

Peake

STUDIES

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Edited and published by
G Peter Winnington, Au Village,
1453 MAUBORGET, Switzerland.
Tel. +41 24 436 22 32
E-mail peakestudies@gmail.com
Home page <http://peakestudies.com>

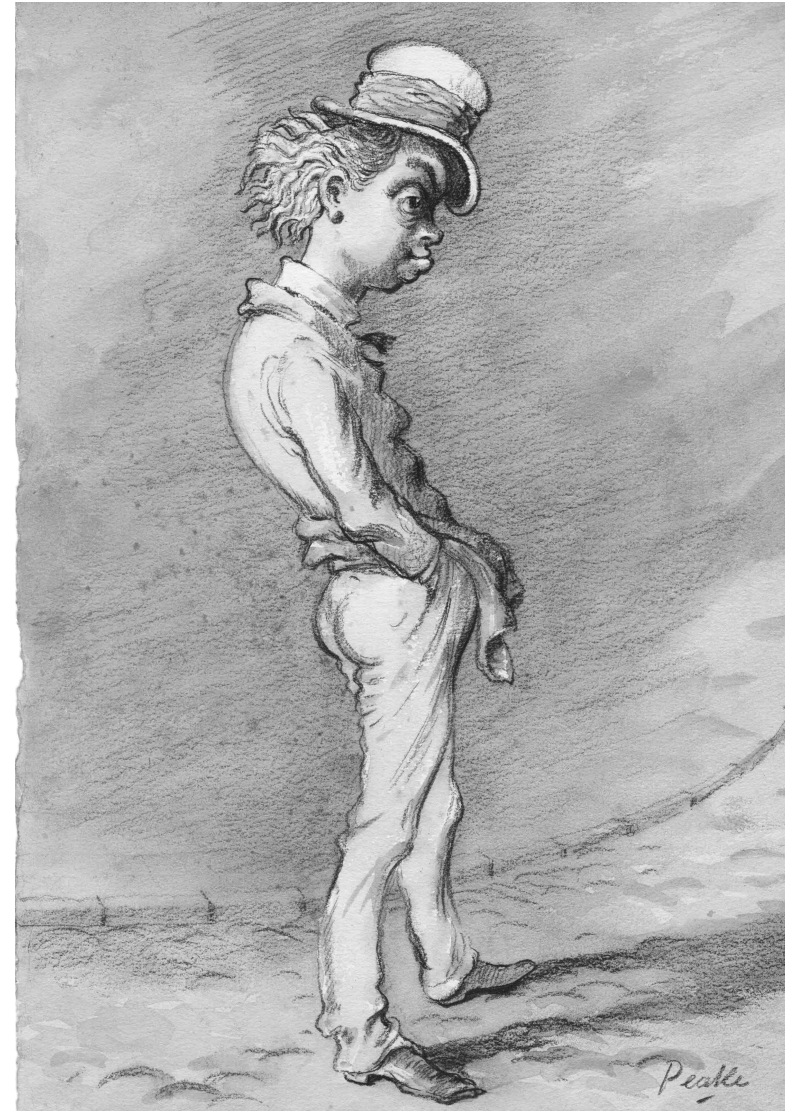
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Send your ideas to the editor.

Peake House



More of Peake's wonderful illustrations for *Bleak House* have come to light. On the previous page is Mr Guppy; below are Mrs Pardiggle's three sons,



and above is Mrs Pardiggle herself.

Images very kindly supplied by Mike Kemp.
Further details at <http://www.kempbooksellers.co.uk/peake.htm>

Dark and Deathless Rabble of Long Shadows: Peake, Dickens, Tolkien, and 'this dark hive called London'

Hadas Elber-Aviram

Reader, forgive in me the pedant. Here you will find no fresh approach to the art of writing[,] no technical frontiers have been extended between these covers. Of this I am neither proud nor penitent.

In this my first novel I lean heavily and gladly upon an archaic manner that I love. If I am stilted I hope it will follow that I am off the ground for only thus might I have seen them face to face.

