controlled synthesizer:

Attack Time Decay Time

Sustain Level   Release Time

Level

Key Pressed   Time   Key Released

[72] The attitude of Radiophonic Workshop members on the advent of the fully developed, instrument-like synthesizer was one of skepticism (*Alchemists of Sound*).

[73] The development of the postwar feature as a formally mixed radio form determined that the studio producer—as with MacNeice in the previous chapter—takes on a compositional role. Desmond Briscoe recognizes his debt to Lance Sieveking's technique of "playing" the control panel in the inter-war period (Briscoe 20); the Radiophonic Workshop is perhaps a connecting link between these earlier examples of radio studio-craft and Brian Eno's theorizing of "The Studio as a Compositional Tool" (Eno 127).

attack and decay than the basic fading in and out of traditional radio production. Pieces by Delia

Derbyshire such as "Air" or "Blue Veils and Golden Sands," for example, use a tape-recorded

percussive sound as their source, with the initial attack edited out so that what remains is pure

resonance, an afterlife of sound detached from its practical origin.[74] Such a vibration is what

David Toop calls "sinister resonance," a discomforting reminder of the intangibility of the

auditory, and its unverifiable past: "unable to write a solid history," Toop confesses, "the listener

accedes to the slippage of time" (Toop 2010: vii). To take another example from Cooper: his

chorus of auditory illusions in *Under the Loofah Tree* reaches a peak "*in a mounting whisper*"

until "*[w]ith melancholy cries they sail away through vast and subterranean caverns echoing, re-*

echoing to silence" (204).

Re-echoing to silence: this is to explain that the aura of novelty accounts for the weirdness

of electronic sound on radio; this *aura*, however, is above all *aural* in character, and as such is

equally involved in the dynamic processes of inevitable decay on the far side of aural and

technocultural presence. Is such an aura, dependent on being hitherto unheard, sustainable?

Novelty fades. The 1960s saw an atmosphere of acclimatization to electroacoustic effects,

perhaps a metaphorical period of decay and release of the cultural impact of Workshop-crafted

sounds; hence the eagerness, demonstrated in the passages quoted above, for the Workshop to

avoid "second-hand" sounds (Brooker 17). Louis Niebur questions the practical extent of

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[74] Faubion Bowers and Daniel Kunin describe the origin of Schaeffer's *musique concrete*: "It was an accident on Schaeffer's part which started the celebrated movement… He wanted to record a church bell, but was late switching on his tape machine. What he got, without the identifying envelope of attack, was an oddity of pure sound. From then on, he pursued the process of distorting ordinary sound to make not only new sounds but to burst open the spectrum of emotion related to them" (Bowers and Kunin).

electronic art music's being "free from any kind of signification" from the very beginning; this music (Niebur is thinking of the electronic studies of Stockhausen and the *musique concrète* of Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry) "in fact contains a rich vocabulary of stereotyped associations" (Niebur 5). Desmond Briscoe concedes that Radiophonic innovation was developed in conjunction with a refinement of the now old-fashioned "auditory cliché" (13).

In retrospect, it seems clear that there should be an inherent complication in the Radiophonic Workshop's intention to observe the line between novelty and cliché, whilst happily crossing the line between popular and high culture. The Workshop enjoyed the by no means contradictory dual-purpose of realizing pieces by Beckett and Cocteau on the Third Programme, and providing sounds for the zany *Goon Show* or popular science fiction like *Dune Roller* on the Home Service. The Workshop's foot in the comic camp allowed any embarrassment at the lapse from novelty into cliché to be wholly entertained. The closeness of Beckettian tragicomedy to slapstick clowning has been well-documented;[75] the eerie radio mediumship in Cocteau's *Orpheus* is another version of the weirdness characteristic of popular sci-fi tales. The Workshop's approach to sound design for each of their various projects is not vastly dissimilar: the clattering bicycle of Mr. Tyler in Beckett's *All That Fall* could easily have belonged to the *Goon Show*, whilst the scrambled radio signals in *Orpheus* are akin to the theremin-generated glissandi of space fiction. The review of Beckett's *Embers* in *The Listener* noted that the production techniques overseen by Donald McWhinnie, conveying the incessant sea-sounds that torment the protagonist Henry, were distractingly similar to those used recently in McWhinnie's own programme *The Ocean*, the memory of which spoiled the freshness of the Beckett production

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[75] This was a point fundamental to Hugh Kenner's *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, for one.

(Rodger 1959: 35-6). P. N. Furbank, in the same publication, offered a decidedly jaded response to the last and least-remembered of Cooper's radiophonic fantasies:

> I was disappointed . . . by Giles Cooper's 'I Gotta Universe' (Home, August 15) of which I was led to expect great things in the radiophonic line. True, there was a fine cataclysmic rocket-launching, with scale-passages for the vacuum-cleaner, as the young man's thoughts sheer off from his girl-friend into outer space. Otherwise, though, there was nothing half as good in this as we used to get from the Goons. (Furbank 1963a: 288)

Speaking of the Goons, Spike Milligan cuttingly claimed that the Goon Show, "serviced" by the Workshop, ended because "we had exhausted every possible computation of sound effects that the BBC had" (Milligan 558).

Novelty, to play on another part of the ADSR envelope, cannot be sustained. If novelty—the sound's arrival as a new, unheard entity—is an inadequate claim to make for the significance of the work of the Radiophonic Workshop, then we can find a more substantial space for discussion by positioning ourselves on the other side of the sound. Heard in retrospect, after their decay and release, the produced sounds of the Radiophonic Workshop resonate with a meaningful weirdness that is created by both their electroacoustic condition and their cultural and institutional context.

The revenant

ELEC   BIRTH   DEATH

CELE   'DEATH'   'BIRTH'
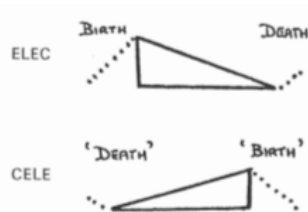
The dotted line in the ELEC diagram is the build up to maturity. This has an analogy in the build up of the transient which begins a musical note. This transient is embryonic too, for it determines, to some degree, the future quality.

The dotted line in the CELE diagram represents to my mind the reverberation after fulfillment . . . the resonance that incites resonance . . .. It is the essence of what is bequeathed to future time.

Do you think that civilisations, as well as people, could be represented by such symbols?

Daphne Oram, *An Individual Note: Of Music, Sound and Electronics* (14)

When Simon Reynolds alludes to the "institutional aura" of the Radiophonic Workshop, he does so cautiously and critically. The remark appears in Reynolds's thorough diagnosis of western popular culture's retrogressive malaise, its "addiction to its own past," as the subtitle of his book has it. This "retromania," encompassing both reverent homage and casual ironic pastiche, has existed in popular culture from at least the mid-century onwards—Reynolds unearths details of 1950s rock 'n' roll revivals as early as the 1960s, for example—but has reached a point of crisis in the twenty-first century: the postmodernity theorized in the late-twentieth century academy has manifested itself in popular culture as an all-including post-irony, an endless series of casual quotations and re-cyclings; at the same time, the retromaniac's memory has been cybernetically enhanced to near-perfection, with all past sounds and images made available for almost-immediate retrieval from the internet's vast archives. When Reynolds discusses the "revisiting" of the Radiophonic Workshop, then, he does so in the context of a critical account of the cul-de-sacs chartered by a civilization focused more on curation than creation.

Despite his obvious impatience with a pandemic nostalgia (he repeats the memorable admonishment of an antiquarian's exasperated wife in Ian McEwan's short story "Solid

Geometry": "you crawl over history like a fly on turd" (98)) Reynolds's tone turns less reproachful when assessing the archiving, homage-making and reanimating attentions devoted to the Radiophonic Workshop and other electroacoustic artists. Reynolds prefaces his book with an important point borrowed from Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia*: Boym recognizes a distinction between "restorative nostalgia" (often reactionary in intent, expressed in the aesthetics of heroic pageantry of the type associated with neo-fascist groups in Europe or Tea Party politics in the United States) and "reflective nostalgia" (aiming to "recall" the past only as a cultural texture, sublimated through art, literature and music) (Reynolds xxvi). The renewal of interest in the Radiophonic Workshop, expressed through "hauntological" theory and practice, is clearly meant by Reynolds to be an example of the latter.

Hauntology grew as a critical theory through the later half of the first decade of the current century. Interestingly, the attack/decay time, the gap between vital originality and moribund over-familiarity, appears once again to be around five years: Mark Fisher claimed in 2006 that "hauntology is the closest thing we have to a movement, a zeitgeist, at the moment"; in 2011 James Bridle supposed that "hauntology . . . is about six months away from becoming the title of a column in a Sunday supplement magazine" (qtd. by Gallix 2011). This heightened awareness, even embarrassment, about hauntology's "moment" having come and/or gone is fitting—"hauntology is already haunting itself," suggests Andrew Gallix. Hauntology as a term, a play on *ontology*, originates from Jacques Derrida's 1993 text *Spectres of Marx*, describing the continued haunting presence of Marx and Marxism after the "end of history," the victory of neoliberalism prematurely announced by Francis Fukuyama the previous year. Derrida's account of the *revenant*—that which returns—is pertinent to a time that is "out of joint"; old King Hamlet's haunting of the Prince of Denmark is held as an example of a repeatedly returning spectre. Hauntology as a critical trend, as it has flourished in the blogosphere, has fixed on artists

and curators (if any distinction between these roles really still exists) whose work is haunted by revenant cultural moments, presences from a past collectively imagined or uncertainly remembered. Hauntology's growth in digital space rather than in the academy determines that the term's meaning has become amorphous, but this vagueness, made greater by the *immediacy* of online publication, is itself an essential quality. Collectively-created blogs such as the self-described "Hauntological Dumping Ground," *Found Objects,* gather evidence of cultural debris such as boys' magazines about radio-controlled vehicles, now-neglected utopian Brutalist buildings, old paperbacks about the occult, bad waxworks from closed-down museums, space age paraphernalia, *musique concrète*, vintage soft pornography done in "futuristic" styles, archived episodes of *Tomorrow's World*, disused school science curriculum videos;[76] a repeated theme is the weird past, or the wrongly-imagined future, or both.

Hauntology is a critical *atmosphere* rather than a critical *approach*, and its attentions do not move in a single direction across the temporal line from past to future. Hauntology supposes a confluence between the past's erroneous imaginings of the future (*lost futures*), and the present's equally faulty or revisionary reconstructions of how the past's future may have been anticipated (*misremembered futures*).

Midcentury electronic sound in general, and the Radiophonic Workshop in particular, is *the* staple example of the hauntological alternative cultural history, the future that never arrived. Hauntology's temporal muddle of lost and misremembered futures has providing a means of discussing – or at least alluding to – this revenant cultural material: a 2006 documentary about Tristram Cary and Peter Zinovieff's Electronic Music Studios was titled *What the Future*

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[76] The term 'Hauntology' has been used far more broadly: I have seen Joe Cole, a once-promising football player selected for the England squad with decreasing frequency, described as a "hauntological footballer."

Sounded Like, while Reynolds named his chapter on hauntology "Ghosts of Futures Past." The Radiophonic Workshop, as a cultural *moment*, has returned: through "live" performances of Radiophonic pieces by surviving members, although these pieces were never conceived as performance pieces; through repackaged collections of Workshop-related product such as the anthologies of work by Tristram Cary and John Baker on Trunk Records, a label devoted to such rediscoveries; in Workshop-quoting (and sampling) pieces by analogue-electronic musicians on the Ghost Box record label.[77]

Radiophonic sound has emerged as the perfect revenant, the ideal hauntological emblem, for two reasons:

1) Firstly, radiophonic sound is constructed from the very beginning with an attentiveness to its own obscure origins and its own decay. Magnetic tape, the medium on which sound can be stored, replayed and looped is itself a malleable material; as a result, the relationship between the revenant sound and the original is re-shaped, bringing about the "malaise of perception" that Derrida identifies as being inherent in the effect of *déjà vu* (Derrida 1994: 15), more properly called, in this case, *déjà entendu*: these cases of replayed sound, and the subsequent practices of sampling, mixing and archive-plundering in electronic music, force our attention to the slightness of the distinction between "unheard of" and "heard before". Analogue sound technology involves a further meaning of "decay": the fact that analogue sound-writing is subject to degradation has come to be retrospectively valued in the age of digital reproduction, where each copy is a uniform reconstruction assembled from the same digital information upon which the original is based.

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[77] During the writing of this chapter, a "new" Radiophonic Workshop helmed by the composer Matthew Herbert was announced; Andrea Parker and Daz Quayle released a collection of "interpretations" of material by Daphne Oram called, after Frederick Bradnum's radiophonic poem, *Private Dreams and Public Nightmares*.

Steven Connor warns against the "nondegradable debris," the "vocal waste" of the digital era (Connor 2001: 476). In the wake of the quasi-ecological crisis identified by Connor, the *vulnerability* of analogue technologies has come to be treasured. William Basinski's *Disintegration Loops* compositions, for example, comprise fragments of recordings replayed from physically deteriorated magnetic tape;[78] Philip Jeck marked the arrival of the digital age by creating live performance pieces featuring scores of rotting record players. Douglas Kahn expresses acoustic/technological decay in even more bodily terms: the phonograph recording of the deceased left at every grave, imagined by Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*—"Hellohello amarawk kopthsth"—is supposed to capture vitality but is in practice "simply catching up with the moldering body beneath" (Kahn 1999: 56). Whereas Walter Benjamin worried that mechanical reproduction would result in images devoid of the "aura" of the unreproduced original, analogue mechanical processes themselves have *gained* an aura—celebrated in movements and genres such as steampunk and retrofuturism—by virtue of their degradable nature, a quality absent in the digital. In this respect (and not through any fidelity of reproduction) the analogue copy gains a sense of "liveness" inherent to voice, as described by Connor: "[v]oice was alive because it was ephemeral; it belonged to a speaking moment" (476). The grainy *mortality* of analogue sound recording is the other side of its celebrated qualities of "warmth" and richness of grain.

2) Secondly, the Radiophonic Workshop is a key hauntological emblem due to its cultural, institutional context. Hauntological artists such as the graphic designer and record label owner Julian House, or Ian Hodgson, who records music under the name Moon Wiring Club, draw equally from the weird margins of more distant British folk culture (with undercurrents of

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[78] Further examples of electronic musicians' interest in faltering technology: Philip Jeck composes using vinyl played on malfunctioning turntables; Stephan Mathieu has experimented with playing his material through Edison Fireside phonographs.

pagan ruralism), and the aesthetics of the postwar British public sector. The public library system, the Open University,[79] and the BBC represent an era (and aura) of benign social engineering. Noting hauntology's receptiveness to the ghosts of this milieu, Simon Reynolds explains:

> After twenty years of post-socialism under Thatcher-Major-Blair, the whole idea of the
>
> public sector—from the BBC to the library system—no longer seems stuffy and square
>
> but oddly cool: a benign system of support and pedagogy whose eclipse is regretted.
>
> Ghost Box are obsessed with the spirit of technocratic utopianism that flourished in a
>
> period between the birth of the welfare state and the ascent of Thatcher . . .. This lost era
>
> of planning and edification represented paternalism (or perhaps maternalism, given its
>
> association with things like free milk for schoolkids or BBC children's fare like *Watch*
>
> *with Mother*) that rock 'n' roll in some sense rebelled against by celebrating desire,
>
> pleasure, disruptive energy, individualism. But by the early 2000s, these bygone ideals of
>
> progress started to acquire the romance, pathos and honour of a lost future. The idea of a
>
> 'nanny state' didn't seem so suffocating and oppressively intrusive any more. (338)

In fact, these exemplars of the public sector, due to their grounding in the collective and the social, comprise on reflection a more recent example of folk culture, if the description "folk" can be extended to a culture that was state-assisted rather than bucolic.[80] The names of artists associated with the hauntological Ghost Box record label—The Advisory Circle, The Focus Group—are immediately suggestive of postwar social planning, and bring to mind some of the quainter-sounding labels for earlier incarnations of the Radiophonic Workshop: the

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[79] The Open University, a distance learning institution with an open entry policy, was established in 1969 with the aim of providing part-time higher education opportunities.

[80] A representative album title combining pagan and postwar folk cultures would be *Broadcast and the Focus Group Investigate Witch Cults of the Radio Age* (2009).

"Electrophonic Effects Committee" (Briscoe 28), beneficiary of a modest "Experimental Fund" (Niebur 27). What is being recalled, with fondness, is a highly social and statist notion of the future. What is being imagined is a social-democratically fostered, futuristically inclined public atmosphere; emphatically not the individualism of techno-aristocrats in the pre-networked early-twentieth century who feature in Sconce's *Haunted Media*. It is in this sense, then, that the connection between revenant cultural ephemera such as electronic sound or school science programmes, and the Marxian concerns causing Derrida's initial use of the term "hauntology," is not tenuous.[81] (These visitations contribute to an attempt, described by Owen Hatherley, to "excavate Utopia" (Hatherley 2009: 3).[82]

Hatherley's own concern—expressed fully in his *Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain*—is for the plight of Britain's midcentury Brutalist buildings, particularly those constructed for use as libraries, council housing, trade union headquarters, public transport terminals—those buildings constructed in the spirit of social democratic optimism, now neglected, crumbling or recuperated by the property market as luxury flats. Hatherley notes that a "close equivalent to Brutalism's avant-garde quotidian is in the work of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop." He endorses Rayner Benham's association of *musique concrète* with the raw concrete of Brutalism; Brutalism and the *bruitage* of the Radiophonic Workshop are aligned: "both are based on the use of manipulated found objects, both have a disdain for harmony but not for structure" (Hatherley 2009: 36). Each is an example of public-sector modernism. Again,

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[81] Aneurin Bevan, architect of the postwar welfare state, conceded that the difficulty in the Labour government's project was that planning is contrary to those who "adventure" (Bevan 36-7). The hauntological undercurrent can be understood as a nostalgia, after decades of neoliberal "adventure," for security.

[82] Another example of *revenance*, more immediately connected to Derrida's writing from the "end of history" would be the phenomenon of *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for the cultural textures of the former East Germany) – this is presumably more often a "reflective" than a "restorative" strain of nostalgia.

exactly contemporaneously contemporaneous with the initial stirring of electronic sound at the BBC, the 1956 Ideal Home Exhibition[83] featured a demonstration of the "House of the Future" designed by Brutalist architect-spouses Alison and Peter Smithson, who would go on to design the monumental council housing complex, Robin Hood Gardens. Following an exchange of demolition and redevelopment plans, this building seems, at the time of writing, to have little future remaining.

On the far side of these future-facing cultural moments, there is a point at which optimism is tainted, futures are lost, the Home becomes unideal, the garden shed festers. Now, as I'll go on to show: Giles Cooper's radio plays, written at this intersection, attentive to the point of fading in and out, touching the margins of the cultural moment, quiver with a *nostalgia* in the old-fashioned sense of "homesickness": written between familiarity and unfamiliarity, Cooper's radiophonic plays develop an aesthetic form to both complement and complicate the (un)homely cultural meaning of the Workshop.

Part 2. Giles Cooper

Unhomeliness: Cooper in the context of postwar Britain

Radiophonic sound, through its play on the not-quite-there ethereality of the radio medium, connotes weirdness in the sense of the *unearthly*. Giles Cooper's plays, realized at the Radiophonic Workshop, suggest a further sense of the weird: weird as in *unhomely*—this being a

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[83] The Radiophonic Workshop devised sound for the Ideal Home Exhibition in the later-50s; the recording of one such piece, by Maddalena Fagandini, remains much-anthologised.

preferred translation of Freud's *unheimlich* or uncanny. Freud supposed that "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud 219). Cooper's plays deal in the uncanny through their setting of horror or fantasy in the realm of the unheroic everyday; however, the disquietude of the mundane that Cooper explores amounts to a more truly *unhomely* quality—his radiophonic fantasies oscillate between the over-familiar and the not-nearly-familiar-enough.

Cooper's radio career moved toward unhomeliness, away from the Home Service on which his earlier radio plays and adaptations were broadcast. Working as an "outside" writer and occasional actor, he had nine original scripts produced by the BBC between 1950 and 1956, before the Third Programme provided a home away from the Home Service for his play *Mathry Beacon* in 1956: this was the first of his radio plays to receive serious critical attention, and the first BBC production from Drama, rather than Features, to receive a prestigious Prix Italia award (Cooper wrote for the Drama department, and Donald McWhinnie was his regular producer, although he was also connected through marriage to Features: his wife's sister was Nest Cleverdon, who formed with her husband Douglas Cleverdon a spousal duo of Features producers). Cooper's writing from the late-1950s, then, is intimately involved in the growing stature of the Drama Department during this period, and the rise of radiophonics as a new dramatic sonority (at the same time as the shadows of obsolescence began to fall over radio broadcasting in general).

Despite this close involvement in Drama's rise, Cooper as a writer remained without a fixed network home. Readers' Reports on his submitted scripts show Cooper falling uncomfortably between the Home Service and the home away from Home of the Third Programme. The script for *Mathry Beacon* was received favourably, but with the warning that,

presumably due to the play's cross-genre tendencies, "placing is going to be a bit of a problem" (Whitehead 38). *The Disagreeable Oyster*, written later the same year, was administratively assessed as "hardly Home Service material" (qtd. in Carpenter 151) and recommended by its Script Reader for placing in the "Loosebox," the stable-like temporary home from which some scripts never emerged (Carpenter 151); an Assistant Script Editor considered the play "connoisseur's meat; the average listener will hate it" (Niebur 26). *The Disagreeable Oyster* was produced after half a year of "very nearly unamiable" discussions about its suitability for the Third or Home networks (McWhinnie 9). *Before the Monday* (1959) met with further disagreements about its proper place but was ultimately produced and placed on the Third by virtue of its being a commissioned script, with the proviso from John Morris, the exasperated Third Programme Controller, "that Giles Cooper should not again be commissioned to write anything without first consulting Third Programme" (Whitehead 149-50).[84] Whereas Louis MacNeice wrote for both the Home Service and Third Programme with an apparently deliberate intention as to which work would be placed on which network, Cooper's lack of identification with a single network denotes a more general placelessness. Cooper was the victim, McWhinnie noted on reflection, of an "administrative gap": he was "thought to be too 'way out' for the Home Service and too 'way in' for the Third' (McWhinnie 9).

Cooper's network homelessness can be explained in part by the fact his work did not comfortably belong to any recognizable genre or dramatic mode. Cooper's *way out*-ness is easy to explain: his plays are typically plotted with a "deceptive simplicity" that might have worked on the Home Service were it not for what Kate Whitehead calls their "sinister undertones" (149).

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[84] Cooper's *Mathry Beacon*, *Unmann, Wittering and Zigo* and *Before the Monday* were "diagonalised" – broadcast first on the Third and later on the Home Service; *The Disagreeable Oyster* and *Under the Loofah Tree,* his most sonically extraordinary works, were not carried over to the Home Service.

