

# Inside the mind of Mervyn Peake

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## INSIDE THE MIND OF MERVYN PEAKE

*What is as rare as to be quite alone,  
To wander through my labyrinthine skull  
And hear no sound but what my brain is making?*  
The Wit to Woo, Act I<sup>1</sup>

When Mervyn Peake died ten years ago, he left an œuvre of four novels, six books of poetry, four volumes of drawings and three books for children in addition to several short stories. He had illustrated more than twenty works, including *Treasure Island*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*.<sup>2</sup> Beside this considerable achievement in prose, poetry and picture, there remained countless unpublished drawings and manuscripts which have been appearing in various publications ever since.

This “genius of the pen and pencil” was born in China, in 1911, where his father was a missionary doctor. Although his paternal grandmother was Vaudoise (from Donatyre), the family was thoroughly British in education and outlook. After beginning his schooling in Tientsin, Mervyn Peake completed his secondary education at Eltham College (a boarding school just south of London for the sons of missionary families) and then studied art at the Croydon School of Art and the Royal Academy Schools.

In 1933, he went to the Channel island of Sark where he spent two years in an artists' colony (founded by his ex-English teacher from Eltham). Returning to England, he started to teach life drawing at the Westminster School of Art in London, where he met a fellow artist, Maeve Gilmore, whom he married in 1937. In later years, when his novels and poems brought in less than enough to live on, teaching was a welcome source of regular income.

Peake spent most of his life in the London area; he returned to Sark with his family after the war, only to find that the economics of an artist and writer's existence required closer contact with

publishers, so they moved back to London. During the war, the armed forces had little idea of what to do with Sapper Peake; after a nervous breakdown, he was invalided out of the army and then received a few commissions as a war artist. For a newly founded political journal, he visited Germany soon after the cessation of hostilities and was profoundly shocked by the suffering he witnessed at Belsen concentration camp. Yet the forties were Peake's best years; he wrote much of his poetry at this time, and did most of the illustrations on which his reputation as a draughtsman is based.

During the 1950s, his health declined and commissions dwindled; he made a short-lived début as a playwright and withdrew into his own world. The sixties found him fatally ill and badly lacking in funds; his novels seemed to have been forgotten by the public. Yet in the year of his death, they were republished in paperback on both sides of the Atlantic, and since then they have sold in their hundreds of thousands.

His first novel, *Titus Groan*<sup>3</sup>, was written during the war and published in 1946; it covers the first year in the life of the eponymous hero — but far more space is devoted to setting the scene, the vast and sprawling castle of Gormenghast, than to Titus himself, who perforce has little more than a crawl-on role to play. The main action concerns the rise to power within the castle of a scheming kitchen hand, Steerpike, who by guts and guile exchanges his menial tasks in the scullery for those of amanuensis of the all-powerful Master of Ritual. A second plot concerns the rivalry between Flay, Lord Groan's spidery personal servant, and the loathsome chef, Swelter, which leads to a magnificent set scene in which they duel under the cobwebbed rooftops of Gormenghast. This echoes another duel, earlier in the book, between the lovers of Keda, Titus's wet nurse.

The second novel, *Gormenghast*<sup>4</sup>, (for which Peake was awarded the Heinemann Prize for Literature in 1951) takes up the story some years later when Titus is six or seven, and follows him through adolescence to manhood when, having killed Steerpike in another of those duels so favoured by Peake, he leaves his castle home and sets out for the unknown world that lies over the edge of the horizon.

Stated baldly like this, the storyline of education and adventure belies the richness of the work: almost ponderous in its slow movement, Peake's luscious prose delights in exposition rather than action; the reader is clearly expected to share a mood rather

than thrill to an adventure. However, the style changes somewhat in the third volume, which was written under duress when Peake was beginning to suffer from the disease that finally killed him at the age of 57. Set outside Gormenghast, in a world that is a cross between Dickens and science fiction, *Titus Alone*<sup>5</sup> is written in sparer prose, less laden with similes and metaphors, more suited to Titus's picaresque adventures. Something of the richness returns, nevertheless, when Peake indulges in tableaux — for he inclines to the painterly, and uses his words impasto. The language, then, and in particular his imagery, is one of the fascinations of his work; it is also one of the obstacles to understanding it. The proliferation of images is such that the difficulty lies not so much in interpreting them, as in choosing among the plethora of possible meanings.

Yet there are constants in Peake's work that serve as guides and touchstones to investigation: one of the dominant metaphors of *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* is that of the castle as a human body — it has a spine (TG, pp. 129 & 202), a head with hair, eyes, jaws and even teeth (GG, p. 101). It holds its breath (GG, p. 277), sweats (TG, p. 413), and has a heart and pulse (GG, p. 17). The Tower of Flints, dominating the castle, "arose like a mutilated finger from among the fists of knuckled masonry and pointed blasphemously at heaven. At night the owls made of it an echoing throat; by day it stood voiceless and cast its long shadow" (TG, p. 15).

