

Peake

STUDIES

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Vol. 14, no 3

October 2015

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Apologies from the editor.



Editorial

THIS WILL BE THE LAST ISSUE of *Peake* STUDIES.

The reason for this is quite simple: the flow of articles offered for publication has dried up. Compared with twenty years ago, far fewer people are wanting to write about Peake, and without contributions the journal loses half its *raison d'être*. Its other purpose, to publish work by Peake, has been largely fulfilled. Although there are still many paintings and drawings in private hands (and therefore unknown to the rest of the world), the amount of unpublished poetry or prose by Peake is now, I believe, very small.

The only unprinted work of his that I am aware of is the short film-script, 'I had a Dream,' that Peake wrote for the Festival of Britain in 1951. So far as I know, it exists only on a single spool of film at the British Film Institute, and I have not been able to arrange to publish a transcription of it in *Peake Studies*. This is a shame, for Peake provided drawings that the camera played over while the actors Joan Maude and Michael Warre performed the monologue that he had written. What is more, he introduced a simple form of animation. In his first drawing of the dreamer, Susan, she has her eyes open. Then, when she begins to recount her dream, her eyes are seen to close. I believe that this technique inspired Peake's project for an animated film, *Just a Line*, which is illustrated on page 93 of *Writings and Drawings* and attributed to the early 1950s.

Although all Peake's known plays, complete or fragmentary, have been printed, mainly in periodicals, there is still no 'collected plays'. Methuen contracted to publish *Peake Plays I* more than six years ago (with the possibility of a volume II if the first was successful). I was appointed to edit it and duly supplied a book containing *The Cave*, *Noah's Ark*, and *The Wit to Woo*. The publisher dilly-dallied and missed the deadline of the 2011 centenary celebration; since then, they have been waiting for a 'suitable moment' to bring it out. The desire to publish Peake seems to have evaporated.

On the other hand, *Peake* STUDIES has printed quite a few letters by

The 'Land Girl' on the previous page is in watercolour over a pencil outline, signed in pencil, on very thin white paper. 14 x 9.5 inches. The subject was probably a model at the Central Art School, where Peake started to teach in 1950. A front view of a very similar model (if not the same girl in different clothes) with the same prop, can be found on page 92 of *Mervyn Peake: the man and his art*.

Image kindly supplied by Mike Kemp.

Further details at <http://www.kempbooksellers.co.uk/peake.htm>

Peake, and many more, starting with all those he wrote to Goatie Smith, remain unpublished. There is the possibility of a *Collected Letters*, in which previously unpublished letters, like those to Goatie, could be included. It all depends on permission from the Peake Estate.

Keeping *Peake Studies* going in the hope of more original work by Peake himself, or his admiring critics, is not an option, then – even as a newsletter: there’s desperately little Peake news to pass on. The late Sebastian Peake was very good at keeping his father’s name in the public eye, and he was generous in passing on details of persons to contact and material for me to print. So, as the journal closes, he is the first person I wish to thank for supporting it, closely followed by its faithful subscribers and keen contributors.

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On the following pages

Four colour illustrations to ‘Children’s Hour: four nursery rhymes’ from *Lilliput*, May 1950 (vol.26, No.5, issue 155, pp.37–40).

They have previously been reprinted, rather small, in *Mervyn Peake: the man and his art* (page 132).

The original drawings were sold at Sotheby’s on 24–25 January 1983.

These are reproduced from the magazine, so the colours may be a bit off compared with the originals.

The verses are also as printed in *Lilliput*, so they too may not be exactly as you remember them.

Mervyn Peake had already illustrated ‘How many miles to Babylon?’ ten years before, in *Ride a Cock-Horse*.

On that occasion, the boy was sitting up in bed, raising his candle to see a dark figure from Babylon, rising behind the bedhead.

Here he seems fascinated and at the same time slightly appalled by what he is seeing.



‘How many miles to Babylon?’
 ‘Three score miles and ten.’
 ‘Can I get there by candle-light?’
 ‘Yes, and back again.
 If your heels are nimble and light,
 You may get there by candle-light.’



'Pussy-cat, pussycat, where have you been?'
 'I've been to London to visit the queen.'
'Pussy-cat, pussycat, what did you there?'
 'I caught a little mouse under the chair.'



Three wise men of Gotham
Went to sea in a bowl.
If the bowl had been stronger,
My song had been longer.



Hark! Hark! The dogs do bark, / The beggars are coming to town.
Some in rags and some in tags, / And some in silken gown.
Some gave them white bread, / And some gave them brown,
And some gave them a good horse-whip,
And sent them out of town.

Ernest Thesiger as a Source of Inspiration for Dr Prunesquallor

H. L. Tyler

SEVERAL READERS of *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* have noted a distinct resemblance between the Castle's resident physician, Doctor Prunesquallor, and the actor Ernest Thesiger: both are tall, skeletally thin, with ridiculous, long, pointed noses, beautiful expressive hands, and a preternaturally graceful manner of moving. Although there is no definite proof that Mervyn Peake knew Ernest Thesiger very well or based aspects of Dr Prunesquallor on him, there is sufficient circumstantial evidence to suggest that Thesiger was Peake's source of inspiration.

Thesiger (1879–1961) was a notorious eccentric who always wore a string of fine pearls beneath his clothing, occasionally appeared at costume parties in female character, and was widely assumed to be homosexual (although he was married). Contemporary journalists observed that 'his appearance is bizarre,'¹ and remarked on 'his oddity of manner and appearance,'² and 'his astonishing grotesquerie.'³

Considered to be one of London's finest comic actors of the inter-war years, Thesiger started out as an artist. Having realized that he would never make his fortune as a painter, he turned to the professional stage in 1909, having appeared in amateur theatricals since childhood. He found immediate success as an actor. In 1915, after recovering from wounds sustained during military service in France, he achieved great success in the farce *A Little Bit of Fluff* which ran for over twelve hundred performances. Later, he became highly regarded for his ability to play unusual characters, such as the Dauphin in George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*.