Cooper's supposed *way in*-ness (from the perspective of the Third), raises a more challenging question. This charge is applied particularly to his trio of everyday fantasies, *The Disagreeable Oyster, Under the Loofah Tree* and *Before the Monday*. These plays, "way in" from the placeless abstractions of the European Absurd, are apparently grounded in the mundane material world, but are equally estranged from the contemporary Kitchen Sink or Angry Young Men dramatic trends.[85] What is interesting here is that the Script Readers' notes and administrative follow-ups that resulted in prolonged holding periods on Cooper's work are responses *purely* to the written play-scripts and take no account whatsoever of the work as an eventual radiophonic production. Even at the level of text alone, however, the problem of "placing" Cooper's scripts is testament to a true unhomeliness—one that is based on a disquieting *similarity* to the recognizable home (but never similar enough, as this similarity is usually tested through leaps into fantasy); this is the same uncanny quality, the discomfort of the nearly-familiar, that Cooper's own antiheroes are typically made to face. Without ease of placing, Cooper's writings were destined to haunt homes to which they did not quite belong.

Cooper flitted in and out of realism in his writings. "The real" in postwar British drama, as the "Kitchen Sink" label reminds us, was perceived in representations of familiar domestic and social spaces. The world of postwar British civilization and its homely comforts is the world from which the characters in *Mathry Beacon* are tellingly separate, and the world to which the unheroic protagonists of Cooper's three pure "radiophonic fantasies" (*The Disagreeable Oyster, Under the Loofah Tree* and *Before the Monday*—the plays that caused such disagreements about network placing) disjointedly belong. These plays are homely fantasies. Their characters exist, with

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[85] *Before the Monday* has at least some resemblance to Pinter, whose first radio play *A Slight Ache* was broadcast a month after *Before the Monday*.

distinct reservations, in the period of presumed affluence and homely comfort that followed the age of postwar austerity.[86] This class of Cooper protagonist is typically shown unhappily, unheroically at leisure. Thinking of these plays in particular, Frances Gray has commented that "like Osborne in *Look Back in Anger*, like Tony Hancock,[87] Cooper uses the British weekend as a symbol of joyless self-exploration" (Gray 149). The comparison to Osborne is telling. The directionless leisure of Cooper's characters is not restful; it is a symptom of a wider malaise, a stagnation without surety, stemming from the famously-lamented lack of "good, brave causes" (Osborne 1956: 84).

In Cooper's radio plays, home—either the private domestic space or the postwar nation—is usually not an arena for struggles fueled by moral certainty. Cooper, like Jimmy Porter's father in *Look Back in Anger*, fought in the Spanish Civil War; he later experienced, according to his sister-in-law Nest Cleverdon, a "long, bloody, beastly war in the Far East" (Carpenter 149). Cooper's plays are in part, as Cleverdon suggests, coloured by his own wartime memories; they are also a response to Britain's collective postwar—and post-empire—crisis of identity. The end of empire is dealt with specifically in other plays by Cooper, such as *Without the Grail* (in which a rogue tea merchant in India, a kind of effete Colonel Kurtz, attempts to maintain an anachronistically colonial rule) and *The Return of General Forefinger* (about a ludicrous plan to return every known statue of a Victorian empire builder to the family home in Ireland). Anachronism, re-placing, disjuncture: these are the themes, germane to the end of empire, that Cooper also applies to his plays of the British everyday. The protagonists of Cooper's

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[86] Harold MacMillan famously announced in July 1957 that the British public had "never had it so good".

[87] For an explicit connection between Hancock and Osborne, see Hancock's spoof radio playlet *Look Back in Hunger*, attributed to the "Hungry Young Man," John Eastbourne.

radiophonic fantasies are unheroic individuals for whom the world has shrunk; the mundane problems they encounter are analogues for the philosophical problem of their own cultural irrelevance. Cooper, however, maintains uncomfortable relationships with recognizable genres. He differs from a realist like Osborne in that he *makes weird* the Kitchen Sink, subjecting it to an genre-altering comic vision that crosses between frivolous and bleak: elements of fantasy, radiophonically realized, play on the effeteness of his characters, and make dubious the comforts of "homeliness."

Mathry Beacon: homelands

Mathry Beacon, broadcast in 1956, is the one play by Cooper that was accepted by the Third Programme with relative consensus.[88] In the context of postwar Britain, this play is profoundly unhomely—if we accept that the role of the Home Service in postwar broadcasting was to quietly re-civilize and reassure Britain as to its national identity. Cooper's play— "emphatically not a war play," he insisted when submitting the script (Whitehead 37)—concerns a military unit of three men and two women who, under the benevolently authoritarian guidance of a cracked old lieutenant, are compelled to guard a highly secret "missile deflector" at an isolated location in the Welsh mountains towards the end of the Second World War. Left to their own devices following the death of the eccentric lieutenant, the group continues to live as a remote community, unaware that the war has long ago ended. This temporarily utopian community, into which is introduced subsistence farming and child-rearing, is a model of social pluralism: the group comprises Evans, the hearty Welshman; Jake, the jazz trumpeter son of

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[88] Accepted with consensus, and broadcast with success: the play was broadcast for the *fifth* time in 1962.

Bajan immigrants; Betsy, the simple country girl; Rita, the cynical and streetwise Londoner; and the group's de facto leader, the public school-educated Blick. Blick, the "educated man" (16) in the unit, is burdened by the dying lieutenant's disclosure that the war has ended but says nothing, choosing to perpetuate the group's existence as a collective farming and child-rearing unit, organized around a schedule of watching over the mysterious "Deflector" (wrongly remembered as a "reflector" by *The Listener*'s critic) (Shuttleworth 981).

Mathry Beacon tells the story of the breakdown of a precarious order. The failure of this utopian collective society hinges on the dark-skinned Jake realizing that one of the children must be his, and attempting to take full parental control, in contradiction to the group's communal structure. This disharmony precipitates the personal breakdown of Blick, the de facto leader. Cooper wrote *Mathry Beacon* shortly after completing his adaptation of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*; *Mathry Beacon* repeats the theme of an isolated micro-society, but chooses to set this particular precariously-balanced community *just* within (though on the margins of) the British homeland. The utopian elements of their society are only explained as a byproduct of their continuing service. The guarding and maintenance of the Deflector is the only stated motive for the continuance of the group's isolation (like Roland in MacNeice's *The Dark Tower*, the members of the unit act on a sense of duty for which they have been given little or no explanation).

A sense of geographical fixity is at first signified by the keynote sound of the Deflector. The play itself, as much as the community depicted in the play, is built and structured around this sound. The practical use of this piece of machinery is deliberately left unexplained (it apparently has none – the lieutenant admits his initial claim that it deflects V2 rockets to be false); what is important is that the machine *sounds* throughout the play, as an electronic pulse that fades in and

out between scenes, connoting the unit's obligation to the land on which they remain rooted, and which they cultivate. Cooper's written directions urge that the Deflector's sound "must not appear to be instrumental in origin" (Cooper 14)—the sounds should not be identifiable, in keeping with the unexplained nature of the equipment itself. The Deflector and its keynote sound provides the play with the radio "*shape*" upon which Donald McWhinnie, writing on the structuring principles of radio production, so insists (94). Remembering his work as producer of this play, McWhinnie writes that "no exactly realistic sound of machinery could have fulfilled these demands, but a combination of machine-sound with semi-musical sound—say, high-frequency notes, giving the effect of wires humming in an unheard wind—might, and, I believe, did" (McWhinnie 82). Indeed, the sound of moving air is mixed with the electronic pulse of the Deflector, undermining the claims to solidity and physical placing made by the fixed soundmark[89] of the machine.

The Deflector signifies the characters' attachment to their remote micro-community, but it does so tenuously. The machine signifies their military responsibility and marks their physical location in the fog and the darkness of night (Cooper constructs thrilling radio blindness of the type described in Richard Hughes' early mining-disaster radio play *Danger*): "If this old Deflector didn't go on making that noise," says the trumpeter Jake Olim, "I don't know where we'd be" (63). Indeed, once the group's leader Andy Blick, burdened by his greater knowledge and disenchanted by the failure of the community, destroys and silences the Deflector, solidity is further compromised. Blick informs the group that the war is over; shortly afterwards, he loses his footing in the fog and falls over the cliff; solid land literally gives way to air. Cooper does not

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[89] The term "soundmark" is taken from the vocabulary developed for soundscape studies by R. Murray Schafer (Schafer 10).

reveal whether Blick's death is an accident or—perhaps prefiguring the sinister claim of the schoolboys in his later play *Unman Wittering and Zigo*, who reckon to have sent their previous schoolmaster over a cliff—a murder committed by the group who have no further use for their leader and educator.[90]

The loss of footing—be it pratfall or death-drop—is a typical occurrence in Cooper's writing. The members of this group are "placed" awkwardly; they are geographically within, but temporally out-of-joint from, postwar Britain. Contrary to their condition as radio characters, the group in *Mathry Beacon* live fully, immediately connected to the land through their subsistence farming;[91] they are certainly more directly in contact with the earth than the protagonists of Cooper's everyday fantasies. But the keynote sound that fixes these characters to this piece of land, the radiophonic pulse of the Deflector, tells a lie about the ultimate usefulness of the machine around which their life is structured—and is ultimately, violently silenced (75), leaving the four surviving members to plan a return to "civilization" (82), happy to return to predicted lives spent owning sweet shops, playing in jazz bands (so far, so much like Jimmy Porter) and driving cars. These imagined future lives are ones of moderate social mobility; this is a move towards commerce, away from the regional self-sufficiency—the *terroir*—of the group's agricultural set-up.

The comfort or discomfort of material things persists as a theme in Cooper's work, after *Mathry Beacon*, as if that play's final turn away from the solid physical certainty of a subsistence

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[90] Blick's death is emblematic of a *disposal*, rather than an overthrow of the bourgeois intellectual, and resonates with the anxieties of bourgeois broadcasters discussed in the previous chapter.

[91] Again, earlier radio drama provides a precedent: the ungrounded "airiness" of radio-dramatic vocabulary can be traced to the 1930s plays of Lord Dunsany—these are precursors of the "fantasy" radio genre, collected along with Dunsany's short stage plays under the title *Plays for Earth and Air*.

farm opens up Cooper's drama to the metaphysical abstractions of trade and commerce, and the philosophical problem of objects obtained indirectly. To Desmond, the house-bound protagonist of Cooper's later play *Before the Monday* (broadcast in 1959), the world of trade and commerce and "business" is a source of almost preternatural anxiety: the thought of shaving with a razor, for example, causes Desmond to fret over "[t]he iron ore sepulchred in rock and they take it out and bang it and crush it and melt it into steel … a thousand men and half a hundred chimneys … Then trains and shops and money … we have to start on soap; oils bubbling in great vats and still no shaving brush. Badgers' hair! My God, the whole world's in it now" (267). Desmond's anxiety is an especially acute case of the materially discomforted condition typical of Cooper's characters, after the agricultural self-sufficiency of *Mathry Beacon*. The origin of the challenge to centric notions of homeland, however, can be traced to *Mathry Beacon* itself: Cooper locates plain *terroir* at the geographical margins of the nation; the full name of the machine that symbolizes and sounds the group's connection to the land is the "Watling Deflector," supposedly called after its inventor (17) but also recalling Watling Street, the ancient pathway connecting mid-Wales (around where the unit is stationed) to the Home Counties[92] – providing a reminder of the arterial connections between Britain's geographical peripheries, and its supposed south-eastern cultural centre. The theme of regional excursion is revisited in Cooper's next major play, *The Disagreeable Oyster*.

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[92] Watling Street is also the site of the defeat in battle of Boudica's army of ancient Britons by the occupying Roman forces in 60AD.

The Disagreeable Oyster: outwardness and embarrassment

The Disagreeable Oyster, placed with considerable difficulty on the Third Programme after prolonged discussions of the play's network suitability, is fully preoccupied with states of unhomeliness and dislocation. The protagonist Mervyn Bundy, a middle-aged married man who hasn't "slept away from home for twenty-two years" (Cooper 87), is sent away on an emergency weekend business errand. Bundy, an employee of Craddock's Calculators, is furnished with a £34 fund to travel by train from Euston to the fictional northern town of Stoddeshunt, correct an error in a factory's calculator, stay overnight in a hotel and return the following morning. Being sent out into the world without prior warning is a matter of some crisis to Bundy, who objects that he is "Costs, not Maintenance" (86). This is a responsibility for which Bundy is not properly equipped; the requirement to improvise when faced with abrupt displacement becomes philosophically troubling, casting light on the fundamental question of Bundy's *being* in the world, beyond the familiarity of home. On his journey through "northerly suburbs, Eskimo lands" Bundy takes comfort in the shelter of the train carriage until arrival at his destination requires him "[t]o leave my little room, my caravan, my home . . . I won't, I won't, I won't" (88). He does. Bundy's day and night away from home is spent in homesickness, a transformative nostalgia that causes him to "hear" his home with unusual detail: "(*Fade in ringing of telephone*) That's my telephone on the rickety table in my hall. I can hear the sunlight sending a long shaft down from the landing window, I can hear the carpet breathing dust" (87).

Bundy's errand is an absurd reduction of the already perverted Quest narrative in MacNeice's *The Dark Tower*. Like MacNeice's Childe Roland, Bundy is forced into a sound-world that is treacherous in its tendency to shift and slip beneath the protagonist's feet. Bundy's own errand proves to be pointless: the factory manager abruptly informs him that the

"inconsistent error" has been fixed by sacking the operator, joining a line between human and mechanical fallibility (90). Crucially, Bundy is not only forced out into the world, he is also left without presence or purpose. Whereas MacNeice's Roland fusses under the force of his mother's will, Bundy is troubled by the problem of his own free will. Giving up on the professional objective of his journey, Bundy turns to his wife's casual request that he bring home a loaf of bread as a crumbly source of purpose.

At the level of production as well as plot, Cooper perpetuates MacNeice's perversions. Frances Gray notes that *The Dark Tower*, broadcast in 1946, is "an indication of the radio possibilities that MacNeice's generation left undeveloped" (141); ten years later and with new radiophonic effects at his disposal, Cooper further explored the frailty of radio drama's insistence on physical presence.

The play's principle conceit is that there are two Bundies, identified in the script as Bundy Major and Bundy Minor, voiced separately by the actors Hamilton Dyce and John Graham:

> PEREGRINE : . . . what did you say your Christian name was?
>
> BUNDY MINOR : I didn't.
>
> BUNDY : It's Mervyn.
>
> PEREGRINE : I expect you're the only Mervyn in the place tonight, I know I'm the only Peregrine. We must treasure our names and use them.
>
> BUNDY MINOR : (*Savagely*) . . . I've never called anyone Peregrine and I won't start now.   (92)

As far as id-monsters go, Bundy Minor is relatively unthreatening and unsuccessful. Explaining this arrangement in an introductory note to the play, Cooper writes that the division of Bundy "is

partly because he has a lot to say to himself and partly because some of what he says would never

be said by the Bundy we see walking about the streets, this being Bundy Major, who is nearly

always unaware of the existence of Bundy Minor. Minor, on the other hand, is only too well

aware of Bundy Major, being inside him and unable to get out" (84). Of course, we do not in fact

see Bundy, Major or Minor, walking about the streets. Radio does not allow for the clear

distinction between a public and a private or inner voice that can be easily conveyed in film or

television, and Cooper plays on this ambiguity. John Graham, acting the part of Bundy Minor,

delivers the majority of his lines in a confidential lowered voice, speaking closer to the

microphone, reducing the amount of space between voice and recording device, suggesting

inwardness. Bundy Minor goes unacknowledged by other characters until the very end of the

play, when a baker hands Bundy the loaf of bread: "share it between the two of you" (124). The

listener's assumption about the inner nature of Bundy Minor's voice is finally subverted.

The play ends, then, with Bundy being turned inside-out.[93] Out, and *outré*: out of his

shell, out of his home, out in the world, out on the air, Bundy's behaviour turns eccentric (out of

the circle, not centred) almost against his will. Bundy Minor, who urges "naughty" transgressions

but just as quickly shrinks from their consequences, registers Bundy's discomfort at being in the

world. Wondering how Bundy might spend his one night away from home, the Minor voice urges

a satisfaction of his "primal urges":

BUNDY: That's all very well, but actually, well, there's nobody suitable, not really.

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[93] Louis Niebur reads the play as being a series of "harrowing demasculininizing events," but I understand
the turning of Bundy inside-out, rather than any fundamentally gendered threat, to be the true source of
discomfort for the protagonist (Niebur 26).

BUNDY MINOR: (*Urgent whisper*) Over by the statue in the centre of the square, idling with a handbag, to and fro from the parking sign to the little basket, let's try her.

BUNDY: Well, I can walk across the square, it's a free country. Take a look at the statue, take a *breath of air*, a little exercise, an *interest in my surroundings*.

OLIVE: Hullo, dear, do you want to be a naughty boy?
BUNDY MINOR: (*Panic*) No, no, no! I don't!

BUNDY: Hu . . . hullo.   (97-8, my emphasis)

An interest in one's surroundings, an involvement in the surrounding air, leads the timid Bundy close to a punishable transgression; he flees the prostitute's flat to the sound of her pleas for him to "come back and be naughty" (99).

The boldness of the play's acoustic design mocks the feebleness of its hapless character. Bundy's night out,[94] his single night spent out in an unfamiliar world, results in a series of embarrassments that are instances of his overall discomfort: the sound-world that he inhabits, and the radiophonic production by means of which he exists, may be *outré* and exploratory in character, but Bundy at heart is not. This tension is characteristic of the conflicting *way-in*ness and *way-out*ness of Cooper's scripts. Drinking alone in a local pub earlier in the play, Bundy is befriended against his will by the camp and resentful aesthete Peregrine Follet, who reckons to identify Mervyn as "[a]nother poor wanderer in the wilderness, lost among the factories, guideless in the housing estates and the hooters and the municipal conveniences" (93) (the reference to municipal conveniences here is surely a coded reference to the implied homosexual

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[94] In this respect, Bundy has a close equivalent in Albert Stokes, protagonist of Pinter's *A Night Out*, a play broadcast first on the Third Programme, and then on television, in 1960. In this play, Albert's rare night out, away from the home he shares with his mother, involves a series of uncomfortable, sexually confusing social encounters.

bond that Peregrine is hoping to forge; this is another instance of Bundy being mistakenly "outed"). But Bundy is only accidentally a wanderer; he is not truly the "man with wit, sophistication and culture" that Peregrine mistakes him for (93). Peregrine is in many ways the typically caricatured Third Programme listener, the teasingly-portrayed fop, wetter than the North Sea, whose provincial loneliness and cultural impoverishment the Third Programme might have hoped to correct: "Do you know there isn't a Poetry Reading Circle for thirty-three miles in any direction, nor an art-gallery, nor a string-quartet, nor even an Expresso bar" (93) (Peregrine's part is acted with a speech impediment, so the words are voiced "Poetwy Weading Circle," "stwing-quartet" and so on). Mortified to be seen with such an eccentric, Bundy flees.

Bundy's great ontological embarrassment is conveyed radiophonically. Frances Gray, in her reading of the play, picks up on the fundamental problem that torments Bundy, which she expresses in Heideggerian terms. Cooper, Gray writes, spent his writing career "examining the experience on the near side of nothingness, characters who reject the *Dasein* . . . and lock on to problems which distract them from the problem of existence itself" (Gray 140). In Bundy's case, I would add, such distractions are slight and imperfect, since the problems that he fixes on (his fear of intimacy and adventure) are surely subsidiary to the wider problem of being-in-the-world. Writing of the world in which these characters exist, Gray notes that "their universe is peculiarly fit for radio to express; yet Cooper was the first to translate it into radio terms adequately and precisely" (140). Radio writers since MacNeice who concentrated on radio's strengths, intimacy and flexibility, "gave their creations something of the solidity of the stage and stage-settings" (141)—this amounts to a normalizing, in dramatic terms, of the now mature medium of radio. Cooper resists any such indication of solidity. Bundy's embarrassed relationship with the world outside himself is expressed in terms that suggest a threat to his own presence – we can gather as much from tracing the etymological line from naughtiness to nothingness, and the line from

figurative to literal mortification. At his most uncomfortable, Bundy expresses himself as a non-presence. Peregrine claims that Stoddeshunt is a cultural desert in which Bundy is a fellow nomad; "[n]o, I'm not," Bundy replies, "I'm a mirage" (93). Peregrine takes this reply as a welcome example of refined wit, as further evidence that Bundy is *with* Peregrine and *against* normative Stoddeshunt's "mowons" and "doltish families" (93); but what Bundy means is that he isn't really anywhere. Hiding in the darkness after having broken into a woman's house to find some clothes, Bundy Minor whispers, "I don't exist, I'm not, I'm part of the dark air, I died a thousand years ago" (115): Bundy seems to be always at the point of returning to the bare facts of his ethereal, radiophonic condition.

The quality of intimacy, identified by Gray as one of radio's strengths, is the very thing that Bundy struggles with – indeed, the Bundy Major / Bundy Minor conflict is Bundy's struggle with his more intimate and honest inner voice. To accurately match Cooper's nuanced handling of the radiophonic form to the zany comic world of his plays: the ontological problem in *The Disagreeable Oyster* is, plainly put, an embarrassment. Cooper crafts an aesthetics of embarrassment, through developing an aural art that is unhomely in the sense of the weird or disquieting, but also in the simpler sense of *not comfortable*. The discomfort follows from figurative and literal exposure. Cooper has the unfortunate Bundy stripped of his clothes in an all-night cafe by a party of women back from a coach trip, then improves on Henry Reed's bath-time scene in *The Private Life of Hilda Tablet* (when "full frontal nudity was heard on radio for the first time" (Reed 8)) by sending Bundy to mingle and play table-tennis with an entire nudist community.

Such exposures are the stuff of popular entertainments, in particular the British music hall, a ribald and public artform that was on its last legs in the 1950s. Cooper renews the dying

music hall with radiophonic significance – the key shift here being that radio broadcasts in this decade were typically received in the private space of the home, quite different from the communal open space of the popular theatre. Cooper's playing on music hall themes serves to bring "outness" and its attendant chaos into the ordered "in-ness" of domesticity.[95] The play's comic nature is somewhat *end of the pier*, to borrow a term drawn from the holiday destinations of the working classes once the maturing of the industrial age in the early twentieth-century brought the concessions of affordable rail travel and recognized labourers' holidays. The pier (built off the solid land of the homeland) was site and symbol of the leisure-and-pleasure-time ribaldry of popular musical shows and postcards of the suggestive or plainly explicit type. "End of the pier," as both a location and a comic state (often called simply "pleasure," as in Blackpool's Pleasure Beach) suggests, again, something eccentric or geographically non-centric, something very much on the watery margins of the homeland. Bundy's gang of female molesters are, of course, "a jolly party back from the seaside" and have returned to their industrial hometown drunk on the seaside spirit of misrule, to the profound embarrassment of Bundy. Their ribaldry on returning is a souvenir of their temporary release from the Gradgrindian grimness of working life.