Not only is the castle described in terms of the human body, it also enjoys more abstract attributes of a living human being: it has a mind, mood and thoughts — even a soul (GG, p. 14). Not surprisingly, more than one critic has called it the principal character of the novels.<sup>6</sup>

This assimilation of a concrete structure with a human mind and body can be found throughout Peake's poetry. In "London 1941" (one of his better-known poems), the city is described in terms of a woman.

*her head  
... is turned  
Upon a neck of stones; her eyes  
Are lid-less windows of smashed glass,  
...  
Her breasts are crumbling brick....  
Her rusted ribs like railings round her heart;*<sup>7</sup>

The reverse process is also a frequent device; “his eyes like broken glass — / The shattered panes of a deserted house”<sup>8</sup> mirrors the previous example. There is a similar passage in *The Craft of the Lead Pencil* in which Peake gives some of his precepts for drawing:

From the draughtsman’s point of view, the average person, however intelligent, never sees a “head”. He merely observes the changing expression of the features and judges thereby whether his companion is delighted or distraught, moody or serene. But the face is so small in comparison with the structure of the head that it may be compared with a lighted window in a house. One can see the room within, but to give real value to the happenings that are taking place therein, it is necessary to let the eye take in the total building, the wall, roof and the façades that flank the casement, the capstones and the crowning ivy. There is then a setting — something that keeps the face — the window — *in its place*.<sup>9</sup>

More particularly though, it is when Peake refers to his own body, or his mind, that he almost invariably resorts to structural or architectural imagery. A typical example:

*As a great town draws the eccentrics in,  
So I am like a city built of clay  
Where madmen flourish, for beneath my skin,  
In every secret arch or alleyway*

*That winds about my bones of midnight, they  
Lurk in their rags, impatient for the call  
To muster at my breastbone, and to cry  
For revolution through the capital.*<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted how frequently these images concentrate on the head; the skull itself, the brain and the mind that animates that brain lie at the centre of Peake’s structural imagery.

*It is at times of half-light that I find  
Forsaken monsters shouldering through my mind.  
If the earth were lamplit I should always be  
Found in their company.*

*Even in sunlight I have heard them clamouring  
About the gateways of my brain, with glimmering  
Rags about their bruise-dark bodies bound,  
And in each brow a ruby like a wound.*<sup>11</sup>

Or as he puts it in another poem, "The streets of midnight wander through the Skull."<sup>12</sup>

Peake habitually spatializes the contents of the mind; it is another of the constants in his work. In *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast*, quite apart from clichés like "to have something at the back of one's mind" (which confirm, incidentally, that we commonly spatialize the contents of the mind), most of the references to what is "going on" in the minds of the characters are expressed in spatial terms. Steerpike's mind, for instance, is "ordered like a bureau with tabulated shelves" (TG, p. 125); for Lord Groan, opium builds "within his skull a tallow-coloured world of ghastly beauty" (TG, p. 205); a picture of "a worm, wriggling its bliss through (Swelter's) brain ... illuminated the inside of Mr Flay's darkened skull" (TG, p. 423). We learn that "any ejaculation ... took time to percolate to the correct area of Nannie Slagg's confused little brain. However, the word 'Titus' was different in that it had before now discovered a short cut through the cells" (TG, p. 467). At one point, Irma Prunesquallor wonders, "Had she unwittingly lifted some hatchway of her brain and revealed to this brilliant man how cold, black, humourless and sterile was the region that lay within?" (GG, p. 252).

All these examples (and they are but a drop from an ocean) show clearly that Peake conceived — metaphorically at least — of a topography of the mind, a kind of inner landscape of the brain where "bright ideas" could illumine the inner darkness. This is clearly based on the explicit metaphors of ordinary speech, but Peake's use of such figures, not to say clichés, is significant. He elaborates them into comic scenes, like this one from the end of *Titus Groan*:

The phrase, "But we mustn't burn *her*, must we?" had found itself a long shelf at the back of Dr Prunesquallor's brain that was nearly empty, and the ridiculous little phrase found squatting drowsily at one end was soon thrown out by the lanky newcomer, which stretched its body along the shelf from the "B" of its head to the "e" of its tail, and turning over had twenty-four winks (in defiance of the usual convention) — deciding upon one per letter and two over for luck; but there was not much time for slumber, the owner of this shelf — of the whole bonehouse, in fact — being liable to pluck from the most obscure of his grey-cell caves and crannies, let alone the shelves, the drowsy phrases at any odd moment" (p. 467).



Now just as the description of buildings in terms of the human body is reversible in Peake's writings to become the human body described in architectural terms, so too the description of the contents of the mind in topographical terms may be reversed: topography figures for the contents of the mind, "as though the castle were but the size of a skull" (TG, p. 422), for instance. In the field of novel-writing, there's nothing particularly new about this — a recent parallel is *The Magus* by John Fowles in which the main character journeys into his self. It is set mainly on a Greek property called Bourani — which is a local word for "skull". Incidentally, there is some play with skulls in *Titus Groan*, and the word can be found jotted at the back of the notebooks in which Peake wrote his novels.