As a film actor, he enjoyed a forty-five-year-long career (1916–61), becoming most famous for his performance as Doctor Septimus



Theisiger as Pretorius, 1935



Prunesquallor by Peake, 1940s

Pretorius in James Whale's 1935 masterpiece, *Bride of Frankenstein*.

Mervyn Peake and his wife liked to go to the cinema, and they surely went to see the *Bride* – it was one of the most popular films of the day. We can at any rate observe a striking physical resemblance between Doctor Prunesquallor, both in Peake's manuscript sketches and in the text of the Titus books, and Theisiger as Pretorius in *Bride*



Ernest Theisiger as himself



Prunesquallor by Peake

of *Frankenstein*, particularly in the crypt scene, where, after a grave-robbing session, Pretorius lays out a picnic on a tombstone, drinks his wine and toasts the bones he has collected, while laughing maniacally.

Two years later, Theisiger and Mervyn Peake worked on the same play, *The Son of the Grand Eunuch* (1936–7), with Theisiger in the role of the Grand Prior Profundity and Peake as costume designer. Whether they actually met during this production is not known, but Peake certainly attended at least one performance of the play.⁴ At this moment, then, if not at any other, Theisiger surely made the impression on Peake that surfaced when he began writing *Titus Groan*, in the autumn of 1940. What is striking is that Prunesquallor remains largely unchanged in all the sketches of him, showing that Peake had a clear idea in his mind of what he looked like. They appear to caricature Theisiger's appearance and mannerisms.

In photographs, Theisiger is often seen with his hands in a position very similar to what Peake describes as 'that peculiarly effeminate gesture of the left hand [which Prunesquallor] was so fond of, the placing of the tips of the thumb and index finger together, thus forming an O, while the remaining three fingers were strained back and curled into letter C's of dwindling sizes.'⁵ Like Prunesquallor, Theisiger wore spectacles, although he generally took them off for photographs, so there are not many images of him wearing them. In one striking contrast to Prunesquallor, Theisiger did not speak in a squeaky falsetto, but had a precise and melodious voice.

What makes it plausible that Peake might have been personally acquainted with Theisiger is the number of other characteristics that Peake attributed to Dr Prunesquallor in the text of the Titus books. Theisiger was extremely talkative and had a caustic wit which he displayed, apparently without regard to hurt feelings, while maintaining a manner of exaggerated urbanity. In spite of this abrasive quality, he was a loyal friend to those he cared for and he engaged in a great deal of charity work. This parallels Prunesquallor's affection for Fuchsia and Titus, and his role as virtually the only denizen of the Castle with compassion, even though he exercises it capriciously. Like Prunesquallor, Theisiger played the violin, though he had probably given it

up by the time he achieved fame as an actor. And also like Prunesquallor, who is described sketching the skeleton of an ostrich on the tablecloth in *Gormenghast*,⁶ he continued to paint and sketch throughout his life.

The eccentric Dr Prunesquallor shares so many characteristics with the eccentric Ernest Thesiger that it seems almost impossible for their similitude to have been produced entirely by chance. Perhaps some day proof will surface that Peake and Thesiger actually met at some point prior to the writing of *Titus Groan*.

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Notes

- 1 'The Versatile Thesiger,' Hugh Walpole in *Vanity Fair*, August 1922.
- 2 Review of *The Circle* by Archibald Haddon in *Green Room Gossip*, 1922.
- 3 Review of *Saint Joan* by James Agate in *The Sunday Times*, March 30, 1924.
4. See G. Peter Winnington, *Mervyn Peake's Vast Alchemies* (Peter Owen, 2009), p.107.
5. Mervyn Peake, *Titus Groan* (all British paperback editions up to the Viking edition of 1998), p.108.
6. Mervyn Peake, *Gormenghast* (all British paperback editions up to the Viking edition of 1998), p.28.

H. L. TYLER is a professional artist and keen amateur embroiderer who became fascinated by Thesiger after reading his book *Adventures in Embroidery* and his memoir *Practically True*. She has recently created a website dedicated to Thesiger, <http://www.ernestthesiger.org>.

Fuchsia's Origins

G. Peter Winnington

SEEING MERVYN PEAKE'S DRAWING OF FUCHSIA on the front cover of the Penguin edition of *Titus Groan* (from 1968 until the mid-1980s), some people – often those with only a hazy idea of the content of the novel – speculated about her ethnic origin. And it is true that her heavy features, particularly her full lips, make her look as though she might have some African blood, or more probably Tahitian, since her hair is straight, rather than curly. What's more, quite a few of the Tahitian girls painted by Gauguin are depicted with a similar bearing of the head, in three-quarter profile, with the eyes looking to the right. Yet nothing in *Titus Groan* suggests that the inhabitants of Gormenghast are anything but European.

Clearly, it was Fuchsia's surly mood and sultry character that Peake was expressing, with no thought of an implied ethnic origin. The Penguin cover drawing (see page 18) was reproduced from the manuscript of *Titus Groan*, dated October 1940. The sketch comes at the moment when Steerpike first climbs into Fuchsia's attic, and she is deeply hurt by this intrusion, this violation of her secret domain. Peake must have had a very clear idea in his mind of what she looked like, for at some later date, when he made pen-and-wash portraits of Gormenghast characters (possibly with a view to having them reproduced in the published book), he made an almost identical picture of her (see page 19). In fact they are so alike that he must have worked from his manuscript sketch (which he tore out of the notebook and preserved separately): the mouth is much the same in shape and expression, but the lower eyelids are less full, and the hair is more abundant, with two bangs on the forehead. None of his other (identifiable) sketches of Fuchsia – and there are not many of them in the manuscripts – depart substantially from this impression of her.