Mine only then, the fancy. Yet even here [I] am surely the debtor to many sources[:] not least among them, being, I imagine[,] the genius of Charles Dickens with his dark and deathless rabble¹ of long shadows.²

THIS EVOCATIVE ADDRESS to the reader, on the third page of Peake's working notebook for chapters 60 and 61 of *Titus Groan* (*TG*), is preceded by a number of false starts, and like them has been heavily crossed out with a black crayon. As far as I know, it is Peake's only express acknowledgment of his debt to Dickens.³

That Peake was deeply influenced by Dickens will come as no surprise to students of his life and work. Peake's biographers and scholars alike have pointed out Dickensian resonances in *TG* and *Gormenghast* (*G*), stressing especially the impact of Dickens's *Bleak House* (*BH*) for the obvious reason that it was one of his favourite books and the only Dickens novel that he was commissioned to illustrate (circa 1945).⁴

Maeve Gilmore recounted that she read '*Bleak House*, several other [novels by] Dickens' to Peake as he sat drawing illustrations (p.72). Peake's close friend Gordon Smith similarly recalled that 'when Mervyn

illustrated a book, he first soaked himself in the text, until he felt almost a part of it. This was particularly true of Dickens and the drawings he did for *Bleak House*. Each book he read was an education, and Dickens was revelation' (p.100). Peter Winnington has identified a range of affinities between Peake and Dickens: similarities in anaphoric rhythm between the roofscape scene in *TG* and the opening of *BH*;⁵ a resemblance between Shrivel, the shaving and hair-brushing dwarf of *Mr Slaughterboard*, and Miss Mowcher, the dwarf hair stylist of *David Copperfield*;⁶ and parallels between Peake's and Dickens's strategies for character naming.⁷ Colin Manlove has gone so far as to claim that 'in some degree the first two books of Peake's trilogy are a re-creation of *Bleak House*' (p.215). Duncan Fallowell has observed that Peake was 'more stylistically in common with Dickens than with any of his British contemporaries' (p.1172), and Charles Gilbert has contended that 'Peake himself loved Dickens and his writing seems to make the same imaginative bargain with the world' (p.14).

A fuller analysis of Dickens's influence on Peake seems to be in order, for critics have by and large confined themselves to brief remarks on the subject. Here I examine parallels in their writing styles, artistic convictions, thematic explorations of class, and representations of the city, while taking care not to elide the differences between them. In keeping with previous scholarship, I place more weight on *BH* than on Dickens's other novels, but branch out where a variety of example seems useful. I also compare Peake with J. R. R. Tolkien, in order to further tease out the affiliations between Peake and Dickens by way of contrast with a third figure. Finally, I will suggest that Peake forged a vital link between Dickensian fiction and a new generation of urban fantasy authors.

Peake's address to the reader provides an illuminating point of departure. By building an opposition between a 'fresh approach to the art of writing' and the extension of 'technical frontiers' on the one hand, and the 'archaic manner' that he ascribed to Dickens and himself on the other, Peake was working towards the formulation of his literary ethos. He knew that his interest lay beyond formal experimentation for its own sake, a thought he expressed again in his introduction to *Drawings*: 'A drawing may be brilliant in a dozen ways and yet be empty. It may be outlandish, bizarre, and it would seem original, but its heart may be

missing. It may be, on the face of it, deceptively quiet through lack of graphic experiment, and yet hold some inner life' (pp.7–8). It was not 'graphic experiment', or what he had termed in earlier iterations of the address, 'heterodox language',⁸ that Peake valorised as crucial to the 'inner life' of art. Rather, it was the ability to soar 'off the ground' in order to 'see them [presumably, the fruits of Peake's imagination] face to face'. Paradoxically, he wished to achieve this transcendence by way of the opposite gravitational movement, leaning 'heavily and gladly upon an archaic manner that I love,' in which the Dickensian dimension figured as a 'dark and deathless rabble of long shadows.'

Dark and deathless shadows held a privileged place in Peake's imagination. Shadows are the elemental substance of Gormenghast, which casts 'shadows of time-eaten buttresses, of broken and lofty turrets, and, most enormous of all, the shadow of the Tower of Flints' (*TG*, p.15). Then there's the 'perfect shadow' of the Twins' tree, cast upon the wall 'as though engraved with superhuman skill' (*TG*, p.137). And the infant Titus is 'suckled on shadows' (*G*, p.7), of course. The shadows of Gormenghast are often the most animated component of its *mises-en-scène*, as in the Countess's room where 'the missel-thrush made no motion', but 'a ghoul of shadow from under a tall cupboard dislodged itself and moved across the floorboards, climbed the bed, and crawled half way across the eiderdown before it returned by the same route, to curl up and roost beneath the cupboard again' (*TG*, p.57).