The Disagreeable Oyster is set in the same naughty north of England familiar from end of pier shows and the increasingly obsolete provincial music halls. The singers of risqué music hall numbers from the 'twenties and 'thirties *performed* embarrassment as popular entertainment: songs such as "Oh, Maggie! What Have You Been Up To!" (sung by Grace Fields) and "Oh Georgie! What a Fine How Do You Do" (by Randolph Sutton) made a self-contradictory show of

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[95] Music hall performances by the likes of George Formby were broadcast on radio, via the Regional, Forces and Light networks; however, these broadcasts are imprecise reproductions of public performances, quite different from the written-for-radio conditions described in Cooper's plays.

personal shyness and family shame. In the camp music hall of this period, embarrassment is paradoxically performed, brought mugging and jigging into the public sphere whose glare is the cause of shame and shyness in the first place, though the source of embarrassment is left tantalizingly out of view or barely-covered by a coded comic language. (The broad story of popular musical entertainment is that this nuanced bashfulness of the music hall became obsolete in the face of the unashamed swagger of rock 'n' roll in the permissive postwar decades; John Osborne illustrates this seismic cultural shift in his play *The Entertainer*.) The northern music hall and film star George Formby perfected this complex, camp play of folk embarrassment. The persona created in Formby's songs is typically engaged in a game of mutual peek-a-boo with the world, most famously pretending coyness in his role as voyeur in "When I'm Cleaning Windows," but more often treading a fine line between embarrassment and exhibitionism: accepting invitations to join nudist colonies (like Cooper's Bundy), being laughed at by ladies' water-polo teams, emerging from bathing "undressed" to find girls taking "snapshots of [his] family crest" (as in "Oh Dear, Mother"); then more knowingly exhibiting the collection of phallic little items which he waves about (his "Little Stick of Blackpool Rock"), obsessively plays with (his 'little ukulele'), or pulls out on his wedding night (more obscurely, his "Grandad's flannelette shirt"). Through the Major and Minor voices of Bundy in *The Disagreeable Oyster*, Cooper re-creates the tension between shame and show, channeling the now obsolete music hall mugs. The radio airwaves, of course, form a different type of public arena to the music hall stage. By channeling music hall through his radio writing, Cooper brings the spirit of misrule out of its place in public spaces of the music hall or the seaside, and into the private space of the listener's home. To a character as feeble as Bundy, this misrule is threatening; to the audience, it is a welcome carnivalesque disruption.

***The Disagreeable Oyster*: the soundworld**

To specifically attend to the source of Bundy's embarrassment, his being-in-the-world, as a being-in-the-*sound*world: what of this sound-world—the desert of factories and housing estates noted by Peregrine—through which Bundy wanders? Cooper's handling of dialogue is typically economical, to the extent that no speaking voices can comfortably claim to have primacy over the produced non-verbal sounds with which they share the air. such an arrangement heightens the sense of Bundy—even with his two speaking voices—as acoustic material buffeted around by the greater noise of his environment. Bundy's eccentricity is trumped by the "nightmare babel of eccentric sound" (as Donald McWhinnie described it) by which he is surrounded (McWhinnie 84). This aural world is fashioned to convey the specifically radiophonic discomfort of Bundy.

The town of Stoddeshunt, as an acoustic environment, is portrayed in a stylized and zany manner. As the play's classification as a "fantasy for radiophonics" suggests, the play's anti-realist aesthetic complicates the mimetic aspects of the sound setting. The comic-dramatic mode to which *The Disagreeable Oyster* is more immediately akin is the radio comedy of *The Goon Show*; in its sonic world-building, Cooper's play has a music-hall or variety lineage in common with the Goons. The popular Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers and Harry Secombe variety comedy, broadcast on the Home Service between 1951 and 1960, made in its later years full use of Radiophonic Workshop effects,[96] having already experimented with less technologically-dependent forms of aural clowning. Many of the effects in *The Disagreeable Oyster*, in keeping with both the play's anti-realism and Cooper's typically unsolemn handling of philosophical

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[96] In an exchange of letters with Spike Milligan in *The Listener*, Desmond Briscoe later recalled his refusal "to allow the Radiophonic Workshop to becomes exclusively the *Goon Show* Sound-Shop" ("Goon Sound" 619).

problems, are Goonish in nature, as Desmond Briscoe has acknowledged. Bundy's fleeing, the

sound that concludes most of his encounters, is heard as footsteps increasing to a frantic and

comically improbable pace, rendered by manipulation of a gramophone recording. "The only way

to make high-speed footsteps in those days was to force the turntable round with your finger as

fast as possible," Briscoe remembers. "The engineers didn't really approve of this because it did

no good to the governing mechanism of the turntable." This technique, requiring no more

equipment than a mortal gramophone turntable, was used previously by the Goons, but Briscoe

insists that "[w]e used them because they seemed appropriate, certainly not because the Goons

had used them" (Briscoe 19).

The auditory setting of *The Disagreeable Oyster*, Briscoe notes, is "as substantial as it is

treacherous" (19); the sound of the play is designed as if to reassure the listener that we are in fact

on solid and solemn ground, whilst undermining this claim to solidity with the possibility that at

any moment we might reach the end of the pier or—like Gunner Blick in *Mathry Beacon* and

Pelham in *Unman Wittering and Zigo*—the edge of the cliff. What mimetic relationship do these

sounds have with an implied physical environment, a territory? *The Disagreeable Oyster* deals,

with complications, in what Douglas Kahn calls "significant sound," meaning imitative *bruitage*

(Kahn 1999: 102). Tracing the line drawn between musical and non-musical sound by Western

art music before (and during) modernism, Kahn insists that "[o]ne thing that remained

tenaciously extramusical . . . was what was usually called *imitation*" (102). Imitative sound (what

becomes known as "sound effects" when made secondary to the filmed or staged image) occupies

an uncomfortable, perhaps embarrassed position between musicalized sound and the purely sonic.

Kahn describes the situation at the advent of modernism, before the development of

phonography:

However it may have been invoked past or present—noise, sound, reproduction, representation, meaning, semiotics—the primarily sonic has been recuperated into music with relative ease while significant sound has met with great resistance. Only the briefest and most infrequent instances of worldly sound were allowed into Western art musical practice, while its broader applications of imitation, such as program music, were commonly considered to be lower life forms. Contraptual sounds produced by noninstrumental objects were banished to the circus, variety theater, novelty music, vaudeville, theatrical sound effects, and folk traditions. (102-3)

The line between musical and nonmusical sound was repositioned by phonographic technology and the advances of the twentieth century musical avant-garde, but the position of imitative sound remained awkward. *Musique concrète* begins with the sound of noninstrumental objects but then reshapes and makes obscure the "significance" of these sounds by stretching, reversing, filtering or looping them, as if the techniques of the *concrète* composers were strategies for circumventing the embarrassment of direct imitation. According to Pierre Schaeffer the "sonorous object," the result of the electroacoustic composition, is "*contained entirely in our perceptive consciousness*" (Schaeffer 79); the significance of the original sound source does not give meaning to the sonorous object.[97] The dramatic *bruitage* of the Radiophonic Workshop—called neither "*musique concrète*" nor even simply "music" (Briscoe 22)—forces the sonorous object back toward imitation,[98] an admittedly skewed mimesis rooted in the traditions of vaudeville and

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[97] This is excepting the type of concept-driven electronic music made by (for example) Matthew Herbert, whose *One Pig* (2011) documents through treated samples the progress of a pig, from the animal's birth to its being slaughtered and eaten. Tellingly, in reviewing a live performance of this piece, John Lewis of *The Guardian* gave Herbert the almost inevitable label of "[s]onic prankster" (Lewis 2012).

[98] When putting together jingles rather than crafting dramatic bruitage, the Radiophonic Workshop were more likely to keep the musicalized sound-source evident: as in the array of animal growls and squawks

variety theatre, the same areas to which imitative sound was, according to Kahn, "banished."

Comedy records such as Albert Whelan's "My Brother Makes the Noises for the Talkies" and

Spike Jones's "Cocktails For Two" make irreverent fun from significant sound in a manner that

The Goon Show would later adopt; the former record, for instance, ends with a comic illustration

of incompetent sound-handling, as a story about cycling past a church on a glorious day is

accompanied by horse's hooves, a thunder sheet and a woodblock, whilst Spike Jones's record

undermines the song's post-Prohibition lyric about "respectably drinking like civilized ladies and

men" with a raucous accompaniment of clattering glasses, popping corks, and visceral

hiccupping. In these cases, as in Cooper's plays, significant sound is out to cause mischief for

both music and the written text. The *treacherousness* of the sound-world in *The Disagreeable

Oyster* results from its being constructed of sounds whose connection to the real world ("worldly

sound," in Kahn's terminology) is both significant and comically trivializing.

For example: when Bundy arrives at the Stoddeshunt factory to complete his initial task

of fixing the company's calculator, the sound-world into which he is plunged is another industrial

symphony, another *ballet mecanique*, a stylized rendering of the noises of heavy industry. Cooper

handles the problem of having his characters speak above (or beneath) this noise with

irreverence. The voice of the doorman who greets Bundy, like the voice of Bundy's wife over the

telephone, is a series of intentionally unintelligible utterances. The behaviour of the factory

soundscapes inhabited by these voices is more surprising:

DOORMAN: Wa-wa?

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pulled together in Delia Derbyshire sequence for the program "Great Zoos of the World"; or the saws and
drills in Daphne Oram's post-Workshop commercial for power tools.

BUNDY: (*Louder*) Craddocks Calculators, I've come to see Mr Rigg.

DOORMAN: Wa-wa?

(*Noise of industry stops abruptly*)

BUNDY: Mr Rigg! I want Mr Rigg!

DOORMAN: Ah, Mr Rigg.

(*A series of voices, some on tannoy, some shouting, call out 'Mr Rigg, Mr Rigg, Mr Rigg'. At their peak they are cut off and Rigg speaks, quiet and truculent*)

RIGG: I'm Rigg, yes?

(*Deafening noise of industry*)

BUNDY: I'm from Craddocks Calculators.

(*Noise cut off*)

RIGG: Where?

(*Deafening noise*)

BUNDY: Craddocks Calculators, London.

(*Noise cut off*)

RIGG: Can't hear a word, come in here. (*Door shuts*) Where did you say? (89)

In this unpredictably-patterned acoustic environment, Bundy's status depends on his negotiating the unexpected gaps in the clamour. Cooper is playing with the radio convention of the scenic transition (where seagulls and waves are faded in to signal arrival at a seaside location, for example, then faded out to allow the characters to speak). The accepted radio shorthand for "placing" a speaker in a particular location is, in *The Disagreeable Oyster*, made a matter of

inconvenience rather than convenience. Bundy's arrival at the local pub is signified by a "babble of unintelligible talk" which, on his entering, "slows down and dies to silence" (91). Seemingly aware of the shift in the produced soundscape, but not understanding the radiophonic convention, Bundy is left embarrassed by the sudden silence: "Why have they all stopped talking? Am I odd? Am I undressed?" (91). (He is not, but he will be.) Bundy's fear of nakedness, his stripping and his trip to the nudist colony culminate in his being turned inside-out by the play's conclusion, at which his minor self is finally exposed; Cooper writes with silence to convey such dreaded exposure.

Cooper's playing with the recognized grammar of radio *bruitage* serves to complicate the "unheard" nature of radiophonic sounds. The production of his play skirts cliché in its use of sonic novelties such as sped up running feet and high-pitched telephone voices—these sounds are poised strangely between novelty and obsolescence, but Cooper tends to deal in clichés *detourned*. The play's title, as Bundy's opening dialogue with his own minor self makes clear, is drawn from the old cliché about the world being one's oyster—the world that opens up to Bundy (for one night only) turns out to be disagreeable. Indeed, the "disagreeable" nature of Bundy's being-in-the-world consists in an embarrassment of the over-familiar, but this embarrassment is further twisted towards a new strangeness of the too-homely.

Under the Loofah Tree: a ready hand on the volume

> In every human being there will surely be . . . tremendous chords of wavepatterns 'sounding out their notes.' Do we control them by the formants we build up . . . by tuned circuits which amplify or filter? Are we forever developing our *regions of resonance* so that our individual consciousness will rise into being – so that we can assert our

individuality? In this way does the tumult of existence resolve itself into a final personal waveshape, the embodiment of all one's own interpretations of the art of living?

Daphne Oram, *An Individual Note: Of Music, Sound and Electronics* (31-2)

"Mary has got some sugar, but Gerald has problems closer to home," introduces the BBC continuity announcer. The play begins. Mary offers Gerald tea and cake, and ten full seconds of stretched out and multiply-layered sounds of water torrenting into a teacup elapse before Gerald responds, in the simplest language, "yes please, darling." A further twenty seconds of rhythmic, amplified tea-slurping and the unstable high-frequency resonance of tinkling china passes before an otherworldly shriek segues into an unruly chorus of demonic inner voices urging Gerald to "do it . . . do it now." Acting on this instruction, Gerald says with hesitation, "Mary, I've come about the sugar." His utterance is followed by an immediate and enormous percussive crash. The continuity announcer: "And you can hear Mary's reply on Thursday afternoon." The play is *Susan's Regrets*, the "winner of this year's Sonic Daisy Award for best use of sound."

Sadly, *Susan's Regrets* is an artfully constructed parody, a gentle send-up of radiophonic drama included in Chris Morris' satirical current affairs radio program *On The Hour*, broadcast on Radio 4 from 1991-1992. As with Morris' best satirical work for radio and television, the parody is executed with convincing attention to detail. Heavy-handed sound effects compensate––to comic effect—for a scarcity of inherently dramatic dialogue, creating a sonic storm in and amongst the teacups of polite domesticity. The transformation of the domestic space, of course, is the proper business of the radio dramatist, given the way in which the radio medium complicates the relationship between the public and private sphere. Giles Cooper, having used Radiophonic Workshop-crafted *bruitage* to establish the strange comedy and terror of Bundy's being away from home in *The Disagreeable Oyster*, brought raucous electronic sound into the domestic space

in *Under the Loofah Tree*. In the former play, Bundy wanders timidly through an unfamiliar town that becomes a vast wilderness; in the latter, the protagonist Edward Thwaite endures a psychomachia whilst confined to his bathtub during his twice-weekly ablutions. Nothing physically penetrates Edward's private space, but a series of voices communicate to him through his resolutely closed bathroom door. It is through sonic effects, both horrific and comic, that Edward's psychological permeability is dramatized as he tries to reconcile his mental and bodily experience of the world. This problem, as we will see in Beckett's radio plays, presents itself differently to the radio playwright than to the stage dramatist.

Edward begins the play by lowering himself into his bath and claiming a distinct separation between his body (dirty, immersed in too-hot water) and the mind with which he hopes to hold and master the world: an imaginary calypso singer is conjured to comment that "Mr. Edward Thwaite / Is in a most extraordinary state, / His toes are boiled to tenderness / But his head containing all his cleverness / Is cool as any refrigerator" (187). Assured cleverness, the ability to contain something of the world (social, historical) that is kept beyond his bathroom door, fulfilling without error the obligation to "never do anything else but think" (187): these are the things to which Edward aspires in trying to keep his head cool. The manner of the calypso singer's arrival tells us that already Edward's mastery of his environment is imperfect. Like the many other voiced presences invited or intruding into the bathroom, the singer's presence is thrown up through Leopold Bloomian mental association: getting into the hot bath makes Edward think of "[b]eing boiled alive in a pot for cannibals"; the play's first summoned sound, a "tribal" drum, countersigns this observation (187); from the drum Edward thinks of a calypso singer (calypso came to prominence in Trinidad in the 1930s, but made a particular impression on British culture in the 1950s following the migration to London of prominent calypsonians such as Lord Kitchener and Lord Beginner; significantly, migration on the Windrush in the 1950s marked

a new moment in Britain's relationship with its colonies). As the faulty and ignorant leap from cannibalism to the urbane, dandified calypsonians shows, Edward is not, like Bloom, a "cultured allroundman" (Joyce 225); he utterly fails to master his environment. The point here is not so much Edward's ignorance, as the wildly unreliable nature of the mental associations that he makes (for which the radio medium is well-suited): the immediate quality of the play, which takes place largely in Edward's mind, is one of immersion rather than mastery. Edward does not "contain" information, so much as it contains him, as shown by the tenuousness of his claim to have "history here in my head … Cavaliers and Roundheads and really nothing till Elizabeth, Shakespeare, F. Drake and Henry the Eighth, all those wives, chop, chop, chop, doublet and hose. Then what? Years and years of Edwards and Henrys" (195-6). Stirring the bathwater as he thinks, Thwaite submits to the fluid relationship between what is in his head and what is beyond and surrounding him.

Images of immersion and submersion dominate the play. Idling with his son's bath toys, Edward incompetently attempts to sink a clockwork steamboat:

How many waves to sink her? (*Sloosh*) One . . . (*Sloosh*) Two . . . (*Sloosh*) She's listing. (*Sloosh*) The passengers are running for the boats . . . (*Sloosh*) The bulkheads go . . . (*Sloosh*) And now she sinks. (*Pause*) Why not? She should have sunk. This time! (*A bigger slosh*) Sink you damned tin toy! (*A tidal wave*) Oh, sink! (*His voice changes from anger to peevish fear*) If I don't sink her this time nothing will ever go right again. I shall die, go broke, be hanged. Sink!

(*The biggest wave of all. We can hear it overflowing the bath and splashing the floor. Finally it subsides. There is a moment of silence, then the 'clonk' of the boat hit the bottom of the bath and a few puny bubbles. Edward gives a satisfied sigh*) (187)

A preposterous Prospero,[99] Edward faces his own impotence as the whims of his will subside, replaced by a crisis of self-doubt. This episode (and the play as a whole) is a play on disproportion. The water sounds in the passage above develop from realistic to fantastic; Edward's moment of existential crisis is not in proportion to his petty failure to sink the toy ship, and the radiophonic tidal waves are disproportionate to the task of sinking the thing. The "puny" bubbles following the sinking remind us that Cooper's preferred mode is bathos, the making ludicrous of high heroic aspiration that Pope, fittingly, called "The Art of Sinking." Edward, as we have heard, is not master of the art of sinking; it is he, the Cooperian non-hero, whose privately heroic attitudes are repeatedly sunk. Edward's bathetic bathtime represents in miniature the dramatic method of Cooper's radiophonic fantasies in general, which depends on a deliberate mixing of registers. *Under the Loofah Tree* is a comic domestic play about a man playing in his bath (with frequent interjections from the sound of a child's rubber duck), in the course of which the protagonist admits to neglecting his dying mother, reveals himself to be responsible for the deaths of an entire platoon during wartime, apostrophizes the Kremlin in the hope of a nuclear war and the obliteration of western civilization, and half-attempts to kill himself. Edward's uncompleted suicide is, of course, by submersion in his bath.

Overwhelming sonicity is specifically written into Cooper's script. The disproportion of dramatic registers is augmented by a play on the disproportion of volume and sonic presence. The episode quoted above depends on ever-swelling, over-swelling slooshes and "puny" bubbling. The bathtub, imaginatively transformed into an ocean by Edward, makes itself heard as the environment in which Edward is immersed, surprising and overwhelming him with its physical

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[99] I am thinking particularly of Prospero in Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (acted by John Gielgud), playing with Antonio and Alonso's ship in miniature in his bath.

and aural presence. Characteristically, Cooper uses dialogue economically (his characters

oscillating between inspired ejaculation and taciturn sulk), and the play-text on the page –

growing clusters of italics and square brackets – represents the overwhelming of the voiced

dialogue by Cooper's increasingly particular directions for sonic effects. A hearing of the play

provides a more nuanced sense of how human voices and their slooshing, bubbling sound-

environment interact. Ian Rodger, reviewing the play's first broadcast in *The Listener*,

concentrates on hearing the play as an act of reception:

> It opened with a gurgling of bath water which seemed to lack volume control. As the
>
> dream characters who visited his mind—his old headmaster, his old sergeant, a radio
>
> quiz-master, his parents, and others—were speaking through filters I had to keep
>
> adjusting my volume control to avoid being left alternately deafened or without
>
> intelligible voices. Thanks to a ready hand on the volume I was able to come to the
>
> conclusion that Mr. Cooper had once again shown his mastery of the medium. (Rodger
>
> 1958: 212)

My own listening to the play, though happening through headphones at the British Library,

agrees with Rodger's account, though it seems to me that the lack of "volume control" is exactly

the point. (There is a gesture in Rodger's response towards radio as a participatory medium.)

Rodger concedes that Cooper has "mastery of the medium" at the same time that the listener,

forced to fiddle with controls, struggles for any such mastery; Edward Thwaite, no kind of hero

in his own play, and no master of his own environment, is presumably suffering from a similar

lack of "volume control."

Edward's suicidal submerging and eventual re-surfacing are enacted sonically as a coming-

back-into-being. The founding Workshop member Daphne Oram, in her appealingly

idiosyncratic book *An Individual Note: Of Music, Sound and Electronics* (1972), theorises human

individuality (the "final personal waveshape" (32)) through a series of analogies to electronic

sound apparatus. Writing about volume control, Oram illustrates how when reproducing a

recorded sound by playing it back on one tape-machine and recording onto another, too high a

playback level causes smooth-timbred sounds (for example:) to be "squared off"

( )—this is the result of the soundwave, analogous in Oram's thinking to individual

personality, being subjected to uncomfortable amplification and extraneous machine noise. "It is

the playback knob of the first machine," notes Oram, "which needs the discipline" (62).

Furthermore, an "outrageously high" signal level will result in complete erasure—a reminder of

both mortality and shameful mortification: "the millions of bar magnets on the tape just cannot

take it—instead of arraying themselves in perfect patterns they become perverse and lie about in

neat rows, side by side, displaying no pattern whatsoever . . .. When you play it back there will be

an *embarrassing* moment of silence" (my emphasis) (63). Should this embarrassment occur in

live radio broadcasting, of course, the result is dead air.

Now, Edward in *Under the Loofah Tree* is immersed in chaos and cacophony, his sound

environment beginning with the too-loud bathwater noises and ending with a heterophonic chorus

of the dead. Immersion, as an aesthetic arrangement, is immediately suggested by the play's

literal bathtime scenario. Radio drama in the 1950s, heard as soundwaves, tended towards watery

subject matter, as if intent on sounding imagined fluid depths—as in Beckett's *Embers*, featuring

a drowned father who took an evening bathe "once too often"; or in Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk

Wood,* in which the retired seaman Captain Cat listens to the voices of drowned former

shipmates; or MacNeice's *He Had a Date,* about a wartime casualty at sea. Tyrone Guthrie's play

from 1930, *The Flowers Are Not For You To Pick,* in which the protagonist recalls events from

his life whilst drowning in the sea, is a precursor to these plays. It is typical of Cooper's bathetic, unheroic approach that the body of water in *Under the Loofah Tree* is miniaturised to a plain bath-tub. But immersion is only part of the story in *Under The Loofah Tree*. Edward himself *sounds*—he himself is, to adopt Oram's vocabulary, an individual wave-pattern; he is not a soundless being floating or sinking in an ocean or bathtub of sound. Electronic sound-writing, Oram notes, is a matter of *transduction* (30)—that is, in biological terms, the transfer of genetic material from one individual cell to another. Oram describes acoustic material as genetic material. In hearing a sound, according to her esoteric terminology, "your personal wavepattern has intermodulated with the incoming signal from the object," resulting in the broadest of questions about sensory perception: "Do we ever perceive reality? Is reality always disguised – always an indecipherable intermodulation between ourselves and "what lies beyond"?" (40-41). What lies beyond Edward in *Under The Loofah Tree* is a soundscaping denoting fluidity, danger, and strangeness. Edward struggles to comprehend this outer strangeness, but the strangeness comprehends Edward.