Some time ago, Mike Kemp acquired an early portrait by Peake

which was catalogued as ‘Mabel with Black Coat’ (see facing page). On the back of it there is a label from the Leicester Galleries, where Peake exhibited in February 1939. Checking the exhibition catalogue, Mike found a portrait, item 37, entitled ‘Model with a black coat’; the spidery handwriting on the back had been mis-read. The work was bought by Stephen Allen, who at once observed a similarity between the features of the sitter and Fuchsia’s face on the front cover of *Titus Groan*.

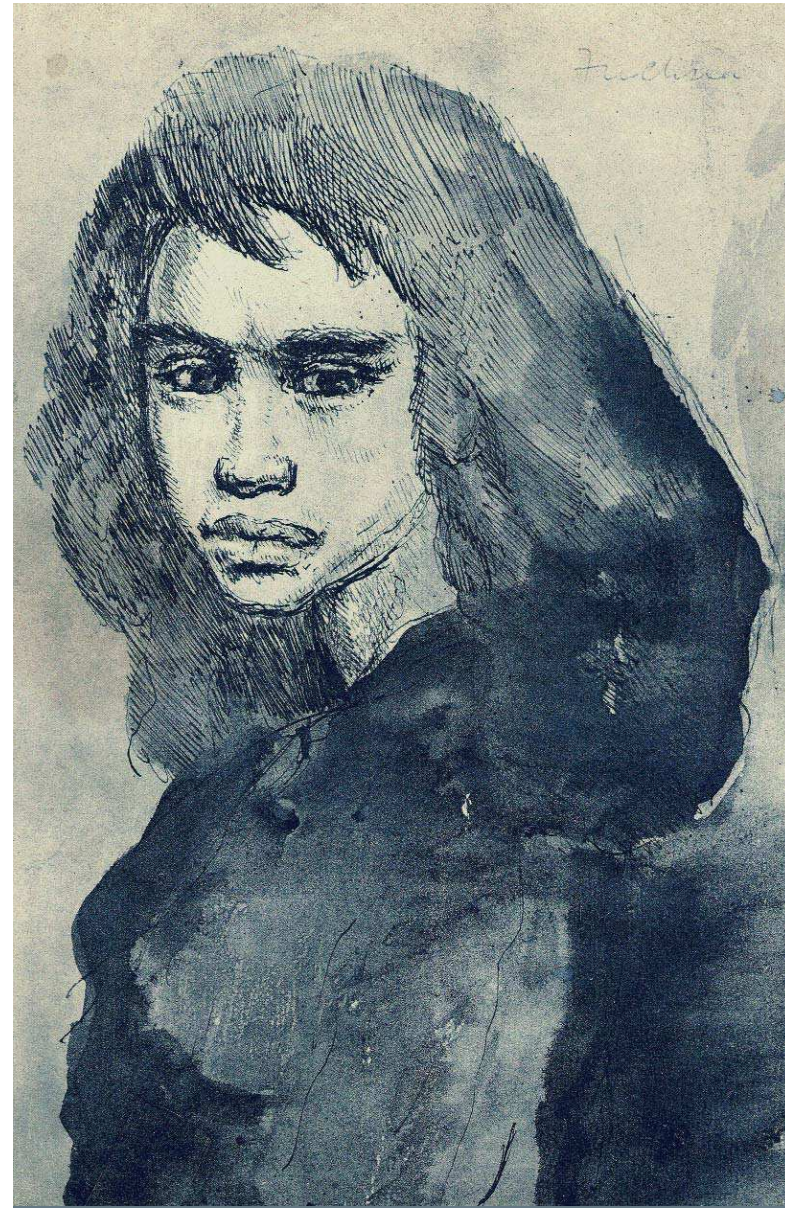
Apart from its presence at the 1939 exhibition, we have no information about the ‘Model with a black coat’. Given the armchair on the very edge of which the girl is so uncomfortably perched, the underwear and dress thrown over the back of the chair, and the carpet on the floor, she is unlikely to be a model sitting at the Westminster School of Art, where Peake began teaching early in 1936. The setting looks much more like one of the run-down rooms that Peake rented between his return from Sark and his marriage in December 1937. That would situate the painting in 1936 or ’37. As he continued to use his room in Battersea Church Road as a studio well into 1939 (see the reminiscences of Eric Drake in *MPR* 9, pages 9 and 10), it might equally well have been done during the following year, at the latest – pictures were submitted for the exhibition at the Leicester Galleries before the end of 1938.

The posture of the sitter is hardly that of someone accustomed to modelling. She may well be one of those girls whom Peake spotted in the street and asked to sit for him, attracted – who knows? – by those features that he knew from Gauguin’s paintings of Tahitian girls. (Maeve recalled that when she was a young bride, ‘the girls he stopped always seemed to have good “bone structure”, which eased the small green seed of jealousy’ (*A World Away*, p.18).) At any rate, her downcast gaze and the position of her hands suggest embarrassed self-consciousness, as does the fact that she has kept her coat round her shoulders and is using it to hide her right breast. The attention that Peake paid to her face in this portrait suggests that he was much more interested in that, in its bone structure, than in her body.

Continued on page 20



Mabel/Model with a Black Coat. Signed, but not dated.
Pastels with ink heightened with gum arabic. 30 x 33.5 cm.
Exhibited: London, The Leicester Galleries, February 1939, item 37,
and London, New Grafton Gallery, October 1969, no.459.
Photographed for *Peake Studies* by Peter Ashley.