Peake's masterly interplay of motionless figures and dancing shadows has its antecedents in Dickens's 'dark and deathless rabble of long shadows', to use Peake's phrase, not least in *BH* where, on the decaying aristocratic estate of Chesney Wold, 'the frozen Dedlocks thaw. Strange movements come upon their features, as the shadows of leaves play there' (p.593). Somewhat like Sepulchre's premonition in Gormenghast's dining hall that he 'will be taken into the immemorial darkness far away among the shadows of the Groans' (*TG*, p.401), in Chesney Wold 'the shadow in the long drawing room upon my lady's picture is the first to come, the last to be disturbed. At this hour and by this light it changes into threatening hands raised up, menacing the handsome face with every breath that stirs' (*BH*, p.594).

Peake's BBC talk, 'The Artist's World' (*AW*), broadcast shortly after

the publication of *TG*, extolled ‘the shadows, ah, the ancient shadows brooding in corners or under furniture, ominous, menacing, palpable’ (p.6). These shadows were part and parcel of what Peake defined in *AW* as the overall purpose of art, namely to reveal the beauty behind ‘the surfaces of things’ (p.6). ‘As I see it, or as I want to see it, the marvels of the visible world are not things in themselves but revelations to stir the imagination’ (p.6) ... to conduct us to amazing climates of the mind, which climates it is for the artist to translate into paint or into words’ (p.7). This vision of a dialectic between the material and the spiritual, between the tactile surfaces of concrete objects – ‘the rocks, plants, waves, lizards, sunflowers, wallpapers, a fruit, a cat, a child’ (p.6) – and the transcendental realm of the imagination that unveils ‘a god – perhaps of beauty, or sublime indifference – at any rate, a god’ (p.6), chimes with his conscious anchorage in ‘the genius of Charles Dickens’.

Peake’s unfinished *Mr Slaughterboard* made an explicit connection between Dickens’s fiction and the Captain’s yearning for an artistic life tethered to the surfaces of books. Slaughterboard allows his blind servant Smear, and only him, to ‘fondle’ his ‘red-leathered Dickens’, by virtue of his possessing ‘a little of that stuff within which longs for more than material things, ... the semblance of a soul’ (p.69). Yet, in paradoxical fashion typical of Peake, it is Smear’s fine-tuned sensitivity to the materiality of books, Dickens’s fiction not least among them, which emerges most distinctly from his duties during Slaughterboard’s reading sessions. As Smear enters the library, ‘the smell of the books came to him like a waft of Heaven’, and he elicits a quasi-erotic response from the place itself: ‘the carpet sank in a kind of voluptuous acceptance of his presence’ (p.72). The blind servant recites his Captain’s favourite literary works from memory, but Slaughterboard’s ritualised evenings in the library demand that Smear first collect the volume to be recited from its place on the shelf, by ‘sliding a glass partition aside [before] he ran his fingers over the leather backs’ (p.73). His physical possession of the book, at once sensual and sacrosanct, dovetails a metonymical focus on tell-tale hand movements: whereas ‘the fingers’ of Slaughterboard’s ‘right hand tapped the table surface delicately’, Smear’s ‘hands were twitching nervously as though longing to hold some coveted treasure’ (p.73).

These observations support Gilbert’s suggestion that Peake and Dickens were both imaginatively invested in an ‘art of surfaces’ (p.14). Dickens scholars widely concur that the relations between surface and depth, appearances and inner reality, were a source of endless fascination for him.⁹ Dickens excelled at reweaving the fabric of superficial reality by configuring mundane objects and habitual behaviours into outrageously fantastical similes and metaphors, thus suffusing the presumably trivial with a heightened, almost superabundant, sense of meaning. Examples are plentiful; to name a few: in *BH*, ‘flakes of soot’ are likened to ‘full-grown snow-flakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun’ (p.11); in *Dombey and Son (DS)*, trains arrive at their terminus ‘gliding like tame dragons into the allotted corners ... making the walls quake, as if they were dilating with the secret knowledge of great powers yet unsuspected in them’ (p.234); and in *Our Mutual Friend (OMF)*, the unremarkable incident of Mr Lammle pouring himself a drink transfigures into the astonishing image of a ‘dark lord engaged in a deed of violence with a bottle of soda-water, as though he were wringing the neck of some unlucky creature and pouring its blood down his throat’ (p.267).