This being the case, Gormenghast may be read as the spatialization of Peake's mind, as he perceived it. In writing his novel, he is writing out the contents of his mind, discovering the tortuous ways of his imagination and sharing with his characters the exploration of the labyrinthine recesses of his mind. ("Labyrinth" was one of the rejected titles for *Gormenghast*.) As happens to most novelists, he feels his characters have a degree of autonomy, are independent of the mind that created them — whereas in fact they owe their every move, their very being, to him. In discovering Gormenghast with them, Peake is discovering himself. They are Gormenghast, too, just as "the woof and warp of the dark place and its past were synonymous with the mesh of veins in the bodies of its denizens" (TG, p. 470).

Many passages in *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* point to this conclusion, but none so clearly as the moment when Titus, with his guardians Flay and Dr Prunesquallor, undertakes a journey into the maze of the depths of the castle, into "a world unfamiliar in its detail — new to *them*, although unquestionably of the very stuff of their memories and recognizable in this general and almost abstract way. They had never been there before, yet it was not alien — it was all Gormenghast" (GG, p. 372).

Such an approach to the text solves many problems without excluding other, equally valid, interpretations from other critical points of view. It corresponds to the difference in style between the first two novels (the only two we have referred to so far in detail) and *Titus Alone*, which is set outside Gormenghast. It corresponds to Peake's change of stance from invisible omniscient narrator to the dramatized narrator of *Titus Alone* who apostrophizes his hero: "Where is he now, Titus the Abdicator? Come out of the

shadows, traitor, and stand upon the wild brink of my brain!" (TA, p. 9) It is as though the character has ceased to be tame, to do the bidding of the author, and instead has turned wild, unpredictable.

In the third volume, Titus is forever wondering whether Gormenghast still exists; he begins to doubt his identity, to lose confidence in his sanity, for "gone was the outline of his mountainous home. Gone that torn world of towers. Gone was the labyrinth that fed his dreams" (TA, p. 9). But in the final pages, he glimpses his home again and turns away, reassured but unable to return to it, knowing that in truth, "he carried his Gormenghast within him" (TA, p. 263). Here we find an expression of Peake's sense of self-alienation as his terminal illness gained its grip upon his brain. His suffering may be gauged from one of his last coherent poems, which notably places him outside the heads he sees, rather than at the centre of his own, and pathetically reveals his inability to control the coming and going of thoughts along corridors of his brain cells that now appear external to him too:

*Heads float about me; come and go, absorb me;  
Terrify me that they deny the nightmare  
That they should be, defy me;  
And all the secrecy; the horror  
Of truth, of this intrinsic truth  
Drifting, ah God, along the corridors  
Of the world; hearing the metal  
Clang; and the rolling wheels.  
Heads float about me haunted  
By solitary sorrows.*<sup>13</sup>

In health it was a rare adventure to wander alone through his skull, listening to the sounds the brain made within, but when the brain broke down in sickness, nightmare ensued, and Peake regretted his excursions into that labyrinth, suspecting he had "played too much around the edge of madness".<sup>14</sup>

G. Peter WINNINGTON.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Wit to Woo* was the only one of Peake's plays to reach the professional stage: it was put on at The Arts Theatre, London, in 1957, and published for the first time in *Peake's Progress*, edited by Maeve Gilmore (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1978). The quotation is from pp. 282-3.

<sup>2</sup> All three titles have recently been republished: *Treasure Island* and *Alice* by Methuen Children's Books, the *Ancient Mariner* by Chatto & Windus (both London).

<sup>3</sup> Quotations are from the second edition (London: Eyre Methuen, and Harmondsworth: Penguin, both 1968) hereinafter abbreviated TG. A French translation, *Titus d'Enfer*, was published by Stock (Paris) in 1974.

<sup>4</sup> *Gormenghast* was first published in 1950. Quotations are from the second edition (London: Eyre Methuen, 1968, and Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) hereinafter abbreviated GG. A French translation was published by Stock (Paris) in 1977.

<sup>5</sup> *Titus Alone* was first published in 1959. Quotations are from the second edition, revised from the MSS by Langdon Jones (London: Eyre Methuen, and Harmondsworth: Penguin, both 1970) hereinafter abbreviated TA. A French translation is in preparation.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. (to cite an instance that has previously passed unnoticed) p. xiii of Norman Spinrad's Introduction to *The Dragon Masters*, by Jack Vance (Boston, Mass: Gregg, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> First published in *Shapes and Sounds* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1941). Reprinted in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> First published in *A Reverie of Bone* (London: Bertram Rota, 1967). Reprinted in *Peake's Progress*, p. 166.

<sup>9</sup> *The Craft of the Lead Pencil* (London: Allan Wingate, 1946). Reprinted in *Mervyn Peake: Writings and Drawings* (London: Academy Editions, 1974), p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> "As a Great Town Draws the Eccentrics in", in *The Glassblowers* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1950). Reprinted in *Selected Poems*, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> First published in *The Glassblowers* under the title "Poem"; reprinted in *Selected Poems*, p. 42, as "At Times of Half-light".

<sup>12</sup> "No Difference" in *Selected Poems*, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> "Heads Float About Me", first printed in *A Reverie of Bone*; reprinted in *Selected Poems*, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> From a letter to his wife, quoted in *A World Away*, by Maeve Gilmore (London: Victor Gollancz, 1970), p. 128.