This concords with the portraits of Fuchsia, in which Peake showed only her face. There are marked similarities between them: the thick eyebrows, the slightly squashed nose, and the full lips. So we might hypothesize – and it can only be speculation – that, as he imagined Fuchsia’s face when surprised in her attic by Steerpike, Peake remembered this portrait from three or four years before, in which he had recorded the defensive posture of a girl unaccustomed to being seen unclothed, and her refusal to make eye contact with the painter. To these he added Fuchsia’s passionate, adolescent character in those petulant lips.

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My thanks to Stephen Allen for sharing his thoughts about this portrait, and to Mike Kemp for his input.

Sources

- Drake, Eric, ‘The Rented Room.’ With comments by Maeve Gilmore. *Mervyn Peake Review*, 9 (Autumn 1979), pp.4–10.
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Peake’s Ballads: ‘The Touch o’ the Ash’ and *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb*

G. Peter Winnington

MERVYN PEAKE WROTE TWO BALLADS, some twenty years apart: ‘The Touch o’ the Ash’ and *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb*. The first (hereafter ToA) is Peake’s earliest extant poem; the carefully copied-out MS, with beautifully decorated capital letters opening each stanza, is dated 1929. *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb* (RFB) was written in the second half of the 1940s, while Peake and his family were living on Sark. It is his last narrative poem. Together these ballads represent two poles of Peake’s poetry-writing, which makes it all the more interesting to examine them together.

Unfortunately, Rob Maslen did not include ToA in his *Collected Poems* of Mervyn Peake. The only printed source is *Peake’s Progress*, where it was erratically transcribed. (I have placed a list of corrections on the *Peake Studies* website.) RFB was also reproduced in *Peake’s Progress*, but the original (Allen Lane) edition was full of misprints and omitted a full stanza. I got that stanza reinstated in the 1981 paperback edition of the book. (Do not bother with the Penguin Classic edition of 2000; it reproduces the error-filled Allen Lane text.) However, the only reliable version of RFB is in *Collected Poems*, and that is what I shall be quoting from.

In form, both poems are based on the traditional seven-foot rhyming lines of the ballad, with occasional internal rhymes, in Peake’s favourite iambic rhythm. Their themes draw on traditional ballad motifs, which were also some of some Peake’s favourites: the sea and sailors, to start with, and especially the solitary figure. Clearly, *Treasure Island* is lurking in the background. So too is *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, whose influence can be felt in both

poems. Their stories are soon told.

In ToA, a shooting star enables an old sailor called Si to predict that the cruel captain of his ship will die ‘three nights tonight, at two-o’-the-clock’ (48), and that Si himself will be the cause of it. His words are overheard and passed on to the captain, who punishes Si by throwing him, bound hand and foot, into the boiler-room furnace. As the hapless Si is cremated alive, his ashes re-assemble into the shape of his body. They rise to haunt the captain until the predicted hour, when ‘the hand of the Ash-man shot forwards out and gripped on [his] gullet strings,’ (61) whereupon the captain falls dead. This is recounted by an unnamed sailor who is repeating the story told him by the bosun of his ship, who claims to have witnessed these events.

No such narratorial complexity in RFB, which is stark in its simplicity. During a World War II air raid on London, a baby is hardly born when its mother is killed: molten lead from the roof above ‘ran in / And over the counterpane’ (179). Thus the baby’s life begins with the death by fire of its mother, just as the ash-body in ToA is born of the immolation of Si. The babe is ‘found in a fire-bright drain asleep / By a sailor dazed and lost’ (179). Carrying it, ‘he pranced like a spider through the fire-torn door / Of a church’ where, after lengthy conversation, they are both killed in the explosion of a flying bomb.

As already intimated, the two poems share a preoccupation with fire, which plays such an important role in the Titus books: Steerpike threatens the Groan family and their immediate attendants with death by burning in the library, which he sets on fire in order to save them at the last minute and thus pass for a hero. Sourdust is too old and frail to make it. Steerpike’s come-uppance occurs when he sets fire to the replacement Master of Ritual, Barquentine – and himself at the same time. Putting out the flames by leaping into the moat enables him to get rid of Barquentine by drowning him, but leaves him scarred for life. There is nothing admirable in Steerpike’s acts.

In ToA, it’s the captain, Bully Shad – is that a truncated shadow? – who is the villain, the most cruel and sadistic of Peake’s authority

figures. He is more cruel than Mr Slaughterboard, who is simply indifferent to the lives of his crew; compared with Shad, Swelter and Barquentine are almost comedic. And the picturebook Captain Slaughterboard, for all his fearsome acts, is tamed by falling in love with the Yellow Creature. So it is appropriate that Bully Shad should be killed by the ash-figure of Si (another truncated name, just as the lives of both captain and sailor are cut short).

Having mentioned Swelter, I should point out that, in the opening scene of *Titus Groan*, the kitchen fires in Swelter’s domain ‘had been banked dangerously’ and ‘four grillers were forcing joint after joint between the metal doors with their clumsy boots’ (TG27). At this point, Steerpike, leaning ‘against the shadowy side of a pillar’ (TG32) is bitterly watching Swelter. In ToA, at the moment when Bully Shad tosses the poor Si through the iron door* of the boiler-room furnace, the narrator makes one of his few interventions, saying: ‘I was deep in the gloom as I watched him there’ (51). The two scenes contain the same motifs, demonstrating the continuity of Peake’s imagination: his novels are not punctual flashes of inspiration, but born of the patterns of a lifetime of imagining.

This continuity can be found in the maritime setting of ToA and the numerous allusions to the sea in RFB. One doesn’t generally think of Peake as a poet of the sea, yet ‘Vikings’ (21–22) was his first published poem, and a seascape or lakeside provides the background to a great many scenes in his work, as I demonstrated in *The Voice of the Heart* (chapter 3, ‘Islands’). Peake used it to enhance the isolation, desolation, or helplessness of the persons involved.