Peake deployed a similarly hyper-intense visual focus that transformed concrete objects and minute details into marvellous apparitions. His narrative sleight of hand has been elegantly summarised by Pierre-Yves Le Cam: ‘Life’s mysteries and marvels are made visible. The magic of things, even the tritest ones, is revealed’ (p.5). The wine stain on Swelter’s uniform thus becomes ‘a long red island’ (*TG*, p.33), the candelabrum in the Countess’s chamber ‘a vast spider suspended by a metal chord’ (*TG*, p.54), and the ‘buttresses and outcrops’ of Gormenghast buildings ‘the hulks of mouldering ships, or stranded monsters whose streaming mouths and brows were the sardonic work of a thousand tempests’ (*G*, p.25). These poetics of enlargement, analogy, distortion, and personification were, for Peake, the soul of art, the capacity to see ‘in the acorn not only the oak but the whole vegetable universe, and in the whole vegetable universe the vital source of all things’ (*AW*, p.6).

Dickens’s and Peake’s dense figural writing styles were fuelled by corresponding artistic visions. Dickens held that the role of literature was to unlock the wonder embedded in the quiddity of everyday life. In the

'Preliminary Word' (*PW*) for his new journal, *Household Words*, he articulated a statement of purpose: 'To show to all that in all familiar things, even in those which are repellent on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will find it out' (p.1). Peake made a strikingly similar declaration about drawing in *The Craft of the Lead Pencil* (*LP*), which came out in the same year as *TG*: 'Neither be afraid of the unorthodox subject nor in finding delight in the contemplation of commonplace things', he advised. 'Anything, seen without prejudice, is enormous' (p.1). Both authors resisted the generic dichotomy between realism and fantasy, advocating instead a creative licence unhampered by literal-minded notions of verisimilitude. 'It does not seem to me to be enough to say of any description that it is the exact truth,' Dickens contended. 'The exact truth must be there; but the merit or art in the narrator is the manner of stating the truth' (in Forster, II, p.313). Peake put it more poetically: 'The quicksands closing on a centaur's head tokens no more of magic than the penny loaf. They both exist' (*LP*, p.1).

J. R. R. Tolkien, for his part, was dismissive of fantasies that endeavoured to unveil the beauty of 'familiar' and 'commonplace' things. 'To denote the queerness of things that have become trite, when they are seen suddenly from a new angle', he wrote in his seminal essay 'On Fairy-Stories' (*FS*),¹⁰ was a 'kind of "fantasy" most people would allow to be wholesome enough', but it had 'only a limited power' (p.146).¹¹ For Tolkien, the highest form of fantasy was 'fairy-stories' (p.113), which did not 'cause you suddenly to realise that England is an utterly alien land' (p.147), but rather transported the reader into 'a Secondary World' whose 'inner consistency of reality' was so immersive that it temporarily supplanted the reader's sense of his own reality (p.140). Tolkien contended that the Secondary Worlds of fairy-stories needed to be self-contained and insulated, excluding 'marvels to be seen in this mortal world in some region of our own time and space' (p.115). The effect of this isolationist fantasy, he readily admitted, was reactionary: 'I do not think that the reader or the maker of fairy-stories need even be ashamed of the "escape" of archaism: of preferring not dragons but horses, castles, sailing-ships, bows and arrows; ... [to] progressive things like factories' (p.150). And he cited Christopher Dawson's radically anti-modern claim that 'the rawness and ugliness of modern European life ... is the sign of

a biological inferiority, of an insufficient or false reaction to environment' (*FS*, p.150). Everything that was wrong with modern life, in Tolkien's view, could be laid squarely at the feet of the Victorian Age: 'Why should we not escape from or condemn the "grim Assyrian" absurdity of top hats, or the Morlockian horror of factories?' (p.150), he pointedly asked.

Dickens's politics has been a subject of longstanding debate among scholars, but there is ample evidence to suggest that he was averse to anti-Victorian medievalism of the kind promulgated by Tolkien. Odious characters such as Mrs Skewton in *DS* and the red-faced gentleman in *The Chimes*, as well as Dickens's satirical pieces, 'The Fine Old English Gentleman' and the 'Threatening Letter to Thomas Hood', point to his antipathy towards those who pined for 'the fine old English Tory times'.¹² Indeed, Mrs Skewton is an explicit caricature of conservative medievalists, waxing sentimental over 'the Middle ages': 'Such charming times! ... So full of Faith! So vigorous and forcible! So picturesque! So perfectly removed from commonplace!' (*DS*, p.407).

Rather than offering escape into an idealised distant past, Dickens directed his writing towards the illumination of the hidden splendour concealed beneath the outward ugliness of the contemporary industrial world: 'The mightier inventions of our age are not, to our thinking, all material, but have a kind of souls in their stupendous bodies which may find expression in *Household Words*,' he wrote in *PW*, proposing communion with no less a fixture of modern life than 'the towering chimneys ... spurting out fire and smoke upon the prospect' (p.1).