Oram's emphasis on transduction anticipates a recent schism in conceptions of "soundscape." The anthropologist Stefan Helmreich, writing in December 2010, challenged R. Murray Schafer's exposition of soundscape as (in Helmreich's language) "an object of contemplation," a thing in which the listener is immersed (Helmreich 10). In keeping with watery ways of expressing the experience of sound, Helmreich formulated a critique of Schafer's soundscape following a "dive to the ocean floor in the research submersible *Alvin* . . .. Against immersion, I arrived at the analytic of *transduction*—the transmutation and conversion of signals that, when accomplished seamlessly, can produce a sense of *effortless presence*" (10, my emphasis). Attention to transductive dynamics—a commingling with the soundscape, in which

we as listeners alter the soundscape, and the soundscape alters us—reinvests the immersed listener with a proper sense of presence and involvement.

Cooper's Edward takes a suicidal dive to the bathtub floor in order to arrive at a similar epiphany, although *radiophonic* presence (being produced, manufactured) is always at least *effortful*. During his ablutions, Edward subjects his very presence, his man-ness, to a harrowing inspection by imagining himself as the subject of a radio program called *This is a Man!*, a kind of *This is your Life* for the not-necessarily famous in which "someone, maybe a celebrity, maybe an obscurity, is picked out from the studio audience and the whole course of his life is placed before both you and him" (189). Edward is unequivocally an obscurity. His former headmaster, only able to recall Thwaite's more eminent namesakes, charges Edward with being "an impostor" (196), not really a man and not really himself. Edward's attempt to properly become a presence rather than a thing immersed (immediately and generally) in a world, requires him to enact the transduction identified by Daphne Oram; to assert, in Oram's terms, his personal wavepattern and involve it in a meaningful way with his environment, his historical context, and record and inscribe himself on the memories of forgetful headmasters. Until now I have focused largely on the elements of the play's soundworld that are external to Edward—the slooshing waters in which he is immersed, for example—but of all the wavepatterns, the one most likely to overload or be "squared off" is Edward himself. The play reaches a climax of a sort as Edward is assailed by the assembling voices of his dead mother, his obliterated platoon, "and all of us, and all of us . . ." (204). These voices "*sail away through vast and subterranean caverns echoing, re-echoing to silence*"; the empty acoustic space is re-filled with an "*intensely menacing rumble . . . in the distance. It comes closer and closer until it fills the air with its heavy throb*" (205). The menacing rumble, the sound that threatens finally to overload, is Edward himself. Cooper's directions indicate that he thought of these sounds as *arriving* and *becoming*, from what Oram calls the

"beyondness" of sound; Desmond Briscoe's production—again frustrating the casual listener's requirement for volume control—places the emphasis on the throb or pulse as a *presence*; Cooper's directions go on to clarify that this beat is, indeed, Edward's own heart-throb, "*heard strong and steady throughout*" the concluding scene as he submerges himself. This pulse—the beat of Edward himself, not the sounds in which he is immersed—remains constant as a series of tape-recorded sounds are cross-faded: a chorus of voices repeating Edward's name, slowed down "*to a growl*"; the sound of the sea (a naturalistic recording, absolutely distinct from the radiophonically rendered bathwater); another series of voices which are, Cooper urges, "*away from Edward, talking to someone else, <u>unaware of his presence</u>*" (205, my emphasis). This final movement, heard during Edward's submersion, is a violent competition between Edward's presence and the growing chaos of sirens, tunes and voices around and amongst him:

> CHORUS: Is he really the father?
>
> He can't do much harm.
>
> I dare say he means well.
>
> Oh no, I don't think so really, not him.
>
> And then, of course, I suppose there's always Thwaite.
>
> (*The heart-throbs are going very fast now and behind them is a single note, increasing in volume until it is unbearable at which point there is a mighty splash*)
>
> EDWARD: (*In a shout*) There's always me! (206)

Between the dismissive "there's always Thwaite" and the exclaimed, reclaimed "[t]here's always me!", Edward repels the challenge to his own presence with his baptismal resurfacing and returns to talking with his wife through the bathroom door about cups of tea and bathroom sponges; back to the homely, one might say, were it not for the gloriously Cooperian caveat that the loofah

sponge (connected to the loofah trees of Edward's wartime service) must be kept out of reach to discourage Edward's young son's habit of biting pieces from it. Such niggles and nibbles persist. The ringleader of his tormentors, the *This is a Man!* host, threatens to return but speaks weakly or, as Cooper puts it, "*as though on another wavelength*"; again, Cooper's own description of how these voices should be produced is remarkably precise and radiophonically-specific: having banished his antagonist to another wavelength, Edward re-asserts his own presence in radio space.

Coda

Waiting for a leftwing bureaucrat to make a heart-beat.

Edward Thwaite's radiophonically-rendered heartbeat stands, in Cooper's play, for a reassertion of Thwaite's own individual presence; Thwaite maintains what Daphne Oram calls his "personal wavepattern" amongst the untamable waves of the bathtub in which he sits immersed, thinking, unconvincingly reconstructing his country's history and his own personal memories (naught learnt *by heart*, despite the persistent pulse). The heartbeat confirms that "there's always Thwaite," acting like the bang of blood and the high-frequency humming of his own nervous system that John Cage encountered in Harvard's anechoic chamber, a "silent" room constructed to entirely eliminate echoes. Hearing *himself* resonate in this way led Cage to accept the concept of non-intentionality—even in a silent room, in the absence of effort or intention, sounds still persist. Cooper's plays might hope to mimetically represent these ever-present pulses, but a radio presence like Edward Thwaite is, of course, the product of a great deal of effort and intention.

Rosemary Tonks was one of a handful of writers who worked with the Radiophonic Workshop in the mid-1960s to produce not radio *drama* in the pure sense, but a brand of electronically-enhanced sound poetry. Following the abstract "Inventions for Radio" of Barry Bermange and the radiophonic poetry of Bob Cobbing in 1964, and preceding the Austrian poet Ernst Jandl's radiophonic work at the BBC in 1966, Tonks curated a program of composite sound-and-word pieces by herself and three other poets under the title "Sono-Montage." Tonks's program left *The Listener*'s critic, Kevin Crossley-Holland, thinking—like Cooper's Thwaite—of the bath-tub: the montage was "exceedingly stimulating, even if it did call for a glass of brandy, or a warm bath, afterwards" (Crossley-Holland 960). Crossley-Holland struggled to inter-modulate with these pieces (claiming that electronic sound "depersonalizes, it cannot exude warmth") but conceded that the program "must have been the product of much hard work."

Much hard work, indeed. Two years after this broadcast, Tonks wrote *The Bloater*, the first of three urbane, snappy and sarcastic novels published before her disappearance from literary life in the 1970s. Presumably informed by her experience of working with the Radiophonic Workshop, Tonks gives *The Bloater*'s protagonist, Min, a job as a sound-engineer at an unidentified electronic sound "workshop," treating recorded voices "like a loaf of bread, first the crust off, then the foot, then we're going to cut it into slices" (22) – the reminder of Bundy's all-important loaf of bread in *The Disagreeable Oyster* is delicious. Later in Tonks's novel Min and her co-worker, the pallid Fred, are required to create a heart-beat sound effect (to throb with presence, perhaps, like that of Cooper's Edward). "You'll never get that heart-beat to sound like a heart-beat," objects Fred, although Min's offering is "a real heart-beat . . . recorded in a hospital" (91). Min notes the effort spent in the airless workshop:

Fred plays with his tools, a razor, a miniature screwdriver, and some joining tape. He

wants to make *his* heart-beat, and that will take at least three-quarters of an hour. If it's

better than the one I've brought in from outside, from the sound library, I can use it. If it's

worse, we shall have to start at this point all over again tomorrow morning. And if you

stick in one place too long in constructing electronic sounds, you lose your ear, your

memory of sound already used, and your ability to improvise spontaneously so that the

whole thing 'jells'. (92)

Growing still more exasperated, "sealed in like tinned shepherd's pie" (20), Min fusses further:

'On the continent in electronic studios enthusiastic young people *with ideas* work

together as a team.' . . . We both have a picture of flashy continental composers in white

macs, young, clean-shaven, and curt in speech, arriving at London Airport with

pamphlets and lectures in bison-skin despatch-cases. Whereas here we are, sitting about,

waiting for a left-wing bureaucrat with no imagination to make a heart-beat. (95)

The result of these skirmishes and compromises is that "however well we succeed, fifty 'experts'

(people who acquire theoretical knowledge without ever using it) will pour cold water on the

result . . . then five years later, grudgingly, and ten years later, publicly, stuff our work into sound

archives, and refer to it incessantly to intimidate future electronic composers" (20). The archived

heartbeat, bereft of vitality, serves to menace the present with a dubiously-earned authority.

Tonks' characteristic sarcasm speaks of produced sounds that are not all atmosphere and aura, but

the result of dull and heart-hardening labour; her narrator already has a pessimistic eye on

posterity, on the archive to which the sound-work will be retired, from where it will molder and

menace the future. What Tonks is describing, however, is exactly the hauntological account of

radio *presence* heading, in Derrida's "malaise of perception" (15), towards a future as a revenant.

Personal archiving, whether in the figurative sense of filling individual memory banks with past experiences primed for remembrance, or the literal sense of private technology-assisted media galleries (see Beckett's Krapp in the next chapter) is equally prone to becoming unvital or alien. Speaking of his production of Cooper's *Under the Loofah Tree*, Donald McWhinnie notes that he created "the flashbacks (and distort[ed] the voices) in such a way that the original idyll seems to have been enacted by positively cretinous creatures" (162). The idyll made weird is a fit description for Cooper's worried, unplaceable plays.

Chapter 4
Periphery and (anti)pastoral in Samuel Beckett's radio landscapes

When he accepted the task of writing a script for radio in 1956, Samuel Beckett insisted that this was a medium about which his ideas were "not even a quarter baked" (*Letters* v.2 688). Even so, his writing up until this point had contained an auditory significance apparent in the "sensitive ear" specifically declared by both Molloy and Moran (*T* 47, 118), and Watt's meticulously rendered experience of hearing "three frogs croaking Krak!, Krek! And Krik!, at one, nine, seventeen, twenty-five, etc., and at one, six, eleven, sixteen, etc., and at one, four, seven, ten, etc., respectively" (*W* 117). What is new in Beckett's first radio scripts – *All That Fall*, written in 1956, and *Embers,* begun in 1958 – is an interest in landscape and location, and interior space as a container for memory. The philosophical and technical difficulties encountered by Beckett in using the airwaves to speak of the solid land, and using broadcasting to convey interior space, are characteristic the last of this dissertation's three radiophonic playwrights.

However, the typically Beckettian nature of the difficulties should not distract us from the fact that Beckett's plays as complete radiophonic works rely on the interpretations and additions of radiophonic producers. As such, in this chapter I develop an approach to Beckett's radio works that avoids author-centrism and acknowledges vigorous collaboration.

Beckett produced his first works for radio following his success with *Waiting For Godot* (1953) and around the time of his major stage plays *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Happy Days* (1961). Beckett's connection to the BBC came through courtship and coaxing by major figures in the Drama department's turn towards the continental avant-garde in the mid-

1950s, such as the producer Donald McWhinnie, the translator and script editor Barbara Bray, and the future head of Drama Martin Esslin. Beckett's works were strictly Third Programme material; in between 1957 and 1960, in addition to productions of Beckett's radio plays, the network aired readings from *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnameable*, a French-language studio performance of *Fin de partie* (*Endgame*) and scholarly talks on Beckett's work. Beckett's involvement with these productions was conducted by occasional meetings in Paris and a great deal of written correspondence.

Part 1. Landscape, soundscape and the whereabouts of radio sound

As we saw in the introduction, Hilda Tablet, the fictional avant-garde composer who featured in Henry Reed's series of radio plays, wanted her electronic sounds to be foreground, but had to make do with reassurance that her music will be "everywhere". For the radiophonic *bruiteurs* at the BBC – the studio producers and specifically non-musician[100] Workshop members – the *whereabouts* of radio sound remained a matter of some ambiguity. Donald McWhinnie, in his guide to radio-craft, stressed that "although Sound Radio exists in only one dimension, time, it is able to create the illusion of another, space" (McWhinnie 41-2). McWhinnie was writing at the end of the 1950s, at a time when the much-heralded arrival of stereophonic sound in radio was immanent, though he doubted "whether this has any artistic relevance" (41). To McWhinnie, the literal "width" created by the stereophonic placing of

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[100] As noted in the previous chapter, on the art of radiophonics: "we've decided not to use the word music at all" (Briscoe 22).

sounds in a left channel, right channel, or somewhere inbetween, was too blunt a solution to the problem of representing space; the *illusion* of space requires a more impressionistic handling of sound. Radio aesthetics, as Steven Connor observes, are unavoidably connected to the question of *location*: "Where is radio? Where does it take place and what place does it occupy when it does?" (Connor 2009b: 274). To this, I would add another question: how can radiophonic techniques establish the illusion of location, of a fabricated landscape? And still a further question: why should Beckett take such pains to represent place through radio?

Beckett's *All That Fall* places its protagonist, Maddy Rooney (*Mrs*. Rooney to most) in a landscape across which she is obliged to travel. The role was acted by Mary O'Farrell, who performed the role of Reed's electro-curious Hilda Tablet; Farrell conveys Mrs. Rooney through a series of unhappy utterances and effortful groans, of which McWhinnie was the director-producer and Desmond Briscoe the supporting noise-maker; along with Cooper's *The Disagreeable Oyster*, *All That Fall* was one of the first Drama Department productions to use the resources of the nascent Radiophonic Workshop. The play, produced in early 1957, was Beckett's first attempt at radio writing and concerns itself with questions of landscape, regions, territory. By this point in his career, Beckett had already moved towards the stage placelessness of *Waiting For Godot* and the ever-diminishing spaces in which the *Molly* / *Malone Dies* / *The Unnameable* novels are "set"; Beckett's engagement with radio, with its always tenuous relationship to physical space, could reasonably have been expected to be a natural continuation of his move away from specific physical settings, acting on The Unnameable's conclusion, spoken from universal space, that his existence "is entirely a matter of voice" (*T* 298). However, just as *All That Fall* marks Beckett's return to writing in the English language (or Anglo-Irish vernacular), the play fixes Beckett's themes to a familiarly Irish landscape, the Foxrock suburb of Beckett's childhood represented as the appropriately lowly, earthly-named "Boghill," with its

station and its racecourse and its cast of bogged-down, semi-rural characters.[101] Declining to capitalize completely on the freedoms of radio placelessness, Beckett attempted in his first radio play to remotely re-create a landscape. *All That Fall*, a bog represented on the air, muddies radio's relationship to space.

Beckett's human characters are compelled to move through this space. Like MacNeice's Roland in *The Dark Tower* and Cooper's Bundy in *The Disagreeable Oyster*, Mrs. Rooney is required to go on a journey—the play describes her progress to and from the station where she meets her blind husband, Dan. *All That Fall* is a bogged-down quest narrative. After his train is delayed, Dan eventually arrives and the pair trudge home, while the play's denouement teases us with the possibility that the reason behind the delay, a child's fatal fall from the train, may have been Dan's doing. Compared to MacNeice and Cooper, Beckett's approach to conveying the movement of his characters through space seems fundamentally stubborn: he declines to exploit the conveniences of the supposedly non-material radio medium. The appeal of radio to MacNeice, for example, was that he could switch at will between implied settings, sending Christopher Columbus sailing back and forth across the Atlantic, or Roland questing over deserts unbothered by the grotesque leprous lands through which his equivalent in Browning's poem has to stagger and suffer; it's not the difficulty of bodily perambulation, but the self-doubting psychological plod that arrests MacNeice's Roland. Cooper's Bundy, as we have seen, is frightened by the instability of the radio landscapes through which he must unheroically quest, but his sequence of zany, fleet-footed exits from one scene to the next are a matter of fun to his author, producers and listeners; he comes and goes. Beckett's Mrs. Rooney, despite the liberties

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[101] Beckett's biographer James Knowlson illustrates the proximity of *All That Fall*'s characters to people known to Beckett in his youth.

allowed by radio drama's invisible stage, undergoes a journey that is unremittingly arduous. Nothing moves freely through this bog. The characters continue complainingly. Modes of transportation – horses, bicycles, cars, trains – all prove to be equally faulty. *All That Fall* is unusual amongst Beckett's works in that its characters are tormented by the requirement to move, rather than the obligation to loiter. No sped-up pattering footsteps mark the progress of Mrs. Rooney and her "two hundred pounds of unhealthy fat" (191) as she and Dan dodder through the landscape; their advance is heard as a dragging of feet in trochaic (that is, *falling*) rhythm, as if the task of moving over the land were in perpetual argument with the fact of being weighted down onto that land. The play, as I will show, is concerned with various types of fall, not least that of the child; *gravity* itself is ever present as a reminder of Beckett's characters' attachment to the land, contrary to the airiness, the "greater power of radiation, diffusion, dispersal" that Steven Connor notes as one of the utopian appeals of early radio (274). Clive Cazeaux, who proposes that radio drama's representation of experience is essentially phenomenological, refers to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of Cézanne's approach to landscape: "in his endeavor to depict the landscape as a lived situation (rather than as the object of classical, schematic perspective), Cézanne applies his colours almost as if he is feeling his way around the canvas and the environment in which it is set, so that the overall effect is the appearance of a landscape that has been grappled with and scrambled over rather than viewed from a distance" (Cazeaux 165-6). Such a description is equally fitting of the radiophonic landscape in *All That Fall*.

The land itself is conspicuous throughout the play. *All That Fall* is a landscape piece, earthy and semi-rural. In one respect, Beckett's work is another instance of unhomeliness portrayed on the Third Programme: the play's events take place unbearably *en plein air*, with Mrs. Rooney regretting that she is not "lying stretched out in [her] comfortable bed . . . just

wasting slowly, painlessly away" (180-1), and her husband yearning to "hasten home and sit

before the fire" (189). Physically, spiritually, Maddy longs to "come safe to haven" (194); she

joins in with the pious Protestant Miss Fitt's hummed hymn: "the night is dark and I am far from

ho-ome" (184). This certainty about the comforts of domesticity, however, is far from consistent:

the play's first spoken sound is Mrs. Rooney's remarking on a "poor woman" in a "ruinous old

house" (172). The Rooneys are ear-witnesses to habitual domestic violence (193); Dan Rooney

considers "the horrors of home life" (193). And where is home? It's a typically Beckettian

approach, of course, to set loose a cast of vagabonds, wanderers-in-the-wilderness, voices

disembodied and deterritorialized across a landscape wiped clean of civilization. The

representation of place in *All That Fall*, though, is more specifically one of marginalized

provincialism: despite the actual proximity of Foxrock to Dublin's metropolitan centre, this is a

semi-rural, peripheral place. Provincialism here stands for the full breadth of the land, beyond

cultural centres. Like Dylan Thomas's Llarreggub in *Under Milk Wood* (similarly constructed

from childhood memories), Boghill is an example of creative radio's rethinking of regionalism.

"A trifle regional": radio centres and peripheries

To leave Beckett and bogs to one side for the moment: the position of the "regional" in

postwar broadcasting was a matter of some contention. A 1946 *Punch* cartoon, responding to the

BBC's re-structuring, shows a broadcaster leaving the Third Programme offices, with a radio

executive calling after him, "Oh, by the way, Mr. Pontifex, you finished absolutely exactly at

nine-thirty—don't you think that's just a trifle regional?" (Whitehead 19). The joke tells us that

the Third Programme, due to the space allotted on its schedules to longer plays and concerts, was

prone to rather unpunctual programming, but the phrasing of the caption also reminds us that the

Third was established in opposition to the unchallenging regional programming produced by the "light" half of the pre-war two-program system. "Regional" programming was provincial, homely, reliably punctual but aesthetically unadventurous; set in opposition to the "regional", the Third Programme's cosmopolitanism becomes another type of centricity—because cosmopolitanism, an ideal of rootlessness, tends to gravitate back towards geographical centres: London; specific districts of London where "sets" and cliques gather; literary London, whose workers would speak peace unto nation then go drinking in Bloomsbury, Soho, Fitzrovia, Belgravia. Beckett's *All That Fall* offers some rethinking of regionalism, by interrogating the distorted exchanges between centres and peripheries inherent to the aesthetics of sound broadcasting.[102]

Broadcasting entails sending signals from a central point to any number of peripherally-located receivers. Michel Serres notes the ways in which radio communication might be disrupted or enriched: "in spoken languages: stammerings, mispronunciations, regional accents, dysphonias, and cacophonies . . . [i]n the technical means of communication: background noise, jamming, static, cut-offs, heresies, various interruptions. If static is accidental, background noise is *essential* to communication" (qtd. in Perloff 248). Signifiers of regionality, in this account, are made equivalent to the "background," where lurk all the things that are secondary to the message itself, but ultimately inseparable from communication as event; the message, in this account, should retain its "centred" character. (A possibly apocryphal story suggests that when, during wartime, the BBC first tolerated a regionally-accented newsreader, the Yorkshireman Wilfred Pickles, they did so as an act of code scrambling, with the intention of making life difficult for

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[102] Anthony Burgess, recalling his childhood memories as a BBC listener in the 1930s, praises the BBC for combining "the cosily regional and the highly refined international" (302-3).

Nazis intent on learning to imitate BBC broadcasters—a move that also suggests the failure of the grainless, easily counterfeited, BBC accent.) Beckett wrote for off-centre voices; he was impressed enough by Patrick Magee's performance as Mr. Slocum in *All That Fall* that he wrote *Krapp's Last Tape* and *The Old Tune* for Magee's "cracked" voice (*CDW* 337).

Background, foreground: already we are talking about aural communication in spatial terms. The Irish voices of Maddy and Dan Rooney connect Beckett's characters to the specific regional landscape they inhabit. This landscape, however, is more properly a *soundscape*—a stylized, crafted one at that—and the production and perception of that soundscape is a tricky business. What I am suggesting here is that Beckett and the BBC's joint production of this soundscape, for all of its regional connotations, causes us to rethink the relationship between centres and peripheries, foregrounds and backgrounds, communication and noise.

The sight-based notion of "background" is suitable to the visible theatrical stage and to the eye that sees in only one direction at a time, but is unfit to describe the multidirectional perception of sound. In his book on radiocraft, Dermot Rattigan (2002) makes an unnecessary distinction between "background" music (Rattigan 188) and "meaningful sound" (2), as if meaning could not be expected to be found in peripheral places. Radio sounds, he warns, should "never be a form of decorative 'wallpaper'" (191), a comment that suggests Rattigan is ignoring the trend towards peripheral aesthetics in twentieth century music that began with Erik Satie's "Furniture Music," continued through John Cage's minimalism-as-aleatoricism and resulted in Brian Eno's conception of "ambient" as a musical genre. Eno glossed minimalism in music as a move "away from narrative towards landscape" (quoted in Ross 475); the notion of all-surrounding, *all* landscape – peripheries and horizons included – is implied in the concept of "ambience" (Eno's interest in ambient music reportedly began when immobilized in a hospital

bed, unable to adjust a stereo's volume control, and obliged instead to listen to a record of harp music at the threshold of audibility) (Tamm 133). Another dismissive attitude to "background" in radio aesthetics was expressed with the best of intentions by Peter Needs, who addressed a committee to challenge proposed cut-backs to the Third Programme's hours in the early 1950s by insisting that the network's value lay in its superiority to the Light Programme, which was merely "a background" (Whitehead 217). Listening entails peripheral awareness. In *All That Fall*, we hear as Mrs. Rooney hears; we hear her hearing at times in all directions at once, at times selectively, effortfully. Her encounter with the audible peripheries is not one of foreground and background, but of circumambience, of all-surrounding atmosphere. Like Neville trying to placate Hilda we might suggest that the sound of radio is neither in the foreground or background, but "everywhere, really."