For all its setting in the heart of London during the Blitz, RFB is full of references to the sea. In the opening stanzas, Peake evokes the sound of the destruction of London, and rapidly moves on to maritime metaphors: shattered windowpanes ‘Set sail with a clink of wings’ (178). As the sailor walks down the street, the toppling building are perceived as passing ships:

And the ships of brick and the ships of stone

* The ‘fire-torn door’ of the church in RFB echoes these oven / boiler-room-furnace doors.

And the charcoal ships lurched by
 While his footsteps clashed on the frozen waves
 That shone to the scarlet sky. (185)

By the way, I wondered if Peake's artist-eye was seeing those 'charcoal ships' as though they were drawn with charcoal against a fire-bright background. After all, in a 1943 poem, he saw skeletons standing 'Like charcoal-boughs' (124). Then I noticed that, as soon as he enters the bomb-damaged church, the sailor lays the babe upon a pew that has become a 'charcoal bench' (185) – as though it has been afflicted by the 'charry touch' of Si in ToA. So I suppose that Peake was simply exploiting the effect of fire on wood.

After laying the baby on the pew, the sailor 'swarmed the side' of the pulpit 'Like a pilot and came aboard' (186). He calls it his crow's-nest (187), and it comes with a 'gull-winged Book' (189). And at the end of the poem, he envisages his future as though describing a fantastic ship:

'The masts are bright with silver light,
 The decks are black with grass
 And the bay's so smooth that I can see
 The blood beneath the glass.

 'And the guns that shine with oil and wine
 Are smothered in sea-flowers deep,
 And in the throat of every gun
 A mermaid lies asleep.

'O little babe, why won't you leap
 Aboard, and sail with me?' (198–9)

In short, RFB is quite as much a tale of the sea as it is of wartime London.

Even the shooting star which inspires Si's prophesy in ToA is associated with the sea in Peake's mind. One of his last poems, beginning 'That lance of light' (which Maslen dates to March–August 1958) describes just such a meteorite that, after a journey of 'a million light-years,' plunges into the sea and 'Hissed at the impact' (218). This would explain why, in stanza nine of RFB, 'the sailor strode

with the new-born babe / to the hiss of the falling stars' (179). Just as the meteorite is associated with time – and with the end of the journey that constitutes its life – so the shooting star in ToA starts a countdown to the moment of Shad's death, and Si's too. Similarly, 'the hiss of the falling stars' in RFB marks the start of a countdown that ends with the fall of the flying bomb and the deaths of both sailor and baby. On a ship, the hours are counted off by the changing watches and the ringing of bells, not to mention by Bully Shad's own brass watch in ToA. The watch is there, metaphorically, in RFB too: the sailor lifts the baby to his ear 'like a watch' and listens to 'the tick of its heart' (181). And Peake takes up this ticking with reference to the programmed 'life' of the flying bomb:

the ticking was

The stuttering of a far machine. (195)

In both stories, then, this remorseless passing of time (in space, in the sky, and on earth) leads to a double death.

Both ToA and RFB are very much about solitude, a motif central to all Peake's work (and consequently it merits a whole chapter in *The Voice of the Heart*). His cruelty isolates Bully Shad; foreknowledge of Shad's death – and his own – isolates Si; sharing that knowledge with a fellow sailor turns the sailor into a solitary and unwilling witness of events, and that sailor, become a bosun, repeats the story to the narrator of the poem

till I wished that I were dead,
 Begad!

Till I wished that I were dead. (61)

Making another person a companion in one's solitude may relieve the burden of solitude, but imposes a different burden on the other person. (In *Letters from a Lost Uncle*, poor Jackson is pressganged – on a beach, of course – into accompanying the Uncle and is literally burdened with all his equipment.)

RFB is all about sharing solitude too. What could be more desperately isolated and lonely than a new-born child lying in a gutter in the middle of an air raid? It is found by Peake's favourite emblem of the solitary: a castaway, a sailor 'In a waterless world' (179). The story of Titus Groan originally started with just such a meeting, 'on

the beach of an island' where 'Lord Groan had been marooned and Mr Stewflower had been living there alone' (PP107). By the time Peake reached the middle of *Gormenghast*, this meeting had become the moment when the young Titus, who has been Lord Groan since the death of his father in the first year of his life, meets the outcast Flay on the banks of Gormenghast river (G137). Flay has not spoken to anyone since he was banished when Titus was very young. He takes the exhausted boy on his shoulder and carries him off to his cave for rest and refreshment. The truant Titus becomes the temporary companion of Flay in his utter isolation.

In RFB, the stranded sailor carries the infant to the church 'in the crib of his bowsprit arm' (185). From the pulpit, he offers to 'sing [it] a tale / To the tune of a bleeding hymn. . . . Will you listen to me?' he asks and the baby replies, 'I will, I will' (188), sealing a highly significant pact between the two.

However, Peake abandoned the idea of having the sailor tell a tale at this point – the story he began can be found in Rob Maslen's article, 'Fantasies of War in Peake's Uncollected Verse.' Instead, Peake developed the relationship between the new-born baby and the sailor. Fantastically, the child 'can speak like a man' and 'perch in the air' (193) – levitate – just as the newly created ash-form of Si can speak and move about the ship, right up to the cross-trees of the mast. So both poems involve the supernatural, which is significant when we consider how carefully Peake avoided the fantastic in the Titus books.

In the surreal conversation that ensues, the baby and the sailor comfort each other and the baby suggests that they should lure a flying bomb to their church, 'That we may explode in one flash of love / At the height of a world at war' (193). Thus RFB ends with a scene of mutual self-sacrifice, whereas in ToA it is mutual destruction.

This is where the similarities between ToA and RFB come to an end. The first is a horror story, uniformly humourless. The second runs through a wide range of emotions. It opens, for instance, by describing the burning of London in terms that express childish delight in the antics of 'little red monkey-flames' that

Run over the roofs and hop

From beam to beam, and hang by their tails

Or pounce on a table-top.

When they 'run wild / And slide down the banisters' (179), it is easy to forget that fire is not usually so playful; it also causes the death of the baby's mother, cremates the living body of Si the sailor, and consumes the library of Gormenghast (as well as Sourdust). In the Titus books, Steerpike acquires a monkey that he calls Satan; the fire in RFB is the evil consequence of war flown in from Nazi Germany. Yet viewed through the innocent eyes of a child, destruction by bombing can be poetic:

The loose wallpapers pour

And ripple their waters of nursery whales. (180)

And the baby is thankful to the sailor,

You showed me the coloured lights,

And the golden shoals of the falling stones,

And the scarlet of the streets;

so that 'I am rich on my natal day' (193). This is the Peake who wrote in 1937,

I am too rich already, for my eyes

Mint gold. (22)

Peake may not have witnessed much of the Blitz itself (although he wished to depict it), but he was living in London in mid-1944 when the flying bombs began to fall, and he will have seen the devastation they caused. As in the Blitz, the disembowelled houses revealed their inner rooms. This may have reminded him of how, in the early 1930s, he painted a child-high frieze of animals round the walls of a nursery (*MP's Vast Alchemies*, p.65). At any rate, it was in July 1944 that he fell in love with Ruth Shackle, and wrote to her: 'Be careful of yourself – in the streets – crossing roads – & this sky-monster. The future will say, "They met at the time of the Flying Bomb – way back in '44"' (*PS* 13: iii, 9). So while ToA takes place in a cruel and loveless world, RFB is all about love.

As I showed in *The Voice of the Heart*, Peake's work is full of ill-assorted companions: his solitary males invariably pick up partners that are humanized animals of ill-defined gender. Think of Captain Slaughterboard and his Yellow Creature, of the Lost Uncle and



Old Man and Child
(28 x 36 inches)
Signed 'Mervyn Peake'
and dated 1933.
From a photograph by John
Bignell, taken for the cata-
logue of the DLI Museum &
Art Gallery exhibition,
'The Voice of a Pencil'
(Dec. 1979-Jan. 80).

Jackson the turtle. In a 1933 oil painting, Peake depicted a really old man with a tiny child in his lap (see facing page), in a setting that could be thought of as anticipating London in the blitz, although it actually seems to depict a craggy natural landscape. The dark pits of the old man's eyes contrast most strikingly with the gentleness of his gesture as he admonishes (or instructs) the tiny infant. This darkness adds to the contrast between the pale, smooth skin of the child compared with the heavily wrinkled man.

In RFB we have a variation on this partnership theme, inspired by love and charity: the sailor picks up a human baby of undetermined gender; by rescuing it from the gutter, he may be thought of as a kind of Good Samaritan, and the baby certainly thinks of him as such, for it repeatedly calls him its 'saviour'.



However, the illustration that Peake provided (albeit years after writing the poem) of the sailor dancing over the shattered panes of glass with the child on his shoulders evokes not just Flay carrying Titus but, more traditionally, Saint Christopher with the Christ-child, whom he drew for Fabian at about the time he wrote RFB (see *PS* 12: iii, 47). Garance Coggins has observed that this illustration seems to quote Blake's frontispiece for *Songs of Experience*.



It is clear that the sailor is thinking along religious lines too: having first qualified the child as a 'doll' (181), he graduates to 'little fish' (183) with fists 'like a brace of anemones' and a 'body as soft as an egg' (187). On the strength of this, he heads straight for the traditional symbol of the fish for Christ, exclaiming

'O, Christ in heaven! I must worship you
For the ticker you keep in your chest;
I must worship you for your new-look, babe,
That'll never be washed or dressed.'

(187)

On the next page, he calls it a 'finless fish' (188), which sounds like 'sinless'.

From this point onwards, the baby takes on Christ-like qualities, first by inspiring the sailor with Biblical strength:

'With the light of your eyes so fixed on mine
Then strong as a lion I am!
The lion of Judah, or Africa,
Or the one that lay down with the lamb.' (187)

Then, in various speeches, it reveals that it has already suffered everything that can befall a human being:

'I've lived it all before,
For there's nothing new when the womb is through
With its restless prisoner.' (188)

In particular, it has experienced everything of a sailor's life:

'I have swarmed the masts of a thousand fleets,
I have drowned through the bruise-blue sea,
I have burned through an age of scarlet fires
So have no fear of me.' (189)

It has infinite sympathy for the man who has saved it.

For all his saintly qualities, the sailor is human. He has hurt his shoulder by 'warding off [a] burning beam' (184) and he is bleeding to death from 'the glass that is lodged in [his] hip bone' (184). In his pain, he is unrecognizable; he

threw back his head and laughed
In a way that was loud and torn,
And even his mother would never have guessed
That his face was the face of her son (184)

His strength is 'ebbing away' and he tells the baby that 'the lion in my breast has died' (191). He fears death, and his Christ-child companion, who has already 'died a thousand times' (193), feels divine pity for him in terms that are quintessentially Peakean:

Down the burning cheek of the naked babe
A tear slid heavily
As though it were taking the curve of the world. (194)

For Peake, a tear is 'the loveliest emblem of the heart's condition' (G337). The babe promises to cheer him as he dies with the

Christian message of hope, 'For death is so mean and small' (192) and 'the Grace / Of God' is immeasurably infinite.

At this moment, the baby sees the figure of 'Christ's Mother' (196) among the rubble in the church. In his weakness and despair, the sailor cannot see her, or hear her beating heart, yet the baby can, rather as Peake's own child in Maeve's womb can hear the beating of her heart, that 'double-throated chord of loving' (77). The babe asks to be taken to her; as the sailor does so, symbolically reuniting the literal baby with its mother and at the same time the Christ-child with the Virgin, his 'brain broke loose' (198), enabling him to embrace death with joy, untrammelled by reason.