Soundscapes and the feeling of being peripheral

Listening means being attentive to peripheries. Maddy Rooney in *All That Fall* is an auditor, hearing the world around her as a soundscape. The idea of "soundscape" was advanced at length by the composer and bioacoustician R. Murray Schafer through his work at Simon Fraser University in the 1960s, and codified in his book *The Tuning of the World*[103] (1977). As an ecologist of sound, Schafer is interested in how sounds move across a particular environment, how sound is a matter of tactile vibrations and "hearing is a way of touching at a distance" (Schafer 11). Sound carries; it is penetrative, perhaps even invasive (which informs Schafer's concerns about noise pollution). The spatial separation suggested by "foreground" and

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[103] Schafer's book was republished in 1994 as *The Soundscape*.

"background" is traversed. Sound technology, of course, vastly complicates the nature of the soundscape and its connection to physical space, bringing about what Schafer calls the "imperialistic outsweep" of amplified sound (88)—broadcast, loudspoken sound is imagined not as peripheral information striking the ear of a centrally-located auditor, but as a signal sent from a culturally-if-not-geographically central point to peripherally located listeners. Territory is renegotiated, perhaps aggressively. Hilda Tablet's *musique concrète reenforcée*, louder than everyone else's, is a farcical exaggeration of this imperialistic tendency of electronic sound. Sound sweeping out, sound cast broadly: amplification, recording and broadcasting technologies facilitate "schizophonia," Schafer's term for sounds separated from their source (88); this is a similar condition to the *acousmatic listening* defined by Schafer's near-namesake Pierre Schaeffer, although for Schafer "schizophonia" is intended to be a "nervous" term, conveying "a sense of aberration and drama" (90). Schizophonia is also more immediately a matter of ecological crisis. In the heavily schizophonic environment, signals run amok, territory is muddled, noise occurs. "Precisely at the time hi-fi was being engineered," writes Schafer, "the world soundscape was slipping into an all-time lo-fi condition" (88). Electroacoustics cause *dis*location, along with a kind of sonic erosion in which the aggregate signal—the soundscape in total—is degraded.

Schafer's hope for soundscape studies was that an increased attentiveness to matters of acoustic ecology would prompt a new era of "clairaudience" and a *re-orchestration* of the sound environment. "Which sounds," Schafer asks, "do we want to preserve, encourage, multiply?" (Schafer 4). Schafer's theory was presented under the title *The Tuning of the World*: the sonic environment, in this account, is a thing to be musically ordered; this is a Romantic approach in which harmony—or certain harmonies privileged as aesthetically, therefore morally *right*—signifies ecological (perhaps spiritual) well-being. Anthropologists and aestheticians alike have

challenged this aspect of Schafer's account of the soundscape. Tim Ingold in *Against Soundscape* and Stefan Helmreich in "Listening Against Soundscapes" have written in opposition to what Helmreich summarizes as a tendency to treat soundscapes "as things in the world, waiting to be tuned into" (Helmreich 10). Again, the question of location arises: where does the listener stand in relation to the soundscape? Yutaka Higashiguchi calls for an "Aesthetics of Periphery Without Center," seeing in Schafer's project of "reorchestrating" the environment an "anthropocentric utilitarianism," granting the privilege of acoustic design to humankind. "The feeling of being peripheral rouses an impulse to find our true significance in our connection with others," writes Higashiguchi (6). Higashiguchi goes so far as to quarrel with the term "environment," which he breaks down to "en" (in) and "viron" (circle): "It means to surround, encircle, and to be around something or someone. This verb [the French *environner*] usually needs an object word that indicates a central place, or someone or something which is located in a central position and surrounded by the subject. Hence the English word *environment* implies a distinction between a center and its periphery." For this reason, Higashiguchi prefers to talk simply of "nature" (2). The key principle of Higashiguchi's peripheral aesthetics is that the auditor—she who perceives peripheral information—is herself peripherally positioned.

This principle is Beckettian. Reflecting on the space he occupies, Beckett's Unnameable doubts the centricity of his own position, and thinks in turn about the mono-directional nature of the eye, and the multi-directional nature of the ear:

But, as I have said, the place may well be vast as it may well measure twelve feet in diameter. It comes to the same thing, as far as discerning its limits is concerned. I like to think I occupy the centre, but nothing is less certain. In a sense I would be better off at the circumference, since my eyes are always fixed in the same direction. But I am

certainly not at the circumference. For if I were it would follow that Molloy, wheeling about me as he does, would issue from the enceinte at every revolution, which is manifestly impossible. But does he in fact wheel, does he not perhaps simply pass before me in a straight line? No, he wheels, I feel it, and about me, like a planet about its sun. And if he made a noise, as he goes, I would hear him all the time, on my right hand, behind my back, on my left hand, before seeing him again. (270)

The Unnameable, however, exists bereft of (or beyond) environment of any physically specific character. He and his fellows are voices in an enclosed space; their whereabouts is a matter of pure speculation. In *All That Fall*, Beckett deals with a similarly speculative peripheral aesthetics in a semi-realistic radio soundscape. The non-verbal noises that act as signifiers of attachment to that space become points of dislocation.

Radio, able to traverse space and re-characterise location, is well-suited to representing centre-less soundscapes. Rudolf Arnheim, an early theorist of the medium, noted the combination and confluence of sounds made possible in mixed radio programs. "By the disappearance of the visual," Arnheim suggests, "an acoustic bridge arises between all sounds: voices, whether connected with a stage scene or not, are now of the same flesh as recitation, discussion, song and music. What hitherto could exist only separately now fits organically together: the human being in the corporeal world talks with disembodied spirits, music meets speech on equal terms" (Arnheim 126). Gaby Hartel has recently argued, convincingly, that Beckett was probably aware of Arnheim's writings (Hartel 223); this suggestion complicates the traditional accounts of Beckett coming to radio knowing nothing and thinking little about the medium. Contemporary reviewers noted the quality of confluence in *All That Fall*. Reviewing the production in *The Listener*, Roy Walker noted that in the play "sounds and meanings suffer a

series of associative but not haphazard metamorphoses" (Walker 1957a: 167). According to the author's own account, this is a play of sounds that "came to" Beckett (rather than *coming from* Beckett) as a "nice gruesome idea full of cartwheels and dragging feet and puffing and panting" (Knowlson 1997: 385).

More recent critics of *All That Fall*, maintaining a simplified division between foreground and background sounds in radio, have demoted the purely sonic aspects of the play to the status of "background," thus shifting the producers and sound engineers involved in the production into a barely-explored critical background. It's easy to see why: Beckett's BBC plays present critics with the opportunity to write about radio plays without becoming too concerned with the institutional atmosphere of the BBC. Unlike the permanent departmental fixture Louis MacNeice, the paraliterary oddjobsman Dylan Thomas, or the hopeful script-sender Giles Cooper, Beckett was an outside author *invited*[104] to write for radio on the back of his recent celebrity (the author of *Waiting For Godot* was, to the BBC, a signifier of cosmopolitan—that is, *continental*—sophistication). In these respects, Beckett's pieces are atypical examples of radio plays at the BBC. With Beckett, the centric models of literary authorship remain intact; that is, if we choose not to prod too much at the inevitable processes of collaboration that a radio production (irrespective of literary fame) necessitates. Readers such as Clas Zilliacus and Daniel Albright would seem to have it that Donald McWhinnie and Desmond Briscoe, the play's *bruiteurs,* to use Beckett's preferred word (*Letters* v.2 656), were unskilled labourers, dreary but necessary. To Zilliacus, the sounds used in the play are merely "part of radio's inventory of clichés" (Zilliacus 1976: 72); Albright suggests that the play's premise lies in a "comic attempt to comprehend a series of ordinary sound effects within the bounds of a perfectly consecutive,

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[104] "Commissioned" is not the right word.

linear plot" (Albright 105). The text-obsessed approach to the play persists: introducing a book in which she deals with Beckett's radio work, Elissa Guralnick assures us that radio plays take their meaning "first and foremost from their dialogue" (Guralnick x). These are choice examples of how even the most capable of literary critics, fixed on what Walter Ong calls the "one-thing-after-another" (Ong 90) nature of post-Renaissance typographic culture, have inadvertently disparaged the work of sound technicians who create the supposed "background" to the pre-eminent radio text.

Scripted noises

A note written by Beckett to accompany the script on its submission tells us that the sound effects are not ordinary, and that the script does not supply the whole meaning. "It calls for a special quality of bruitage," Beckett noted, "perhaps not quite clear from the text" (*Letters* v.2 656). A defence of the craft of the radio *bruiteurs* must begin with the five animal voices—a cow, a bird, a sheep, a dog and a cock—that announce the beginning of the play. Zilliacus' and Porter's points about these voices being an animal "quartet," prefiguring the string quartet playing Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" (Porter 435), is surely a consequence of their reading rather than listening to the play: the text indeed calls for four animals, but in the BBC production the unscripted dog makes an appearance as an additional fifth voice.[105] These animal sounds are taken by Zilliacus and Albright to be ordinary, stock sounds, known to post-war listeners simply as "noises." Indeed, the use of stock noises in radio developed as a pet peeve of discerning

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[105] In fairness to Zilliacus, his interpretation of *Embers* depends more on interpreting the plays as a radio text, and he does pick up on some inconsistencies between script and recording; Henry's father could be accused of being in Argentina or Peru or Venezuela, depending on which version one follows. (218-9)

listeners as radio matured. In November 1946 Henry Reed (perhaps warming up for his depictions of Hilda Tablet, who makes *musique concrète* from the sound of zips and combs) constructed a program listed plainly in the schedule as "Noises." Reviewing the broadcast, *The Listener*'s radio critic Martin Armstrong admitted that he "expected the worst":

> Noises, as readers must long since have realized, are the queen bee in my bonnet. It has often seemed that the B.B.C. uses them either on the assumption that the listener has no imagination or because they are so proud of their stock of noises that they anxiously search the text of any programme for the slightest excuse to fire them off. (Armstrong 767).

To the reviewer's surprise, Reed "did not impose noises on a programme; he imposed a programme on noises" (767). Reed's program, Armstrong records, was an essay on the psychology of noises in which specifically-created effects "were used to play, wittily and suggestively, on the imagination of the listener". The program demonstrated, for example, that the "excruciatingly evocative" noise of a crying baby lost its violent "personal sting" when layered into a chorus of twelve or more such cries. Other demonstrations involving landscape sounds (waterfalls, streams) were included. In this recording and manipulation of natural sounds the reviewer correctly suspected the involvement of Ludwig Koch, the celebrated expatriate German field-recordist, natural historian and BBC broadcaster. I will return to Koch's specific approach to recording natural sounds; what is important to note here is the high regard in which the reviewer holds Koch, evidence that at the very birth of the Third Programme, listeners and

critics were sensitive to the nuance and artistry employed in the recording of sound.[106] A script requiring sheep and donkeys need not depend upon a stock bleat and a witless coconut shell.

Beckett's opening to *All That Fall*, in which the animals are heard "*severally, then together*," calls for a similar layering of voices as that demonstrated by Koch. These noises are markers of the landscape in which the play is set, acting as what R. Murray Schafer calls "keynote sounds" in the fabricated soundscape of the play, signifying the semi-rural setting. More than that, they also tell us about the nature of the soundscape. The five opening voices are arranged rhythmically, announcing the play's arrangement of measured, rhythmic patterns such as the heavy tread of Maddy Rooney's (and later Dan Rooney's) footsteps. The soundscape takes shape as a composition. Writing about the introduction, the play's producer Donald McWhinnie notes that "[i]t is a stylized form of scene-setting, containing within itself a pointer to the convention of the play: a mixture of realism and poetry, frustration and farce" (McWhinnie 133). "Stylized realism," Martin Esslin called the play's technique (129). Stylization, the re-composing of the sonic material, meaningful rhythm: the non-verbal sounds that make up *All That Fall* are consistently subjected to *organizing* principles.

Staying with animal sounds, Maddy Rooney is a fastidious auditor of the non-human noises around her, reckoning to note the difference between the voice of a donkey and a hinny (a crossbred horse and donkey). Here is how the former is heard in the play:

> MRS ROONEY: We are down. And little the worse. [*Silence. A donkey brays. Silence.*] That was a true donkey. Its father and mother were donkeys. [*Silence.*] (190).

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[106] Koch's influence on radio-writers is widespread: his recording of seal-songs is a probable influence on Louis MacNeice's *The Mad Islands*, which includes an encounter with selkies (Scotch-Irish mythological seal-people).

This pattern—a silence, a sound, another silence, a taxonomically precise remark on the sound, then another silence – is a pattern that recurs throughout the play. The odd, unnatural silences, a feature of the play's stylized realism, do not tell us simply that the soundscape is an artificial one; rather, they communicate Maddy's manner of perceiving the soundscape. As a listener, Maddy filters the organic sounds she hears; she creates a silence for them to fill, as if her pauses were annunciatory pauses. This may sound too mechanical to be a convincing representation of auditory perception, but Maddy Rooney's critical listening is entirely in keeping with the "strange detachment" that Hugh Kenner notes is typical of Beckett's characters, along with "their reluctance to live through the senses without scrupulous interrogation of all that the senses report" (Kenner 84); Maddy's listening is consistent with Beckett's faultily Cartesian rendering of the human sensorium, in which his "people" entertain Descartes' understanding of perception as an "inspection on the part of the mind alone," distinct from the body, before succumbing to doubt's as to the soundness of the mind itself (Descartes 68).[107] This interrogation of the senses is particularly pronounced in Beckett's radio pieces, where one sense is privileged and others are deprived. In Beckett, the perceiving mind imposes forms on its object with comic laboriousness. Mrs. Rooney's certainty about the difference between the sound of a donkey and a hinny signifies either that she has considerable expertise in the field of bioacoustics or, more likely, that she is a critical and selective listener who ascribes very subjective meanings to sounds just as she shapes them with significant form.

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[107] I say "faultily" Cartesian to acknowledge that the skeptical quality of the self-scrutiny exhibited by Beckett's characters makes possible an alternative reading of their dramatized perception – their doubtful pauses perhaps anticipate the "questioning character" of phenomenological perception described in Clive Cazeaux's phenomenological account of radio drama (Cazeaux 160).

On radio, which emphasizes a single sense, the scrupulousness described by Kenner is exaggerated to a point of high anxiety. Henry, the protagonist of Beckett's next radio play *Embers*, advances this classification of sounds into Brechtian territory: "That sound you hear is the sea," he notes. "I mention it because the sound is so strange, so unlike the sound of the sea, that if you didn't see what it was you wouldn't know what it was" (253). Mrs. Rooney similarly interrogates the representational capabilities of radio. Henry's "that" refers specifically to a sound ("that *sound . . .*") but Mrs. Rooney's deictic "that" traps the listener in the gap between the sound and the sound-source ("that was a true donkey…."). A listener to music can say "violin" when really meaning "the sound of a violin" without too much trouble; in the representational art of sound drama, metonymic cracks appear and widen. When startled by the bicyclist Mr. Taylor, Mrs. Rooney responds to Taylor's protestation that he clearly rang his bell by reminding him that "[y]our bell is one thing, Mr. Taylor, and you are another" (174).

"I am sorry to disturb you about the animals"

"That was a true donkey. Its father and mother were donkeys": on the face of it, Maddy Rooney's comment advances the play's themes of breeding, fertility and sterility (we are, after all, in agrarian territory). Like much else in the play, however, this remark doubles as a comment on the matter of radio. Whether or not the donkey would indeed be a "true" donkey, in the practicalities of production, was the subject of a detailed exchange between Beckett and his producers during preparations for both the original BBC recording of *All That Fall*, and a later APR recording. In McWhinnie's BBC production, the animal sounds are provided not by field recordings of "true" donkeys, hens and lambs but by human mimics. Beckett remained on the continent during the preparation and recording of the play, so aside from an initial meeting with

McWhinnie and John Morris in Paris, production decisions were made via written correspondence. Martin Esslin, then working in the Drama Department, records that McWhinnie needed several attempts at convincing Beckett of the necessity of employing mimics. After an initial exchange, McWhinnie wrote to Beckett,

> I am sorry to disturb you about the animals. Of course we have realistic recordings, but the difficulty is that it is almost impossible to obtain the right sort of timing and balance with realistic effects. By using good mimics I think we can get real style and shape into the thing. The other factor is that existing recordings are very familiar to our listeners and I do feel that without being extreme we need, in this particular case, to get away from standard realism. (Esslin 129)

Again, a fine line between the familiar and the unfamiliar is traced. Roy Walker, in his *Listener* review, shares my suspicion that Maddy Rooney's comment on hearing the hinny—"[s]o hinnies whinny" (173)—is a "mad rune" (pun presumably intended) ensnaring McWhinnie himself in the written script of the play, and also by implication in its produced sounds (Walker 1957a: 167).

McWhinnie's deliberate attempt to "get real style and shape into the thing" by means of sound design is a way of replicating the kind of mental ordering of the soundscape that Mrs. Rooney would logically be expected to perform. What results from this technique is a phenomenological enquiry into the mechanics of thought and sensory perception. This trope is so perfectly Beckettian that it's tempting to overlook the collaborative decisions—and disputes— involved in realizing the play's aesthetic pattern. The play's qualities of tension and doubt about the representation of perception arise from fault-lines in the collaborative process. Beckett was marked by the BBC as a potentially difficult collaborator: in 1954 the producer P. H. Newby had

been warned by Beckett's Paris publisher that the author was "*un sauvage*" (Esslin 126); by 1956, the BBC's Paris representative Cecilia Reeves had noted hopefully that "his former, rather hostile, attitude to radio in general is improving" (Esslin 126-7). John Morris, after a meeting with Beckett in Paris before work on the script of *All That Fall* began, wrote to Val Gielgud that "he has a very sound idea of the *problems* of writing for radio" (Esslin 127, my emphasis). Beckett's scripts set up problems for his producers and *bruiteurs* to solve. The problem in *All That Fall*, a play so full of sonic signifiers of landscape, is one of acoustic perspective.

An audible landscape is an active, living landscape. Ulrika Maude makes this point in her essay on Beckett and the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Seeing, Maude writes, "requires little perceptible activity on the part of the subject. Although the same can be said about hearing, it does demand action on the part of the object, for sound is not emitted from objects as easily as light" (Maude 78).[108] In Beckett's work, the *livingness*, the activity of the sonorous object, is strangely evaluated by Maddy Rooney's particular perceiving ear. Maddy's preoccupations—her physical difficulties, her "fat and rheumatism and childlessness" (174), her own faulty ability to express—determine that the living landscape she hears raises questions about fertility and sterility, organic growth and decay, living and dead languages. At the level of radio production, these produced sounds are not quite "living" or live. The stylized nature of the soundscape is, in this sense, apt. Writing about the paintings of Jack Yeats in 1937, Beckett claimed to have recognized in the Irish landscape "a nature almost as inhumanly inorganic as a stage set" (Maude 85).

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[108] Schafer's soundscape studies would suggest that *listening* requires the activity that hearing does not; these remarks are welcome responses to the notion that listening is primarily passive.

Beckett had requested that the animal voices in *All That Fall* be selected from the BBC's store of recordings. Beckett may not have appreciated that the difficulty with a field recording of, say, a donkey is that the recording is liable to contain plenty of the field in which the donkey is standing. The result is the auditory equivalent of mud being trampled all over the studio floor: authentic, but perhaps unsightly (or whatever the auditory equivalent of that adjective may be). This is something that Ludwig Koch, the BBC's best-known sound-recordist in the mid-twentieth century, realized. A Radio 4 program about Koch's work by Sean Street, first broadcast in April 2009, describes at length his working methods (with archive recordings of Koch's own spoken explanations). In Koch's preferred recording of a nightingale, for example, the sound of the bird is recorded without "contextual background sound" or "sense of the natural perspective"; the bird is recorded as a "specimen," as Street calls it, with the muddying ambient soundscape cleared—often quite literally, as Koch's recording technique involved patiently flushing unwanted animals and birds from the field so as to get the cleanest and clearest recording of the desired species. "It's a paradoxical sort of authenticity . . .. You need to 'isolate the songster,' as [Koch] would have put it," adds the geographer Hayden Lorimer; field recording involves a type of "theatrical spotlighting".[109] Koch can be heard, on archive interview recordings, declaring himself "the most happiest man when the bird obliges," like the director of a particularly difficult child star. Koch's technique, then, is ultimately another sort of stylized realism. Koch's purpose was to encourage attentive listening to the ecological periphery (the nightingale recording mentioned above was part of his 1936 multimedia soundbook, *Songs of Wild Birds*, in which gramophone records were included alongside explanatory texts); however, these peripheral details are "spotlighted," which means clearing away their original ambient

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[109] This refining of nature is an Aesthete's approach – consider Des Esseintes, in Huysmans' *À rebours*, who sound-designs his dandy's paradise with a solitary caged cricket.

surroundings. The birds or animals, then, occupy a kind of "everywhere" space, offered up for perception beyond the background / foreground dichotomy. McWhinnie's use of human mimics in *All That Fall*, separating a desired ambient detail from ambience in general, is another form of spotlighting, more comparable to the work of celebrated bird mimics such as Edward Avis, whose performances, a cut above the popular bird mimics and whistlers of old vaudeville or the music hall, gained the approval of both the Aubudon Society and American radio listeners (Tipp).

Everett Frost, who produced Beckett's radio plays for American Public Radio in 1986, also recognized the importance of adopting an inorganic approach to soundscape:

> the enigmatic 'rural sounds' that open the play cannot, if Beckett's instructions are adhered to, be produced in a way that creates the realistic ambience of a rural soundscape . . .. The sounds make perfect sense, however, when they are heard as the cacophony of the natural world, not as it 'is', but as Mrs. Rooney experiences it—she is a Cartesian victim whose reality cannot be divorced from her perception of it. (Frost 367)

Frost appears to agree with McWhinnie's stylized realism, at least in principle. However, perhaps under the pressure of Beckett's own insisting, once again, that recordings of animals rather than human mimics be used, Frost's production of the play *does* create a plainer sense of a consistent rural ambience; Beckett got his way on this occasion, perhaps in part due to the new availability of digital studio equipment and the less cumbersome ways of making original field recordings behave. (I will consider the reason for Beckett's repeated complaint *against* the use of human mimics in my discussion of the play's approach to language in general.) The result is that Frost's version of the play contains, put simply, more *noise*—that is, ambient sound that is quite specifically ushered into the "background" of acoustic space, to murmur ambiently whilst the

actors are speaking the all-important text, not quite compromising the radiophonic clarity of the performed text. McWhinnie's BBC production, in which characters are never required to speak above another sound, seems to me to come closer to conveying the implied sense that this is a play in which the actors are auditors. In McWhinnie's hands, the radio form is used to demonstrate how a character hears, in a way that staged theatre could never hope to show how a character sees or hears.