The first consequence of this is his hallucinatory vision of a sailor's life, ending with his inviting the babe to join him, that I quoted earlier. 'I will,' answers the child, echoing his earlier promise to the sailor. But at this moment, he hears 'the *silence* of the cross / That we've been waiting for' (199). This is highly ambiguous: is it the silence of death on the Cross that this Christ-child knows awaits him, or the silence that follows the cutting out of the engine of the flying bomb, signifying that it is now about to fall?* The answer is of course both – or rather, all three, for there are in fact three crosses here: there's the cross of Christ's crucifixion; the German iron cross that was painted on the wings of flying bombs; and the shape of the flying bomb itself, with its 'short black wings that made the cross' (201). And all three recall the cross-trees on the masts of sailing ships, the place that Captain Shad selects to await the coming of his death in the shape of the ash-form of Si.

Meanwhile, the child has 'slid out of the sailor's coat / And hovered over his head' (200), as though to protect the sailor from the falling bomb – and something equally fantastic has taken place. In the ruined church

* The V1 flying bomb was propelled by a pulsejet engine that made a characteristic rapid popping or buzzing noise – hence they were familiarly known as 'buzz-bombs'. Londoners quickly learned to sigh with relief when one passed overhead with the sound unchanged – or to rush for shelter if they heard the engine stop.

a headless horse
Lay stiff in the smouldering aisle with a hoof
At its heart like the sign of the cross. (185)

At the time when we encounter them early in the poem, the significance of the headless horse and its curious posture are lost on us, but now

the dead horse rose on its armoured feet
And strode to where they stood, (200)
with the result that all these symbols come together:
the silence broke and the air was filled
With the whirr of the diving cross
While the babe hung poised and the fainting sailor
Leaned on the headless horse. (200)

The proximity of these heads is significant. Traditionally, the brain in the head – our reason – is what prevents Christians from accepting belief and trust in God. Traditionally, too, the horse symbolizes the body, controlled by the rider, reason. Now this horse is not only riderless but headless; the sailor has ceased to reason and is leaning against the horse, while the babe hovers above them both, in the place where their heads might be. They form a kind of Trinity. And at this very moment, the bomb falls and explodes. Its tail

Stuck out of the floor to point the place
That it had journeyed from.

While plunged below in the shattered crypt
Was the skull of the scalding head. (201)

This anticipates Peake's belief in *Titus Alone* in the evil of technology and Muzzlehatch's resulting desire to blow up the factory.

'Scalding head' reminds me of other moments in Peake's writing when a skull is associated with bubbling water. For instance, following Sourdust's death in the fire, Flay fetches his skeleton from the library: 'after scratching his own skull for a long while [he] at last decided that the only thing to do would be to carry the rattling relics in his arms *as though he were carrying a baby*.' It was raining hard at the time, the water 'streaming over the bones and skull in his arms and *bubbling* in the eye sockets' (TG 336). On the following page,

after Steerpike has appropriated the skull for his own purposes, Sourdust's remains are buried with a calf's skull, 'after it had been *boiled* and was free of the last vestige of flesh' (TG 337; my emphasis in each case). So the 'skull of the scalding head' of the flying bomb, surprising enough here, is not without its antecedents.

While ToA may be definitely pagan, the religious message at the end of RFB makes it thoroughly unique in Peake's oeuvre. His most explicitly Christian poem, it nevertheless remains faithful to the pattern of immolation that we find in ToA and the Titus books, and other basic motifs which recur throughout his work.

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The Things They Say

Aghast at the Lack of Gormen

‘We are all imprisoned by the dictionary. We choose out of that vast, paper-walled prison our convicts, the little black printed words, when in truth we need fresh sounds to utter, new enfranchised noises which would produce a new effect.’

Steerpike in *Titus Groan*

Employing the creative wordplay that typifies his work, Peake uses four lines to identify and illuminate the difference between a book that remains with you for as long as it takes to read and those which (like *Gormenghast*) entrench themselves within your psyche. In short, Peake explains the key to his success as a writer, or at least, the critical success of the Titus books. (An important distinction because whilst those brave enough might suggest that Peake’s masterpiece technically surpasses Tolkien’s, only the latter allows you to don pixelled elven garb and traipse Mordor.)

Attempting to explain Peake’s ability to create mind-altering description, critics have highlighted his occupation as an illustrator. However, whilst the artist’s eye is undoubtedly advantageous, I feel that Peake is able to drag his readers so wholly into Gormenghast because he is able to fuse together combinations of words and ideas that no other writer would consider. (Or at least none that I’ve read yet.) . . .

It’s curious that whilst I feel enriched as a person and a writer for having read the Titus books, I have to acknowledge at the same time that there’s a lot you could dislike about the trilogy. . . . Unlike a lot of popular fiction, it is not hugely plot-driven and the dense layering of description often overwhelms the comparatively sparse dialogue. Additionally, one might recognize the characters as pantomime heroes and villains: the moody teenager, the spluttering doctor, and the depressive earl.

However, I’d argue that even its flaws simultaneously work to redeem themselves: yes, Peake’s style is description-heavy but it’s not description in the usual sense of setting the scene. His descriptions comprise chunks of art work that you consume without ever checking how many pages are left. Whilst arguably carved from the same block as stock panto figures, his characters have their oddities so richly detailed and expanded upon that, like the descriptions, they rise above their carving blocks.

As an expression of my appreciation for the Titus books, I have dedicated a post to this lurking literary gem in order to alert as many people as possible that they need to read it instantly. (As in *now*.) However, if you’re one of the lucky ones whose brain is already creeping past Flay’s sleeping form, help me share my love for a wrongfully neglected masterpiece.

Posted by ‘The Ring Lady’ on 26 March 2015

<https://ringladytraining.wordpress.com/2015/03/26/aghast-at-the-lack-of-gormen/>

Grub Street: margins of the literary scene

From ‘a review of *Gormenghast*’

Peake’s writing style is a key element in what makes his books unique, or rather, what successfully makes this gargantuan castle and its bizarre inhabitants feel like the cast of an epic tale rather than an odd little artistic experiment by a gifted eccentric. Ponderous, wordy, elaborate, drawn-out: there is no doubt that Peake could cut most of his sentences down by three quarters, but to do so would be to destroy exactly what makes his writing so brilliant. Here’s an example, which may be the longest quote I have ever inserted into a book review, but which I think illustrates the style of Gormenghast perfectly – especially since it happens to be simultaneously horrifying and hilarious. Deadyawn, the ancient and wheelchair-bound headmaster of Gormenghast’s school, arrives in a classroom with the faculty for a surprise visit; mere moments ago, the schoolboys were playing a game beneath the nose of their sleeping teacher which involved the

use of a waxed and slippery floorboard, which now remains up-turned.

How merciful a thing is man's ignorance of his immediate future! What a ghastly, paralysing thing it would have been if all those present could have known what was about to happen within a matter of seconds! For nothing short of pre-knowledge could have stopped the occurrence, so suddenly it sprang upon them.

The scholars were still standing, and Mr Fly, the usher, who had reached the end of the passage between the desks, was about to turn the high chair to the left and to run it up under Bellgrove's desk where Deadyawn could speak to his oldest professor, when the calamity occurred, and even the dreadful fact of Titus' disappearance was forgotten. For The Fly had slipped! His feet had fled from under his perky body. His cocky little walk was suddenly a splayed confusion of legs. They shot to and fro like a frog's. But for all their lashing they could get no grip on the slippery floor, for he had trodden on that deadly board which had been returned – upside down – to its place below Bellgrove's desk.

The Fly had no time to let go his grip of the High Chair. It swayed above him like a tower – and then while the long line of the staff peered over one another's shoulders and the boys stood at their desks transfixed, something more appalling than they had ever contemplated took place before them.

For as The Fly came down in a crash on the boards, the wheels of the high chair whirled like tops and gave their final screech and the rickety piece of furniture leapt like a mad thing and from its summit something was hurled high into the air! It was Deadyawn!

He descended from somewhere near the ceiling like a visitor from another planet, or from the cosmic realms of Outer Space, as with all the signs of the Zodiac fluttering about him he plunged earthwards.

Had he but had a long brass trumpet at his lips and the power of arching his back and curling upwards as he neared the floor-boards, and of swooping across the room over the heads of the scholars in a riot of draperies, to float away and out through the leaves of the

plane tree and over the back of Gormenghast, to disappear for ever from the rational world – then, if only he had had the power to do this, that dreadful sound would have been avoided: that most dreadful and sickening sound which not a single boy or professor who heard it that morning was ever able to forget. It darkened the heart and brain. It darkened the very sunlight itself in that summer classroom.

But it was not enough that their hearing was appalled by the sound of a skull being crushed like an egg – for, as though everything was working together to produce the maximum horror, Fate had it that the Headmaster, in descending absolutely vertically, struck the floor with the top of his cranium, and remained upside down, in a horrible state of balance, having stiffened with a form of premature rigor mortis.

The soft, imponderable, flaccid Deadyawn, that arch-symbol of delegated duties, of negation and apathy, appeared now that he was upside down to have more life in him than he had ever had before. His limbs, stiffened in the death-spasm, were positively muscular. His crushed skull appeared to balance a body that had suddenly perceived its reason for living.

The first movement, after the gasp of horror that ran across the sunny schoolroom, came from among the debris of what was once the high chair.

The usher emerged, his red hair ruffled, quick eyes bulging, his teeth chattering with terror. At the sight of his master upside down, he made for the window, all trace of cockiness gone from his carriage, his sense of propriety so outraged that there was nothing he wanted so much as to make a quick end to himself. Climbing on the window-sill, The Fly swung his legs over and then dropped to the quadrangle a hundred feet below.

A quote *that* long really breaks the bounds of good taste in a book review, but I can't resist. I find it hilarious. The Fly's immediate, silent, wordless suicide is the icing on the cake, a scene straight out of Monty Python. It's also worth mentioning how pitch-perfect Peake's names are for his strange, amusing characters – Deadyawn,

Flannelcat, Opus Fluke, Rottcodd, Perch-Prism, Bellgrove – a cross between Dr Seuss and Charles Dickens.

I've seen other reviewers comment on how much Peake's prose style appears to be influenced by his primary calling as an artist and illustrator; how so much of *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* involve the careful construction of painted scenes with words, a series of motionless, epic moments bound together to form a story. I've used the word 'unique' too many times in this review, but there's no other way to describe the world of Gormenghast: not quite Gothic, not quite Dickensian, not quite Baroque. The BBC made an adaptation of the series about fifteen years ago, which I don't know anything about apart from the fact that it was poorly received. I'm not surprised, because these books are unfilmable. They're far too weirdly unique to properly exist anywhere outside a reader's head.

I've avoided reading too much about the third and final book, *Titus Alone*, but I've heard that Peake's health was declining as he wrote it and that it's a very different sort of book from its predecessors. Some people hate it, some love it. We shall see. In any case, even if it turns out to be a clanger, *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* will still comprise two of the 20th century's greatest works of literature. They are, quite simply, must-read novels.

Mitch Edgeworth (an Australian living in London)

March 29, 2015

<https://grubstreethack.wordpress.com/2015/03/29/>

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