The moments of stillness that Beckett writes into *All That Fall*, resisting the potential simultaneities of radio, serve to similarly extract the required specimens. "All is still," says Mrs. Rooney:

> No living soul in sight. There is no one to ask. The world is feeding. The wind—[*Brief wind*.]—scarcely stirs the leaves and the birds—[*Brief chirp*.]—are tired singing. The cows—[*Brief moo*.]—and sheep—[*Brief baa*.]—ruminate in silence. The dogs—[*Brief bark*.]—are hushed and the hens—[*Brief cackle*.]—sprawl torpid in the dust. We are alone. There is no one to ask. (192)

Daniel Albright finds in this passage an "aporia between script and diegetic sound" that can be explained by "Beckett's love for dissonance among the various planes of theatrical experience" (Albright 106). I'd like to suggest a more precise explanation. Here Mrs. Rooney slips, uncharacteristically, into a detached narrative voice comparable to that of the compulsive story-splutterer Henry in *Embers* ("White world. Not a sound" (255)) or the recording voice of the younger Krapp ("Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited" (221)). For all of his usual restraint and reticence, Beckett is occasionally showy about his silences. As listeners or audience, we are able to hear the silence noted by Henry and Krapp, or at least made to encounter a Cagean non-existence of silence in the radio static or tape machine whirr—

mechanistic equivalents of the intracranial bang of blood and humming of nervous system—that sound in the gaps left by voice. The example from *All That Fall* leaves us in some doubt. Are the wind and cows and sheep silent or are they not? Here Mrs. Rooney enacts a kind of directorial summoning similar to that of Henry, who brings the sound of hooves and stones into *Embers* by peevishly calling for them (253). While *Embers* is plainly a psychologised play (a "skullscape" or "soulscape", as Linda Ben Zvi and Ruby Cohn have called it (Perloff 1999: 247)), with a tenuous relationship to physical space, the summoning of sounds by Mrs. Rooney in *All That Fall* indicates a complex intermingling with the soundscape; to refer to these peripheral details is to acknowledge their being, which can be signified on radio only by making the voices sound, even when their silence is being alleged. Silence—a reduction of the ambient context—serves to present a sound, but there is a danger that radio voices can also go missing, as when Mr. Tyler is momentarily lost during a pause:

> MRS ROONEY: Are you alright, Mr. Tyler? [*Pause*.] Where is he? [*Pause*.] Ah there you are! (175)

Mrs. Rooney herself strives to keep herself present. As Miss Fitt, Mr. Tyler and Mr. Barrell chatter at the train station, Mrs. Rooney harasses them (or us) with a reminder of her own existence: "Do not imagine, because I am silent, that I am not present, and alive, to all that is going on" (185); speaking, she creates herself.

Part 2. *All That Fall*, fitness and radio form

Martin Esslin, who joined the BBC in 1940 and became head of Radio Drama in 1963, was well positioned to conclude his assessment of Beckett's media writings by acknowledging the "meticulous craftsmanship which forms his basic attitude to his work":

> His contributions to a production process are always characterized by humility towards
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> the technical side of the work, combined with a respect for the craftsmanship involved,
>
> which seemed to derive from an approach similar to that of the medieval craftsman who
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> regarded accurate craftsmanship as a form of religious worship. (Esslin 154)

Esslin does not elaborate on his final comparison, and leaves tantalizingly unfinished the thought of Beckett as a participant in an electronic medievalism, a media-playwright in practical agreement with the "medieval modernists" described by Michael T. Saler: with William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement; with the collective, functionalist aesthetics of the Bauhaus, the Omega Workshop and the Design and Industries Association; with Eric Gill's medievalist craft Guilds providing art and design for such modern institutions such as the London Underground and the BBC itself (Gill's *Johnston* typeface is used by the Underground, and his *Prospero and Ariel* stands above the entrance of Broadcasting House). The medieval-modernist approach to what goes on in a radio studio, of course, is to embrace rather than expel the *bruiteurs* – those fellow-craftsmen downgraded by author-centric criticism to expendable unskilled labourers – to a critical background.

An approach to Beckett's radio plays based on his "humility towards the technical side of the work" need not be incompatible with the more familiar account of the *sauvage* elements of Beckett's art best voiced by Daniel Albright, who suggests that Beckett "wrote for radio, film,

television, in deliberately awkward ways; he refused to take advantage of what the medium can do well, preferring the effortful, the recalcitrant, even the incorrect" (Albright 1). This obsession with the inadequacies of a medium still amounts to an "extraordinary doting on technique" (3); the Third Programme's own controller, John Morris, noted that Beckett was clued in to the "*problems* of writing for radio (Knowlson 385, my emphasis). I am not suggesting that there is simply a separation between Beckett's working methods and his achieved effect: that would be to picture Beckett working with a healthy meticulousness at producing unsettling representations of failure and frailty; or to assert that, like the comedian who is serious about laughter, Beckett is meticulous about inadequacy. Rather, these pieces are damned from the beginning: *All That Fall* came to the author as a "nice, gruesome idea" (Knowlson 385). The immobilized cyclist Mr. Tyler might be thinking of his author as well as his parents when he curses "the wet Saturday afternoon of my conception" (175). A major challenge in analyzing Beckett's radio works is the task of explaining how the often-recited aesthetics of grim failure co-exists in Beckett's work with the healthy respect for craftsmanship described by Esslin.

The mantra of the medieval-modernist Design and Industries Association was 'Fitness for Purpose,' a more resolutely functionalist version of the Clive Bell's insistence on *significant form* as the stuff proper to aesthetics (Saler 73, Bell 190). Beckett's investigation of radio *technique* is related to the self-interrogations of his narrators or protagonists or (in the radio pieces) perturbed perceivers of the worlds they allegedly inhabit. And who among Beckett's people can claim to have purpose, let alone *fitness* for that purpose? Who among them is Fit For Life? Vladimir and Estragon perform their exercises, movements, elevations, relaxations, elongations fitfully rather than fitly and find themselves sadly "not in form" (*CDW* 71). Nevertheless, Beckett's people are, as much as any Bowflex-commercial bore, intensely interested in the mechanical workings of their own bodies, and of the bicycles and boots to

which their bodies are frequently attached. Molloy, for example, cycles with Olympian determination and explains in painstaking detail how he is able to ride whilst on crutches, converting the whole affair into a vaudevillean routine recited as an analytical, physical study (17); less commendably, he applies the same scrutiny to the movements of his legs as he kicks a man death (78). Moran, Molly's pursuer, similarly deconstructs his own manner of running to the point that the simplest motions are rendered mechanical and grotesque: "And I have often caught faster runners than myself thanks to this way of running. They stop and wait for me, rather than prolong such a horrible outburst at their heels" (133). These are examples of what Hugh Kenner calls "that strange detachment with which Beckett's people regard the things their hands and feet do: their tendency to analyze their own motions like a man working out why a bicycle does not topple" (84). "When I try and think riding I lose my balance and fall," Molloy himself explains (26). This study of motion and uprightness, implying a foreboding of a fall later if not sooner, is specially pertinent to *All That Fall*, where news of the text for the following day's sermon—"The Lord upholdeth all that fall and raiseth up all those that be bowed down"—elicits "*wild laughter*" from Maddy and Dan Rooney (198).

"Nice day for the races," remarks Christy, using a phrase that stood as the play's working title. "No doubt it is," replies Mrs. Rooney, "But will it hold up? [*Pause. With emotion*.] Will it hold up?" (172) "Will it hold up?" is a question asked, directly or indirectly, of Mr. Tyler's bicycle, of Mrs. Rooney's own body as she attempts to climb into Mr. Slocum's car, "very high off the ground" (177); it may also be asked of Miss Fitt's aloof piety, and Dan Rooney's explanation for the train's lateness. As if answering the general question in the negative, by the play's conclusion leaves fall from the "lovely laburnum"; rain falls from the sky (196). Clas Zilliacus rightly recalls Beckett's delight in the "marvelous" idea that "the fall of a leaf and the fall of Lucifer are the same thing" (Zilliacus 1999: 306). If sinking signaled a kind of comic

bathos in Cooper's radio work, in Beckett's writing gravity itself tells of a more total, more blackly comic damnation.

So Mrs. Rooney, perhaps inhabiting her own Dantean hell, as Zilliacus suggests, tramples fitfully and unfitly across the landscape, encountering the difficulties of that landscape (its acclivities and declivities) just as Beckett faces, stage by stage, the troubles of radio. Chief amongst these is the problem that making soundscapes for radio is one thing, but conveying a sense of movement through those fabricated spaces is quite another. Donald McWhinnie devotes several pages to the problem of signifying movement in his guide to radiocraft, published just two years after his work on *All That Fall*. "Background" (there's that word again) footsteps tend to be unsatisfactory, he notes (111). In fact, he continues, "radio cannot accommodate convincingly long realistic scenes of people walking together" (112). Did Beckett not know this? Did he not care? People walking together is, after all, the overall premise of *All That Fall*. The play's radiophonic rhythm, as I've noted, depends on the unsteady drag of Maddy's feet; these are joined later in the play by the hollow metallic thud (more resonant and forceful than a tap) of blind Dan Rooney's cane. These steps are not heard, however, when Maddy is either speaking or listening. Presumably this rule is meant to fit the patterns of perception enacted in the play (now Mrs. Rooney is listening to Mr. Tyler, so she is no longer listening to her own steps). Another radiogenic solution might have been to fade down the footsteps so as not to compromise the clarity of the spoken dialogue, but this fading down would have implied the kind of "background" footsteps that McWhinnie warns against. "Why do you halt?", asks Mrs. Rooney of Christy at the beginning of the play: "But why do I halt?" (172). Much later in the play, however, Beckett causes us to take literally the suggestion that each character halts before speaking by having Dan Rooney insist, "once and for all, do not ask to speak and move at the same time" (189).

Progress is painfully slow. Perhaps this is Beckett's way of conveying in radio (which does very much exist in time, more so than written prose) that particular quality of Beckett's novels, again recognized by Hugh Kenner, whereby the pace of the prose is "utterly unrelated to the pace of events" (Kenner 84); in *All That Fall*, the undoubted slowness of motion is time-stretched by an additional slowness of perception. Laborious motion through landscape was, to Beckett, a preferred metaphor for the production of writing: "the only chance for me now as a writer," he noted to Barney Rosset, "is to go into retreat and put a stop to all this fucking élan acquis [momentum] and get back down to the bottom of all the hills again, grimmer hills" (*Letters* v.2 181).

And what of that other moving form, Kenner's "Cartesian centaur," the fusion of man-and-bicycle? Again, Beckett fixes on the very details that are, according to McWhinnie, inherently unradiogenic. McWhinnie recalls Lance Sieveking's radio adaptation of Forster's *A Passage to India*, which called for the bell of Dr. Aziz's bicycle: "nothing is more difficult to represent in sound than a bicycle because—even if it has a flat tyre—it has no immediately distinctive sound, apart from its bell and nothing is more chillingly static than a bicycle bell if you are unable to see the wheels going round" (McWhinnie 112). This is a difficulty that Beckett seems to exploit in having Mr. Tyler arrive out of nowhere (that is, the profound nowhere of radio silence) to startle Mrs. Rooney. He rings his bell as a courtesy, but his bell is an unnatural thing, "magnified beyond recognition," as McWhinnie himself planned it (139-40). The bell, as engineered by Briscoe, arrives as a shrill, indecipherable drilling sound with sharp attack; only on its second ringing is the sound tamed to a recognizably tinkling bell. (This is one of the sounds not anticipated by Mrs. Rooney, even though the very purpose of a bicycle bell is to announce the presence of a bicycle before the bicycle is actually there.) "Gracious how you wobble," remarks Maddy on Tyler's unsteady cycling (174); quite literally working out why the

bicycle doesn't topple, to revisit Kenner's idea, Mrs. Rooney again anticipates a fall, while the radio presence of the highly unradiogenic bicycle is equally wobbly, equally unlikely to "hold up" to scrutiny.

The one character in the play who apparently lives beyond scrutiny of physical forms is the punningly-named Miss Fitt, the pious protestant with her meaningful homophones about "fresh sole" (186) who lives more "alone with [her] maker" than in the physical world, to that point of being "not there . . . just not really there at all" (182-3). She announces herself as being "distray" (182); that is, detached from the land and her actual environment—in this sense she is a misfit, but in another sense she casts aside the troubles of the other unfit bodies amongst whom she passes: "there is that Fitt woman," is how Maddy announces Miss Fitt's entrance. "Look closely," Mrs. Rooney insists, aghast at going unnoticed by Miss Fitt, and you will finally distinguish a once female shape" (182). "All I saw," protests Miss Fitt, "was a big pale blur, just another big pale blur" (183). And so Miss Fitt, although an exception rather than a rule in her absent-mindedness, seems to identify a more general condition of deterioration, a distortion of form more terrible and total than the physical specific accounts of particular bodily ailments noted by Boghill's other inhabitants. "Maddy Rooney, née Dunne, the big pale blur," repeats Mrs. Rooney "*ruefully,*" as if accepting this total deterioration that is also a deterritorialization, a fall from the physical world into the world of the pure spirit (to the sarcastically Protestant Mrs. Rooney, this un-substantiation can only be understood as a fall). Jeff Porter has argued that Mrs. Rooney's corporeality and corpulence signal a "return of the repressed" to Beckett's writing—an atypical appearance of "the repudiated body" in his work—but I would suggest that the significant thing is the awkwardness and unfitness of this body, coupled with the deterioration with which it is threatened (Porter 443).

The challenge faced by Maddy, then, is one of maintaining "form" amongst a soundscape that evades the order imposed by human personality. As far back as 1934, Beckett considered the rendering of landscape in painting and suggested that Cezanne "seems to have been the first to see landscape and state it as a material of a strictly peculiar order, incommensurable with all human expressions whatsoever. Atomistic landscape with no velleities of vitalism, landscape with personality a la rigeur, but personality in its own terms, not in Pelman's *landscapality*" (quoted in Maude 82). Beckett's use of "atomistic" in this early text refers to an aesthetic approach opposed to Platonic formalism (Dickie 45-6) and pre-empts Mrs. Rooney's anguished utterance, as she considers her feared loss of form, outbursting:

> what's wrong with me, never tranquil, seething out of my dirty old pelt, out of my skull, oh to be in atoms, in atoms. [*Frenziedly*] ATOMS! (177)

Language and form: voicing the "very bizarre"

So, Beckett's careful interest in radio craftsmanship, as alleged by Esslin, is best understood in connection with his characters' examinations of body-mechanics: in each case, what is being undertaken is a rigorous but askance examination of a thing that the user, at heart, suspects is fundamentally unfit. Radio-body and author alike perform a self-scrutiny without self-interest. These examinations belong to the general attitude of skepticism about the basic matter of radio, language and sound—*All That Fall* explores language as a spoken, sonic event, and scrutinizes the extent to which language as meaningful sound "holds up"; there is a sense throughout the play of an impending collapse into noise, static, the erosion of meaning.

Mrs. Rooney's self-scrutiny extends to a profound interest in how she herself speaks. She mistrusts the sounds she utters, as well as the sounds she perceives: "Do you find anything … bizarre about my way of speaking?", she asks Christy.

> I do not mean the voice. [*Pause.*] No, I mean the words. [*Pause. More to herself.*] I use none but the simplest words, I hope, and yet I sometimes find my way of speaking very … bizarre. (173)

This suggestion is repeated later in the play, after Maddy describes her return home as an attempt to "come safe to haven" (194): "Do you know, Maddy, sometimes one would think you were struggling with a dead language" (194), Dan comments, so discrediting the expected comforts, domestic or spiritual, implied by Maddy's "haven". The malaise is general: "I confess I often have it myself, I happen to overhear what I am saying," Dan goes on. The feeling, Maddy notes, is "*unspeakably* excruciating" (my emphasis); beyond the struggle with dead language is a distress for which spoken language is not fit. Daniel Albright convincingly argues that Mrs. Rooney's "bizarre" way of speaking is a kind of radio static, a "degrading of signal-to-noise ratio," which is to say that Beckett tests and exploits the potential unfitness of the radio medium (Albright 111). Billie Whitelaw remembers Beckett himself describing Mrs. Rooney, with her breaking-up language, as being in a state of "abortive explosiveness" (Frost 368).

Coming safe to haven: the phrase, however "dead," signifies the attainable end of the play: concluding the journey, returning home, finishing up where we started. But where did we start? With dead music, Schubert's "Death and Maiden," played by the Rooneys' elderly neighbour, "all day that same old record" (197). To return to this point requires not just the forward motion of Maddy and Dan, but the conclusion of Dan's equally hindered explanation for the train's delay. As Maddy puts it: "I am agog, tell me all, *then* we shall press on and never pause, never

pause till we come safe to haven" (194, my emphasis). Dan calls his explanation his "composition" (194); he is akin to Henry in *Embers*, Krapp, the Unnameable and any other Beckett character whose predicament is that he is compelled, rather than inspired, to tell a story. He is akin, too, to Molloy (called "Dan" for some reason by his mother) who revels in "the tranquility of decomposition"—that is, a story-telling, replacing lived experience, whose purpose is to perpetuate itself and so negate the need for future action (*T* 18, 25). All day, that same record.

Dan does not finish; conclusion is provided by a messenger. Jerry, the station's errand-boy, is the bit-part child-emissary, an equivalent of the boy(s) in *Waiting For Godot*. He catches up with the Rooneys to return the "kind of ball" that Dan Rooney dropped (198); his more direct purpose in the play, however, is to carry information. Jerry's short transmission is in danger of being lost to noise, to over-excitement that recalls the other aborted explosive communications in the play: "Take your time, my little man," Maddy counsels, "you will burst a blood-vessel" (198). Dan Rooney—the apparently guilty man in the backwards murder mystery—attempts to interfere with the boy's message ("[l]eave the boy alone, he knows nothing!") before the information is delivered, fitfully, as intermittently as in an interrupted transmission:

> It was a little child fell out of the carriage, Ma'am. [*Pause.*] On to the line, Ma'am. [*Pause.*] Under the wheels, Ma'am. (199)

So reads the published text; the interruption of this devastating message is heightened in the BBC production, where the middle of the message ("On to the line, Ma'am") is omitted.

Neither Maddy nor Dan speak another word. The play ends with a "*[t]empest of wind and rain*" (199) that sounds, in the BBC production, very much like static or interference, even on the

recently-released British Library compact disc; this radiophonically-rendered tempest must have been indistinguishable from unwanted static on the Third Programme's unreliable wavelength, on which a Bach harpsichord recital was liable to come across like "someone distantly thrashing a birdcage" (Carpenter 29). Beckett's specific directions add to this sense of an encroaching interference:

> [*Silence.* JERRY *runs off. His steps die away. Tempest of wind and rain. It abates. They move on. Dragging steps, etc. They halt. Tempest of wind and rain*.] (199)

The tempest approaches, abates and returns, in the manner of the intermittent interference that would have been familiar to seasoned listeners to the Third Programme, which spent the first years of its existence on a wavelength to which it had disputable legitimate right, so that programs would frequently be interrupted by competing transmissions from the wavelength's original occupiers in Soviet Latvia (Carpenter 28). The acoustic perspective, the sense of place, is troubled. This ending is entirely consistent with the apocalyptic violence predicted by Mrs. Rooney earlier in the play, which is imagined as a degrading noise, a "great roaring machine" (176).

Jerry runs off. In a play full of dragging feet, delayed trains, a hinny who "refuses to advance" (173), injured bicycles, temperamental automobiles, the child is a fleet-footed oddity. His footsteps "die away"; we hear him leaving the acoustic plane, departing the boggy soundworld of the play, ending up somewhere, presumably, safer to haven. The same is not true of Maddy and Dan. The last we hear of them is their footsteps coming to an abrupt halt; the static-storm returns, and there is nothing to signify any further movement by the Rooneys. They end up stationary, not moving; they do not exit the play, but the all-ending, apocalyptic tempest closes

on them. At the expiration of the play, the wind – "devious and equivocal" and "not to be trusted," according to R. Murray Schafer (Schafer 171) – prevails.

McWhinnie records that in his production, the source for the noise of the wind, although electronically treated, was human breath—an "acoustic bridge," to use Arnheim's term, is created between human speech and apocalyptic noise, validating Daniel Albright's suggestion that the encroaching tempest is spoken language collapsed into noise, as if the producers chose to conclude with a willful erosion of the play's initial soundworld. There is a strange truth, perhaps, to Dan Rooney's complaint to his wife: "I speak—and you listen to the wind" (194). On completing the play, Beckett wrote in a letter to Nancy Cunard of its being "broadcast to the 4 winds" (*Letters* v.2 670).

"Crying to suck its mother": pastoralism, language and landscape

What relationship does this eroded language have to landscape? Taking up Dan's thought about her seemingly "dead language," Maddy continues:

Well, you know, it will be dead in time, just like our own poor dear Gaelic, there is that to be said.

[*Urgent baa*.]

MR ROONEY: [*Startled*.] Good God!

MRS ROONEY: Oh the pretty little woolly lamb, crying to suck its mother! Theirs has not changed, since Arcady. (194)

(Earlier in the play, Miss Fitt has also lost her mother (184), but says so less directly.) The lamb's baa, a startling sound that is neither pretty nor little, is another interruption; it is also held

up by Mrs. Rooney as an example of permanence, in contrast to moribund human speech. *Since Arcady*: the play's concerns with landscape, growth and regeneration, are focused through this deliberately estranging invocation of a pastoral motif.

The rural sounds in *All That Fall* are similar in detail to other instances of pastoral soundscapes in modern writing. In William Morris's 1888 novel *The Dream of John Ball*, in which a dreaming man finds himself bang in the middle of the 1381 peasant's revolt, a progressive, utopian medievalism is expressed through the protagonist's clairaudience:

> Wide open were the windows, and the scents of the fragrant night floated in upon us, and the sounds of the men at their meat or making merry about the township; and whiles we heard the gibber of an owl from the trees westward of the church, and the sharp cry of a blackbird made fearful by the prowling stoat, or the far-off lowing of a cow from the upland pastures; or the hoofs of a horse trotting on the pilgrimage road. (Morris 82-3)

Here natural sound comes together harmoniously, without difficulty, conveniently creating an ideal acoustic environment amongst which Morris's organic socialism can be realized. More complicatedly, Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* describes a rural village pageant performance during wartime, in which voices present and absent, present and historical are intermingled through the use of a hidden gramophone. The failure of language that follows the performance— "the audience sat staring at the villagers, whose mouths opened, but no sound came"—is corrected by a bioacoustical intervention:

> Then suddenly, as the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden. One had lost her calf. In the very nick of time she lifted her great moon-eyed head and bellowed … the whole world was filled with dumb yearning. It was the primeval voice sounding loud in

the ear of the present moment … The cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance;

filled the emptiness and continued the emotion. (Woolf 2008: 96)

Perhaps Mrs. Rooney's comment on the unchanged Arcadian language of the lamb "crying to suck its mother" is a similar instance of the "primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment." The lamb would also seem to have experienced what Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok describe as "the transition from a mouth filled with the breast to a mouth filled with words" which occurs "by virtue of the intervening experiences of the empty mouth" in common with humankind (Abraham 127), whilst Woolf's pageant audience remains empty-mouthed. In Woolf and Beckett's cases, the distance to be bridged by vocal utterance is generational—a lamb has lost its mother; a cow has lost her calf; Miss Fitt has lost her mother; Maddy Rooney has lost her daughter.

Such bioacoustical interventions return us to the whereabouts of the play's landscape. *All That Fall*, beginning and ending with the "poor woman" whose signal sound is "Death and the Maiden," also recalls the epithets for Ireland recited by Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Ulysses*: "poor old woman" and "silk of the kine" (Joyce 14), titles that speak of a degraded pastoralism: these names permeate Stephen's consciousness as he observes the old milk-woman (and this episode itself results in a conversation about the "deadness" of Gaelic language between the milk-woman and the English visitor Haines). Milk-giving, maternity and organic growth, set uneasily beside an increasingly inorganic language, provides the model for *All That Fall*'s perturbed pastoral setting. Such is Beckett's way with pastoral: Molloy sees a set of lambs being led away to pasture, then second-guesses that they may be off to be slaughtered (28); Moran encounters the same scene and remarks blackly "What a pastoral land, my God" (146); Henry in *Embers* instructs his daughter to "run along … and look at the lambs" with such violence that the

young child wails with terror (256). We do not know whether the lamb crying to suck its mother is ever satisfied, or whether Miss Fitt finds her mother.

Barrenness and infertility are fundamental to *All That Fall*; if offspring are not being pushed from trains, they are being otherwise lost or else prevented in the first place. The hinny, a sterile animal, introduces this theme. Mrs. Rooney recites her afflictions as "sorrow and pining and gentility and church-going and fat and rheumatism and childlessness" (174), later alluding to a "Little Minnie", a deceased daughter (or a daughter who never was?) who would by now be past child-bearing age: "In her forties now she'd be, I don't know, fifty, girding up her lovely little loins, getting ready for the change" (176). Mr. Tyler reverberates Mrs. Rooney's childlessness by declaring himself "grandchildless" on account of his "poor daughter" whose "whole … bag of tricks" has been removed (174). Mrs. Rooney contemplates Christy's attempts to sell dung by asking, skeptically, "what would we want with dung, at our time of life?" (173), as if to imply an obscure connection between human fertility and the fertility of the soil. In the end, neither the fertility of the soil nor the supposed fixity of the timeless pastoral lamb will endure the erosion of landscape and soundscape enacted at the play's conclusion.

Part 3. *Embers*: from landscape to skullscape

The model of auditory perception demonstrated in *All That Fall*, in which a centrally-located auditor responds to ambient aesthetic details, is altered in Beckett's subsequent radio piece, *Embers*. In this play, called by Marjorie Perloff a "skullscape" (Perloff 1999: 247), sounds come from within. Instead of responding to sounds from a surrounding environment, the protagonist Henry summons noises that he wishes to hear, in order to distract himself from sounds (also,

presumably, the product of his own psyche) that he does not wish to hear. This is less a reversal

of *All That Fall*'s aural perspective, and more a peculiar scrutinizing of the stylized realism

developed in the earlier play. We have already seen how Beckett's directions in *All That Fall*

require Mrs. Rooney to pause before a particular sound is heard, as if her pause were a

deliberate, annunciatory device. Henry goes a step further by yelling—perhaps demanding?—the

name of the sound before the sound is heard, to himself or to the listener; we share (or suffer) his

acoustic perspective. Beckett turns inside-out the clumsy radiophonic device of having a

character "gloss" a potentially ambiguous sound effect, after the sound has been played. Here is

Henry "summoning" the sound of hooves:

> Hooves! [*Pause. Louder*.] Hooves! [*Sound of hooves walking on hard road. They die*
>
> *rapidly away. Pause*.] Again! [*Hooves as before*.] (253)

This passage supports Carzeaux's interpretation of radio form as a vehicle for a

phenomenological enquiry into perception: "phenomenologically speaking," Carzeaux writes,

"sensory receptivity is the 'bringing into being' of stimuli" (Carzeaux 160). The *rapid dying* of

the hoof sounds is key to the play's acoustic design. There is no "landscape" as such into which

this summoned horse may recede; the space beyond Henry's skull and sensorium is largely

uncharted territory. Henry's own voice, which makes the demands for hooves and stones,

similarly comes *from nowhere*: the image below, showing an opening portion of the play as it

appears in sound-editing software, indicates how Henry's voice – particularly the two obtrusive

yelled words, "*on*" and "*hooves,*" violently fracture the droning sea-soundscape; rather than being contained within the play's soundscape, Henry's voice is a startling imposition:[110]
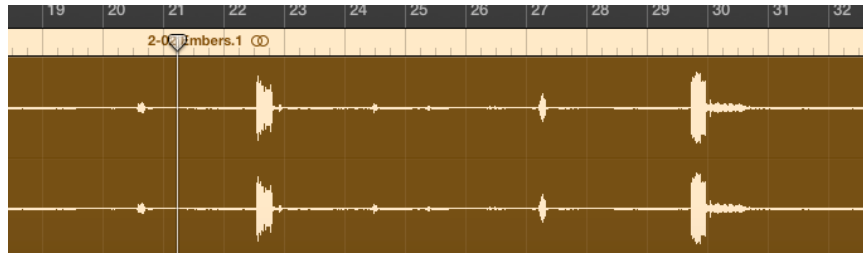
The erosion of landscape feared in *All That Fall* is realized in *Embers*. When the characters do speak of the land, they do so as of a thing that is disintegrating: there is, Henry stresses, "a leveling going on" (261). We can identify the basic character of the places, beyond Henry's cranium, that the play describes: he sits by the sea, on one side of a bay, "on the brink of" an oceanic immersion (258). The sea—realized by Desmond Briscoe as a combination of a stock recording of waves and a disquieting electronic drone—sounds throughout the play, whenever Henry falls silent. In fact, the sea-drone is the very reason why Henry is compelled to summon more solid sounds, or to tell stories to himself, or to converse with his wife Ada (who may or may not be really present): the sea horrifies Henry, bringing to mind his dead father and the "evening bathe [he] took once too often" (253). The sea is Henry's father's grave (his body was never recovered); its sound is unwelcome, a sound that Henry "shouldn't be hearing" (260). What do we hear when we hear the sea, when Henry hears the sea? The tide pulling on the beach's pebbles (this is unequivocally a stony, not a sandy beach, as Briscoe and McWhinnie seem to have grasped): a "sucking," as Henry says with some disgust (261). The sea sucking

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[110] I have played the BBC recording of the play to groups of students on several occasions; the effect on these audiences of Henry's violent imposition is always one of extreme shock and discomfort, described in some cases as physical pain.

pebbles is a vast geological re-enactment of Molloy methodically sucking the stones he picks from the beach; in either case, we are hearing an erosion, grain by grain. Erosion, and erasure. In *Embers*, human conversation is twinned with another obliterating water—Henry imagines an eternity of "small talk to the babbling of Lethe about the good old days when we wished we were dead" (256). Lethe, the Greek underworld's river of oblivion or forgetting, trickles into this line as a watery emblem of the erosion of memory; the allusion in total is phrased as a peculiar double-negative, violently anti-nostalgic and paradoxical.[111]

The play's soundscape, however geologically constructed, is not regionally specific. To combat the sea-sound – to "drown it" (254) as he confusedly puts it – Henry recites stories (more of which later), summons sounds or performs a series of *evocations* (260), to borrow the word used in the script to denote the passages in which imagined conversations are held – the word confirms Henry as tormented producer of a series of plays for voices. "I'd be talking now no matter where I was," Henry confesses, typically analytical of his own condition: "I once went to Switzerland to get away from the cursed thing and never stopped the whole time I was there" (254). Henry's evocations, his stories and his sounds are sound-objects that he possesses, about which he may well claim, in the manner of Dan Rooney violently explaining the "kind of ball" that the messenger returns to him, "it is a thing I carry about with me" (198). Henry carries his sounds and stories just as Dan carries his ball, and Molloy carries his stones in his pocket: these items are tokens of each characters' vagabondage. The vagabond, in Beckett, is an unfixed wanderer, an unsentimental journeyer, a *flâneur* without a city, a figure from the periphery who is everywhere, really. Beckett's Henry – like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, thinking on an Irish

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[111] The reference to Lethe as a signifier of oblivion also reminds us of the opening stanza of Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," a poem which Beckett was quoting directly as early as 1934, describing another watery death, that of the lobster in "Dante and the Lobster."

beach – encounters the ineluctable modality of the audible. Henry's case conflates the permeable

eardrum with permeable consciousness, permeable memory. In Henry's thoughts, ambient sound

and memory become mixed up; interiority is "broadcast" as far as its own immediate locality.

In earlier works by Beckett, memory is either entirely absent, or treated with extreme

hostility. Fintan O'Toole makes such a point when, reviewing a recent edition of Beckett's

letters, he identifies the period around 1957 as a "turning point" in Beckett's writing, and

explains the illness and death of Beckett's old friend Ethna McCarthy as initiating a "letting-in of

three things he had fought to exclude from his writing – womanliness, memory, and the

possibility of love" (O'Toole); the "arrival of female voices" into Beckett's written world begins

in this period (O'Toole points to *All That Fall*, along with *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Happy Days*).

The arrival of femininity, O'Toole further contends, directly correlates with the introduction of

"memory, erotic desire, even tenderness." I am half-sympathetic to this attempt to relate

femininity to lyrical memory, although I'd suggest that the direct engagement with sonority

beginning with the radio works and continuing through the tape-recorder in *Krapp's Last Tape* is

equally responsible for opening up Beckett's writing to the theme of memory. As O'Toole

himself notes, Beckett would go on to recommend a tape-recorder as an aid to memory, to assist

his friend Thomas McGreevy in the writing of his memoirs. The recording and play-back of

memory in *Embers* and *Krapp's Last Tape* involves anguish, fault and fear.

"Is it live?" The production of memory

Embers is a ghost-story, memory-haunted, in which the past was only half washed away

by the waters of Lethe. The evocation of memories is mixed up, also, with mechanical

production. Henry himself becomes a kind of producer (that is, the hopeless kind). Besides

carrying around his store of sounds and stories, Henry claims to also employ audio technology to combat the invasive, unwanted sounds as his roves. "Now I walk around with a gramophone," he states, "but I forgot it today" (261). "Walking around" with a gramophone in the 1950s was possible, but certainly not convenient; Beckett looks forward to our current age in which recorded data – pocket-sized, eyeball-sized, virus-sized – is a cybernetic, portable enhancement of our own memory-banks. At any rate, Henry left his gramophone behind today, in one of the play's several instances of unwilled forgetting (how old is Addie, Henry's daughter? Did his wife, Ada, ever meet his father? Henry forgets). In forgetting his gramophone, his remembering device, Henry wriggles in the crack between mechanical remembering and the failure of human memory, whilst labouring to maintain by his own mental processes the simultaneity of pasts and presents that recording technology allows.

A further word about recording and replaying devices. I discussed in the preceding chapter how in the "Hades" episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom contemplates burial practices and methods of remembering the dead, supposing that keeping a gramophone recording of the deceased would maintain the memory of the voice. This recording, though— "Hellohellohello amawfullyglad kraark awfullygladaseeragain hellohello amarawf kopthsth"—is liable to degrade, done in equally by mechanical failure and the grain in the human voice (Joyce 109). (Henry, with his reference to Lethe, is also thinking of Hades; he has in common with Bloom a self-slaughtered father.) By the time Beckett's Krapp comes along, tape has replaced the gramophone disc as a more malleable material for capturing memory. Krapp, developed from Beckett's own efforts to master the workings of a tape machine to play back recordings of *All*

That Fall,[112] uses his tape recorder to create his vast archive of personal recollections. The mechanization of memory is, again, imperfect; the tape-recorded voice remains a half-presence, partially recognized as "that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago" (222). Although Krapp's tapes have retained a greater sonic fidelity than Bloom's imagined gramophone, the older Krapp confronts the degradation of his own human voice: he is afflicted with a "cracked" voice (215); his greatest moments of linguistic excess are his delighted playing with the word "spool" ("spooool!"), as if language now serves him best as enjoyable noise. Krapp is faced with Rooney-esque bewilderment at his former self's use of decorative language, pausing and repeating and eventually reacquainting himself with the word "viduity," as used by his younger self to describe his dying mother's widowhood (219). As Krapp exemplifies language's cracking, the emphasis falls again on a word signifying bereavement: Beckett's way is to mingle multiple mortifications. In memoriam.

Recorded sound is not-live sound. In 1961 (three years after Krapp, two years after *Embers*) Memorex tapes went onto shop shelves—"Is it live or is it Memorex," their later advertising campaigns asked. Ada, in *Embers*, is not exactly Henry's living, present wife; she is a voice in his head, carefully not-embodied by accompanying sound effects (Beckett specifies that she does not make a sound in sitting down on the ground, as Henry himself does (257)), memorized if not Memorexed, a thing he carries around with him. A subsequent producer of the play, Everett Frost, recalls the exasperation of Billie Whitelaw, who played Ada. "Look, am I dead?," Whitelaw asked Beckett. "Let's just say you're not all there," Beckett responded (Frost 376). That Beckett thought of the play's voices as tape-recorded revenants, excavated memory-

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[112] Beckett, having been unable to pick up the play's broadcast, wrote to the BBC requesting a tape, then again requesting instructions on how to use a tape machine.

wrecks, is supported by further recollections by Whitelaw. After years of working with Beckett, Whitelaw declares herself in possession of a "little Beckett box" (a thing she carries around with her?) containing "what I call a scream button and I also have a laugh button. And I think when Beckett writes a laugh, certainly with the ladies I seem to play, it's usually a laugh that comes piercing into the air out of nothing and stops dead. And it's the same with the scream" (267). Beckett, valuing the idea of the pre-recorded, the not-live, approved of this way of expression his characters' exclamations.

This manner of denoting his actors' utterances seems to insist on non-naturalism; however, taken literally, Beckett and Whitelaw's shorthand is not entirely separate from one of the basic interpretations of Stanislavskian realism: Stanslivaski's method, according to this interpretation, recommends a mental recording or storing of emotional memory, for use as needed. This emotional recollection is a type of button-pushing, or re-playing. Is the method emotional or mental? With Beckett, the emphasis falls on the problematically mental processes of memory. Perhaps what Beckett is really up to, again, is another instance of stylized realism; or the real, aided by the mechanical, turned absurd. Henry in *Embers* operates his sensorium in a manner that is purely, almost transgressively technically; I am thinking here of an essay by the media theorist Mark Coté in which Coté suggests that in order to "better understand conscious interiority in relation to an inorganic material exteriority," we might look to the post-phenomenology of Don Ihde, which encourages us to look beyond the human / technological nonhuman dichotomy. The division is a classical one, dating back to the Greek distinction between *episteme* (theoretical knowledge) and *techne* (practical knowledge gained via technical experience of the external world) (Coté 1). Occupying an extreme position, Plato considers *techne* a source of contamination: writing, he suggests, "will implant forgetfulness in men's souls"; humans will recall things "no longer from within themselves, but by means of external

marks" (Plato 275a). What of sound-writing, image-writing? And what of an Absurdist mannequin like Henry in *Embers*, whose basic sense perceptions, in common with those of Beckett's other creations, are always already technical?

Screams and laughter, involuntary or semi-voluntary ejaculations, are rendered grotesque in their forced, played-back state. Beckett characteristically delights in exposing the picked carcass of comic scenes. (Beckett wrote to McWhinnie after hearing the production of *All That Fall* that he especially liked the wild laughter of the Rooneys (*Letters* v.2 12)) In one such moment, the evoked Ada requests that Henry remember how to laugh:

ADA: You laughed so charmingly once, I think that's what first attracted me to you. That and your smile. [*Pause. He tries to laugh, fails.*]

HENRY: Perhaps I should begin with the smile. [*Pause for smile.*] Did that attract you? [*Pause.*] Now I'll try again. [*Long horrible laugh.*] Any of the old charm there?

ADA: Oh Henry! (258)

Ada's final "Oh Henry!" is, in the BBC production, an articulation of suffering rather than pleasure. Beckett, who peopled his stage plays with physically dilapidated comedians and failed to get Charlie Chaplin, then succeeded in getting Buster Keaton for his 1965 *Film*, had a penchant for metaphysically tormented clowning.[113] Henry's horrid laughter resounds in the realm of the vaudevillean uncanny – alongside, for example, the novelty "laughing records" popularized in the 1920s. We should also acknowledge that the laugh track (or "canned laughter") originated in broadcasting with the introduction of tape to radio production in the late

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[113] Hugh Kenner's study of Beckett advances the notion of Beckett's characters as metaphysical clowns.

1940s. Henri Bergson, in his treatise on laughter, claims that laughter is a purely human quality (Bergson 11). In the trilogy, Beckett's Moran discusses this issue with Father Ambrose; they agree that laughter is particular to man and unknown to animals *and Christ* (93). The addition is delicious: laughter is unknown to the lower or higher beings; man as a laughing animal is neither demeaned nor elevated. Laughter, Beckett seems to conclude, is not of the natural world; neither is it spiritual in quality. It is human and – at least to the older Henry – technical.

To refer to the specific production of these utterances: the laughter in Beckett's radio plays is a dry signal, unmodified by reverberation or echo effects, to the extent that the laughter occupies no discernible acoustic space (echo and reverb effects typically contribute to the creation of a sense of space in sound production). The sound bounces off nothing; it is absorbed by nothing. Other sounds in *Embers*, the memory sounds – let's call them *playbacks* rather than *flashbacks* – are made to echo, recalling both place and memory. Here is how Beckett writes directions for Henry's sonic reconstruction of his daughter's childhood riding lessons:

> RIDING MASTER: Tummy in Miss! Chin up Miss! [*Hooves galloping.*] Now Miss! Eyes front miss! [*Addie begins to wail.*] Now Miss! Now Miss! [*Galloping hooves, 'Now Miss!' and ADDIE's wail amplified to paroxysm, then suddenly cut off. Pause.*] (259)

These sounds – the hooves, the riding master's voice and the girl's wail – are subjected by the sound engineer Desmond Briscoe to delay effects, where the sound is recorded to magnetic tape and played back into the recording, creating a falling echo of the original sound, so the sound and its repeated echo become part of the same thick acoustical texture. These recollected voices, happening in the past, are already separate from the "original" sound; it is fitting, then, that they are made to echo or reverberate, since echo is the afterlife of a sound, or a produced memory of

the original. Both ghostliness, and mechanical reproduction, are written into the text of the work.

How permanent are these recorded memories? The younger Krapp expresses memory as a physical imprint. Speaking into his recording device, Krapp recalls spending his mother's dying moments outside of the hospital, watching a beautiful nurse and throwing a rubber ball, perhaps similar to Dan Rooney's kind-of-ball, for a dog (the objects that Beckett's people possess tend to get passed around a fair bit). "Moments," Krapp reflects:

> Her moment, my moment. [*Pause*.] The dog's moments. [*Pause*.] In the end I held it out to him and he took it in his mouth, gently, gently. A small, old, hard, solid rubber ball. [*Pause*.] I shall feel it, in my hand, until my dying day. [*Pause*.] I might have kept it. [*Pause*.] But I gave it to the dog. (220)

The memory, if Krapp is to be believed, is inscribed; the moment is written in the flesh, in the form of the ball that he will feel until his own death. But does the memory persist as predicted? Is the tape-recording itself the inadequate form that the memory takes—grotesque, strange to the ears of the older Krapp, out of time? The older Krapp, at the start of the play, is bamboozled by the note referring to a black ball in his written records of tape entries. Memory as inscription (sound-written, imprinted on the mind) mixes up memory with writing (the means of recording). For *Embers*, we can talk about Henry's somewhat-functioning laugh button as his own out-of-time recording, played back hollow, the shell of an expression reanimated. Molloy, too–"[t]ears and laughter," he remarks: "they are so much Gaelic to me" (35); Gaelic stands again, as with Mrs. Rooney, as an example of a dead, unsalvageable language. We now understand, also, why Mrs. Rooney calls her own use of language "bizarre"—out-of-time language, mixed up with memory-devices, takes on the character of the mechanical uncanny.

Imprints—the ball in the hand, the groove in the disc, do not endure. When Henry states slyly that "there is a leveling going on" he may well be referring to a mental landscape as well as a physical one. The physical erosion to which I referred earlier—the sea sucking pebbles, sounding throughout the play—is coupled with the erosion of memory. Henry talks to his drowned father; his father "doesn't answer any more" (262). Small chat, as Henry predicted, has brought on Lethe's oblivion ("*to* the babbling of Lethe" may mean "accompanied by" or "leading to" eternal forgetting). "I suppose you have worn him out", Ada warns Henry, of his father's silence:

> You wore him out living and now you are wearing him out dead … The time will come when no one will speak to you at all, not even complete strangers. [*Pause*.] You will be quite alone with your voice, there will be no other voice in the world but yours. (262)

The father—think of him as akin to Leopold Bloom's imagined gramophone-grandfather in "Hades"—is worn out, the grooves all completely leveled, the inscription gone. In this respect Henry more basic attempts to "produce" sounds, demanding hooves and thuds and constructing primitive acoustic compositions like a frustrated radio *bruiteur*, seem like crude and pathetic consolation. His abilities as a producer of memory are worn down to the most crude sound play where noises of the solid world (percussive clangs) are the last defence against the oceanic sucking, the Lethean oblivion. Ada (or the memory of Ada) recalls an incident before Henry's father's death, the older man "sitting on a rock looking out to sea … I never forgot his posture … as if he had been turned to stone" (262); in memory, the figure is imagined as fused with the mineral landscape. Henry implores Ada to continue talking about this, but she has nothing to add. Back in *All That Fall*, Mrs. Rooney refers to a chorus of "Rock of Ages" sung during the

sinking of the Titanic, or the Lusitania (she forgets), again sardonically imagining a futile hope

for rocky permanence.

In my soul … where the acoustics are so bad

Henry is a producer, demanding specific sounds (solid sounds, like stone; measurable

sounds, like hooves – "could a horse mark time?", he wonders (253)). He is also an author of a

self-generating narrative, a story that Henry speaks to himself as another barrier against the sea-

sound pushing on the other side of his own silence. For Henry, the loops of memory which he

replays are an internalized technical memory. As Clas Zilliacus notes, "Henry has no need of

Krapp's estranged double, the tape: he himself is both" (Zilliacus 1970: 220).

The bridge between the world in which he is contained (the external world) and the world

that he contains (the internal world) is a shadowy man named Holloway, presumably a doctor of

some sort, who Ada suggests that Henry should see, since there is "something wrong" with his

brain (260). Does Holloway have any existence outside of Henry's consciousness? Is Holloway a

hollow man, fabricated purely by Henry? Is Holloway a memory? Ada's second suggestion that

Henry should see Holloway is made as a direct alternative to his attempts to drown the sea-

sound. If we can with any certainty say anything of Holloway, we must say that he is a dealer of

silence.

Like Dan Rooney stalling the story of the child's death, like the Unnameable throughout

the entirety of his text, Henry tells a story that he will not, cannot, must not complete. His story

concerns Holloway and a visitor named Bolton on a snowy night. Bolton pleads with Holloway

for something unspecified; Holloway presumes that Bolton requires him to administer an

anaesthetic of an unspecified nature, but remains frustrated by Bolton's ineloquence: "damned if he'll sit up all night before a black grate, doesn't understand, call a man out, an old friend, in the cold and dark, urgent need, bring the bag, then not a word, no explanation, no heat, no light…" (255-6). The play's emphasis on the theme of oblivion would suggest that the doctor is being asked to help in an assisted suicide. The most probable "Bolton," then, is Henry's father, although Bolton could equally be Henry himself. Like Krapp, who keeps his estranged former selves on tapes, Henry's story is an attempt to inscribe memory as storage media, but he resists the completion of this memory. And just as Krapp's tape-recording returns to the inevitable concluding phrases – "Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited" (221) – Henry's story gets stuck on variants of "white world, great trouble, not a sound" (263). The story is a defence against the sea, but the story itself is being worn down – into darkness, into lack of form – as details are worried over then whittled away. The white world – erasure's victory – recalls the eroding white noise at the conclusion of *All That Fall*.

Again we are dealing with a Beckett narrative where, as described by Hugh Kenner (Kenner 91), the pace of the prose slows down far behind the pace of recorded events (to use an analogy from audio engineering, this is a kind of narrative time-stretching). The emphasis, once again, is on radio *territory*: Henry tells his story as if determined to give his tale specific, substantial locality. So he twitches and frets around the finer details of furniture and lighting, like a painter groping for the right form:

> Before the fire with all the shutters … no, the hangings, hangings, all the hangings drawn in the light, no light, only the light of the fire, sitting there in the … no, standing, standing there on the hearthrug in the dark with his arms on the chimney piece and his head on his arms, standing there waiting in the dark before the fire in his old red dressing gown and

no sound in the house of any kind, only the sound of the fire. [*Pause*.] Standing there in

his old red dressing-gown might go on fire any minute like when he was a child, no, that

was his pyjamas, standing there waiting in the dark, no light, only the light of the fire, an

old man in great trouble. (254)

This scene – a composition in white, black and red – speaks of a grasping for form, but the

erasure suggested by the recurring "white world" is never far away from these images. The fire's

exhaustion provides the "embers" of the title and recalls the hollow claim of the younger self on

Krapp's tape: "Perhaps my best years are gone … But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the

fire in me now" (223). Henry's story in *Embers* "ends" with energy exhausted, the life told out of

the "ghastly scene" that is now deathlike in its stillness. This stillness is one of Beckett's means

of dealing with the theme of memory – with, as he put it in his early essay on Proust, the

intolerable "contradiction between presence and irremediable obliteration" (Beckett 1930: 28).

The method is comparable to that of Chris Marker's *La jetée*, a film in which the traumatic

reconstruction of prisoner's memory in a post-nuclear war future is portrayed almost entirely

through still images.

Such is the result of Henry's tormented composition, which I take to be an analog for

Beckett's own behaviour as a writer. So let's return to the ghastliness (that is, ghostliness) of

Embers in total, and the impossibility of questions such as who is Holloway, is Ada really

present, is Henry even alive. James Knowlson refers to a letter, written in 1972, in which Beckett

explains:

I simply know next to nothing about my work in this way, as little as a plumber of the

history of hydraulics. There is nothing/nobody with me when I'm writing, only the hellish

job in hand. The 'eye of the mind' in *Happy Days* does not *refer* to Yeats any more than

the 'revels' in *Endgame* [refer] to *The Tempest*. They are just bits of pipe I happen to

have with me. I suppose all is reminiscence from womb to tomb. All I can say is I have

scant information concerning mine—alas. (Knowlson 1983: 16).

Beckett here is explaining – honestly or disingenuously – that he writes in a state where context

has been eroded, so that phrases that may be taken as meaningful allusions cannot be understood

as anything other than "bits of pipe" in a plumber's tool bag, as if the recalling mind works

purely as technical knowledge completely divorced from a schema. *Embers* ends with the

storyteller Henry needing his "little book" to remind him of his coming commitments:

> This evening … [*Pause.*] Nothing this evening. [*Pause.*] Tomorrow … tomorrow …
>
> plumber at nine, then nothing. [*Pause. Puzzled.*] Plumber at nine? [*Pause.*] Ah yes, the
>
> waste. [*Pause.*] Words. [*Pause.*] Saturday … nothing. Sunday … Sunday … nothing all
>
> day. [*Pause.*] Nothing, all day nothing. [*Pause.*] All day all night nothing. [*Pause.*] Not a
>
> sound. (264)

The suggestions in this closing passage are multiple. Firstly, the play on "waste" rightly reminds

us of memory as a bank for surplus data, now detritus – comparable to the flotsam occupying the

rivers of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The visiting plumber also connects back to watery depths. In a

play where memory is blockage and Lethean water is forgetting, the plumber is as likely as the

visiting doctor Holloway and his "little black bag" (254) to facilitate oblivion. After the plumber,

Henry's itinerary recorded in his little book tells us, nothing. Not a sound.

And what kind of recording device, indeed, is the little book? Stephane Mallarmé

describes a book as "a tomb in miniature for our souls" (Mallarmé 81). The contemporary

novelist Tom McCarthy, writing on the status of the author and anthropologist in a world in

which software and virtual networks are the primary recorders of human experience, alludes to

Mallarmé:

> the notion that we might need some person, some skilled craftsman, to compose any
>
> messages, let alone incisive or "epiphanic" ones, seems hopelessly quaint. Malinowski
>
> may have urged his craft's practitioners to Write Everything Down – but now, it is all
>
> written down already. There's hardly an instant of our lives that isn't documented. Walk
>
> down any stretch of street and you're being filmed by three cameras at once – and the
>
> phone you carry in your pocket is pinpointing and logging your location at each given
>
> moment. Every website that you visit, each keystroke and click-through are archived:
>
> even if you've hit delete or empty trash it's still there, lodged within some data fold or
>
> enclave, some occluded-yet-retrievable avenue of circuitry. Mallarmé, the first to
>
> introduce the category of the "virtual" into poetics, would have gasped (and not entirely
>
> joyfully) at the unfolded and expanded, omnipresent, omniscient "book" or data tomb
>
> within whose soft walls we live now – and gasped most loudly at the irony that this
>
> "book" renders the role of its writer redundant. (McCarthy)

Beckett is, I believe, forecasting a personal "data tomb" in the faltering narratives of Henry.

The unstated biographical significance of Henry's narrative is appropriate to a play that,

like a child with a seashell to the ear mistaking their own blood and muscles for the ocean's

noise, mixes up interiority and exteriority – as a narrator, is Henry inside or outside of his story?

Or are questions of interiority and exteriority as unhelpful for narratology as they are for sound

studies, and better replaced by Brian Richardson's notion of the "permeable narrator"?[114] Much

of the speaking that happens is an attempt to give order and organization. In a passage quoted by

Alan Beck in his work on "point of listening," the composer and sound artist Michel Chion

asserts that the human voice "creates a hierarchy around itself" and "structures the sound space

which contains it"[115] (Beck 12). Henry's narrative voice attempts such structuring and hierarchy

creation, but does not convince. In this respect the play is one describing a failure or even a

defeat. Without much conviction, Ada recalls her strong point in school as being "geometry…

plane and solid" (259), but this faintly-recollected mastery seems to have vanished. The

occasions of Addie's childhood recalled as ghastly memories – her piano lesson, accompanied

by the time-keeping tapping of a mathematical ruler; her riding lesson, where she is coached on

her own personal form and posture – end in distress, as Addie's failure to attain these markers of

female accomplishment leads to "cacophonous" wailing. Marjorie Perloff correctly notes that the

repeating motifs in Henry's narrative ("old man … white world … no good") conform to the

organizing principles of poetic metre, but this system also slows and fails (Perloff 1999). Henry's

obsession with the question of whether "a horse can mark time" (253), perhaps a grasping for

order, results eventually in a fantasy of destruction:

> Train it to mark time! Shoe it with steel and tie it up in the yard, have it stamp all
>
> day! [*Pause*.] A ten-ton mammoth back from the dead, shoe it with steel and have it
>
> tramp the world down! Listen to it! (253)

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[114] Richardson's book *Unnatural Voices* (2006) classifies the "permeable narrator" as an alternative to the isolated consciousness of a solipsistic first-person narrator. The "permeable" narrator will display "the instrusion of the voice of another within the narrator's consciousness" (Richardson 95).

[115] "La presence d'une voix humaine hierarchise autour d'elle… la presence d'une voix humaine structure l'espace sonore qui la contient."

In the end, Beckett's radio protagonists flicker and falter, eroded by their own soundworld. But this is not the failure of the radio form. The dysfunction of these soulscapes speaks, finally, of the failure of solipsism as an alternative to the truly resonant sphere of aural space.

Conclusion: Radiophonic Remains

As we have seen, the protagonists of major radiophonic works by MacNeice, Cooper and Beckett flirt with a longing for obliteration. Hank, the artist in MacNeice's *Persons From Porlock*, paints and potholes himself into annihilating darkness: his black paintings and his subterranean hobby provide a refuge from financial and existential crises. Edward Thwaite in Cooper's *Under the Loofah Tree* apostrophizes the Kremlin, urging the outbreak of an all-destructive nuclear war. Henry in Beckett's *Embers* anticipates an apocalyptic steel-shoed mammoth tramping the world down. These nihilistic moments, not isolated examples, are the extreme symptoms of a general willful striving towards discomfort in the works of these three radiophonic writers. And this discomfort, as I have shown, is not only thematic but is also manifested in the form of radio works; if each writer explores the limitations of the radio form, then each writer also exposes what is *beyond* the limit: here, MacNeice encounters uncertainty; Cooper, embarrassment; Beckett, failure. These annihilating tendencies are the reverse of radio production, reminders that a form that capitalizes on the ability to create worlds out of "nothing" can return to this state of nothingness with equal or greater speed.

Such examples suggest that the radio medium in the postwar era had a moribund quality, and its writers connected this obsolescence to the already ghostly qualities of sound broadcasting – its ephemerality, its immateriality, its disembodied nature. An appropriate concluding question, then, is what *remains* of radio? Acoustic resonance, to which I referred in my introduction, speaks of the interaction of a sound with the sonic environment into which it is projected; sounds *resonate* once diffused from their sound-emitting sources. In my analytical chapters I have shown how creative radio required active listeners to complete the creation of meaning from the

acoustic signal. After the decay of this signal, what further resonance does radio have? What echoes, and what afterlife? I will apply this question to the cultural and institutional aspects of radio, and to radiophonic aesthetics in general.

The end of the radiophonic era

When did the radiophonic era end? The period covered by my discussion of progressive radio concludes in 1963, the year in which Louis MacNeice died and Laurence Gilliam, was on sick leave (Gilliam died the following year); in the absence of these two major figures, the BBC administration commenced the winding up of Features Department. Other moments could plausibly be identified as the end of the era of progressive radio. The Third Programme endured cuts to its broadcasting hours in 1957, and officially ended in 1967, replaced by Radio 3 in a widespread restructuring of BBC radio networks.[116] Another account considering the BBC's general broadcasting mission as an extension of welfare statism might identify 1979, when the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government signaled the unambiguous end of what remained of consensus politics, as the year in which progressive radio truly ended. A still broader account, interested in the development of radio technology, might point to the adoption of digital sound-production in the 1980s and the introduction of digital broadcasting in Britain at the start of the twenty-first century. I will here consider the reasons for these multiple endings, before noting lasting resonances – the remains – of radiophonic material.

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[116] The renaming of stations happened in 1967, but the substantial changes of content to Radio 3 took effect in 1970.

The termination of Features Department in early 1965 can be explained in two ways. In one sense, Features was a victim of its own success, having led the way in literary and sonic experimentalism in the 1940s and 1950s, initiating many of the developments (the creative use of studio technique and electroacoustic effects; an interest in the continental avant-garde; non-linear or less plot-dependent script-writing; the use of hybridized radio forms) that Drama went on to adopt in the later 1950s. Once Drama made use of these aspects of the radiophonic form, the distinction between the two departments was less clear. Similarly, Features script-writers, as the producer Piers Plowright has explained in an interview, refined a "pure radio" technique that had the effect of making their own authorial role less and less prominent. Features Department was crucial in developing a less author-centric model of radio, to the extent that Features writers in the mould of poet-producers like MacNeice wrote themselves into extinction. The poetically sensitive approach to production developed by MacNeice set a precedent for post-Features radio. Plowright himself was working as a Drama producer when making major works such as *Mr Fletcher the Poet* (1984), in which full prominence is given to the voice of the real-life subject, Jeff Fletcher, who vividly remembers incidents from his childhood in a Leicestershire mining community without authorial comment or intrusion. The producer's task, in such as program, is primarily to *listen* ("I think of myself as the listener," says Plowright) and then to sympathetically arrange the recorded material. The reminiscences, Plowright argues, have the *structure* of both poetry and drama; the resulting program is a *feature* in all but departmental name (Plowright). Equally, the Current Affairs Department in both radio and television began to freely use techniques borrowed from Features, so in its creative-documentary potential, as in its creative literary role, Features was superseded.

A contrasting explanation for the decline of Features is what Marilyn Butler identifies as the archaism of Features' relaxed, perhaps complacent departmental atmosphere, especially in

the face of BBC's new bureaucratic framework, which was designed to encourage greater productivity. "It is not really likely," reflects Butler, "that the indulgent atmosphere of Features, the comradeship, the long alcoholic sessions and the soporific meetings afterwards, *were* precisely conducive to the best creative effort" (Butler 6). The personnel of the department, as well as their Romantic ideals, were aging: as Asa Briggs records, the last full-time appointment to the department had been made in 1953 (Briggs 1995: 348). Taking these facts coldly, the 1960s, a decade of youthful cultural regeneration, was perhaps the right time to shut Features down. And yet, after its passing, the department's achievements were recognized: oddly, television was the medium in which Features and its "pure radio" approach were explored and celebrated in an *Omnibus* broadcast in 1977 (Briggs 1995: 349).

Similarly, the end of the Third Programme in 1967 was interpreted, depending on the sympathies or self-interest of the commenter, as confirmation of either the completion or abortion of the project of cultural planning. The new division of radio into four networks – Radio 1 for pop music, Radio 2 as the new light network, Radio 3 as a cultural network devoted primarily to "serious" music and Radio 4 as the new incarnation of the Home Service – left creative spoken radio with no natural home. Radio 3 included spoken content, but in drastically reduced proportions, although Radio 4 "absorbed" some Third Programme quality material (Whitehead 239), becoming essentially an amalgamation of the Third and Home. Viewed optimistically, this absorption denoted the success of the Third's cultural mission of preparing the British public for high quality radio, to the extent that a specialist network was no longer required. To others, the too-great gap between Radios 1 and 2 and the "elevated" Radio 3 created a greater segregation than had been apparent with the older networks and their policies of diagonalisation; Richard Hoggart lamented that there was "no longer the possibility of surprise" (Whitehead 232) at what listeners could enjoy. The problem of segregated broadcasting, so

central in discussions during the formation of the Third, remained prominent after the network's closure.

My choice of 1963 as the concluding point for the age of postwar radiophonics is determined by cultural factors outside as well as inside the BBC. In the early 1960s, the problem of postwar Britain's perceived cultural irrelevance (outlined in my introductory chapter) was answered by a developing popular culture. The BBC's 1967 restructuring was largely forced by the corporation's overdue acceptance of popular music[117] (for which Radio 1 was created). The radical aesthetic experience provided by progressive radiophonics was now available in youth culture, which necessarily originated outside of the mechanism of statist cultural production. Radio, for the new pop culture, was the means of distribution rather than production. This was an age of counter-culture rather than consensus – although the long-term effect of popular broadcasting on the vitality of radical counter-cultural aesthetics is a topic for another, longer critical enquiry. Still another critical discussion might examine how The Beatles' "A Day in the Life" has the semi-dramatic structure and electroacoustic dexterity of a radio feature; how David Bowie's pre-fame experiments with character-based recordings such as "Please Mr. Gravedigger" are pocket-sized sound plays, dense with radiophonic effects; or how the psychedelic explorations on the Small Faces' *Ogden's Nut Gone Flake* album, piecing together sonic effects and linguistically experimental spoken word fragments by the absurdist comedian Stanley Unwin continue the experiments in narrative and sound of radiophonic programs (all examples 1967).

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[117] For the purposes of this discussion, I take "popular" music to mean youth-oriented rock 'n' roll and its related forms, as opposed to the "light" music offered on the Light Programme or the folk music occasionally featured on the Home Service or Third Programme.

The resonance of radiophonics

Creative radio continued to exist, despite these changes to the corporation's structure. In British drama, the legacy of creative radio on the Third Programme remained apparent throughout the 1960s and beyond. Harold Pinter's works for radio such as *A Slight Ache* (1959) and *A Night Out* (1960) helped to confirm his growing reputation in the theatre; Caryl Churchill wrote a number of plays for the BBC during the sixties before her major successes on the stage. But my point about the Third Programme, as I noted in my opening chapter, is that it had a relevance beyond its use as a training ground for stage playwrights. Other writers continued to produce works for radio, such as Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase* (1972) and John Arden's *Pearl* (1978) that were major works in their own right, produced on the new Radio 3. But again, my concern is not so much for radio's contribution to the dramatic canon, as for the general sonic turn in the era of postwar radiophonics, the new ways of listening encouraged in this cultural moment, and radio's contribution to a resonant aural sphere. The legacy of these things is harder to quantify. I offer some examples of current radio art from both inside and outside the BBC, not as a definitive comment on the current state of radio art, but to indicate a continued interest in acoustically rich radiophonics.

Chris Watson, who began his career in sound as a founding member of the Sheffield group Cabaret Voltaire, pioneers of industrial music, now holds a role in the BBC comparable to that of Ludwig Koch during the mid-century. Watson is perhaps the highest profile sound recordist working for the corporation, although "sound recordist" is perhaps too modest a title for Watson, whose body of work includes exceptionally crafted field recordings of wildlife and natural spaces, as well as human environments. Watson has contributed sound to television, such

as David Attenborough's high-profile wildlife documentaries, but on radio he is able to direct the audience's attention to his sound-recordings alone. Some typical programs by Watson, made in collaboration with the producer Sarah Blunt and aired on BBC Radio 4 in recent years, include "The Station" (2013), assembled with the producer Sarah Blunt from Watson's recordings of soundscapes from Newcastle Upon Tyne Central Station; "Cricket Cabaret" (2012), a specially-made composition combining treated and untreated recording of Japanese crickets; and "Limestone, Water, Fire and Ice" (2012), in which Watson describes his experiences recording sound in caves in New Zealand and Iceland (and here we think of MacNeice's final sound-recording assignment). Each of these productions guides the casual radio listener through processes of attentive listening, emphasizing both the technological "listening" of the microphone, and the critical listening of the recordist and producer.

In David Hendy's series *Noise: A Human History* (2013), sound becomes more plainly the basis for an ongoing narrative. Each of the thirty short episodes is devoted to a different historical human environment, presented through archival or specially-made recordings. Hendy tells social histories through recorded soundscapes such as religious ceremonies, street festivals and natural spaces (still another cave – an eerie "talking" cave in Burgundy – is featured). Hendy's entire series was "remixed" in a fifteen-minute composition blending sounds from each episode, arranged by Matthew Herbert. Herbert has recently taken on the role of director of the New Radiophonic Workshop, a "rebirthing" of the Workshop announced in 2012 – an enterprise that speaks of the high esteem in which the original Workshop (closed by the BBC in 1998) is now held. The dialogue between "pure" field recording and creative radiophonics remains open.

Herbert is one of many experimental musicians to develop an involvement with creative radio. Ergo Phizmiz's radio play about Paul Klee for the BBC, *Paul Klee, a Balloon, the Moon,*

Music and Me (2011) imagines a phantasmagorical encounter with the painter (perhaps updating the "imaginary talks" that were a staple of Features' output), rendered in this instance by Phizmiz's customary collection of homemade or re-purposed toy instruments. Felix Kubin, the electronic musician and sound artist, has written prolifically for German radio, with stated influence by the Radiophonic Workshop as well as the German *Hörspiel* tradition. Alisdair McGregor and Howard Jacques, whose production team Holy Mountain has created dramas for Radio 4, make sonically aggressive and politically engaged radio, motivated by a desire to dispel the notion of radio drama as "middle class, boring and self-satirising" (Uddin 10); a recent production, *The Air Gap* (2012) dramatized Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning's incarceration for leaking confidential military information.

These examples tell us that creative, sonically exploratory radio is still being produced; but the material conditions, of course, are now different. I can guess with some confidence that my own experience of listening to these works is not atypical of today's audiences: of the programs mentioned above, I heard maybe two or three of them as live broadcasts, and "caught up" with the rest via digital storage media such as the BBC's iPlayer (which "holds" recordings of broadcasts for a limited time, or in some cases indefinitely, for listening at the audience's leisure). I am quite sure that I listened to all of them alone. Digital radio, as well as taking the imperfections and ethereal mystery out of radio (my guitar amplifier is not haunted by digital radio, as it was by the old ghostly analogue signals), has made liveness inessential to the experience of radio. In this respect, the gap between radio and the podcast format has been narrowed.[118] Postwar radio initiated the move away from "live" production, using tape

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[118] The most notable recent instance of aural narrative is the enormous popularity (and the ethical debate concerning) *Serial*, the 2014 podcast series by Sarah Koenig, who documents her extensive research into

technologies to pre-record programs; however, the diffusion and reception of these scheduled broadcasts were still live acts. Current digital listening habits signal a move away from the simultaneity of experience essential to broadcasting's creation of imagined communities.

This is to say that radio is now digitally stored; it waits for us; it does not seek to permeate or interrupt our daily business in the manner of the anxious radio voice annoying bridge players in the Third Programme's first ever broadcast, the satirical *How To Listen* (see page 36). The irony in this digital preservation is that traditionally, the BBC had a famously cavalier attitude towards preserving and archiving materials, to the extent that many presumably significant broadcasts (both radio and television) are lost – this carelessness is doubly odd, given the prevalent bureaucratic properness characteristic of other aspects of the BBC's life. What *can* be rescued of ephemeral radio is now being archived, in keeping with the "archive fever" of digital culture – the British Library Sound Archive has digitized many recorded broadcasts, and some major postwar plays, such as MacNeice's *The Dark Tower*, have been added to the iPlayer service.

Would the postwar radiophonic writers have appreciated the iPlayer or the podcast form? Presumably. Certainly, writers for the Third Programme appreciated that network's tendency to offer generous repeats of successful programs (*success* here usually determined by the broadcaster, not the listener); writing and production could become relatively complex, since the dedicated listener could be relied on to go back to a repeat broadcast. Digital radio extends these privileges. MacNeice, Cooper and Beckett might well have been delighted by digital radio. But

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a 1999 murder case. As non-fiction given narrative direction by the producer, *Serial* adapts the form of the radio feature.

we also hear in the works of these writers a certain relishing of the uncomfortable permeation of the private lives of the diverse public; digital radio decreases this possibility.

And radio, as I have repeatedly insisted, is really the construction of meaning *by the listener*. And from a listener's perspective, I am nagged by a feeling, when I listen to a "current" broadcast in much the same manner as I listen to a restored mp3 of Beckett's plays, or a digital album of incidental atmospheres by the Radiophonic Workshop – hearing stable, non-perishable information that is not competing for air-time or air-space – that I am listening only *to* radio, not *in* radio. The aesthetic, technological and social ideas diffused by the postwar BBC continue to resonate, but the fully resonant aural sphere in which the full meaning of postwar radiophonic writing is contained was unique to a specific moment.

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