From Peake's meditations on drawing, one may easily surmise that his inclinations lay with Dickens rather than Tolkien. His comments on his writing, however, complicate the case. Take, for example, an excerpt from his letter to Gordon Smith, outlining his thoughts about *TG*:

I feel that what I'm 'after' has to a large extent been forgotten while I wrote. What was I after anyway? I suppose, to create a world of my own in which those who belong to it and move in it come to life and never step outside into either this world of bus queues, ration books, or even the upper Ganges – or into another imaginative world. I mean that the mood should be always, although I hope varied from chapter to chap-

ter – yet consistently, say, Gryphon, and not Bulldog, Gazelle or even Gargoyle. (24 October 1943, in Smith, p.103)

Taken at face value, this letter seems to indicate Peake's intention of creating a closed fictional realm that tallies closely with Tolkien's contemporaneously developed theory of Secondary Worlds. The impression is reinforced by Peake's specific rejection of elements from everyday life, namely 'bus queues' and 'ration books'. Towards the end of the letter, however, the apparent parallels with Tolkien are cast into doubt by the image of a gryphon, Peake's monster of choice for the embodiment of his novel's otherworldliness. A gryphon is rather different from Tolkien's graceful 'folk of Faërie' who 'put on the pride and beauty that we would fain wear ourselves' (*FS*, p.113). It is a chimera made up of the unlikely combination of lion and eagle.¹³ His emblematic use of the gryphon thus intimates a more ungainly realm than Tolkien's Faërie.

The gryphon's piecemeal corporeality carries over to the timeworn stones of Gormenghast, with its Tower of Flints 'patched unevenly with black ivy' and protruding 'like a mutilated finger from among the fists of knuckled masonry' (*TG*, p.15). The gritty texture of these descriptions has far more in common with *BH*'s Chesney Wold, 'that ancient house, rooted in that quiet park, where the ivy and the moss have had time to mature, and the gnarled and warted elms, and the umbrageous oaks, stand deep in the fern and leaves of a hundred years' (p.416), than with Tolkien's glamorous, glittering edifices. Compare Gormenghast's Tower of Flints to Gondor's 'Tower of Ecthelion' in *The Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*), which 'shone out against the sky, glimmering like a spike of pearl and silver, tall and fair and shapely' (p.751). The contrasts in colour, shape, and atmosphere between Peake's and Dickens's edifices on the one hand, and Tolkien's on the other, can be interpreted as metonymically indicative of the differences between their fictional worlds – the former evince an uneven, abrasive, implacable bulk of architecture, the latter evoke rather a sanitised, smooth, immaculately polished monolith.

Gormenghast's rough-edged epistemological surface likewise accommodates a Dickensian theme beyond the pale of *LOTR*, namely class stratification and its severe consequences for Haves and Have-Nots alike.

Gormenghast may be a world away from 'bus queues' and 'ration books', but it boldly implies the perennial gulf between the over-privileged and the dispossessed. The opening paragraph of *TG* describes the most wretched of all Gormenghast's locales, the Outer Dwellings. These ramshackle hovels spread from the castle 'like an epidemic around its outer walls' (p.15), their residents an 'all-but forgotten people' plagued by premature aging and bitter enmities (p.17). This Gothic shanty town calls to mind the personified slum of *BH*, nicknamed 'Tom-all-alone's', where 'tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery' (p.236), people are rarely known 'by any Christian sign' (p.331), and wanton neglect unfailingly 'propagates infection and contagion' (p.654). Moreover, both the Outer Dwellings and Tom-all-alone's have a devastating effect on the centres of power that have marginalised them. Tom-all-alone's is home to Jo, the crossing sweeper beautifully drawn by Peake,¹⁴ who unwittingly becomes key to the exposure of Lady Dedlock's secret past and the consequent downfall of the Dedlock family. Analogously, the Dweller Keda becomes Titus's wet nurse, and as Manlove observes (though he promptly dismisses his own insight), 'it could be argued that Titus sucked in the lust for freedom with her milk' (p.236). Keda's illegitimate daughter, 'The Thing', plays a vital role in Titus's decision to leave Gormenghast,¹⁵ thus effectively ending the Earldom of House Groan.

The first close-up view of the city in *Titus Alone* (*TA*) likewise foregrounds the lower stratum of its society. Peake introduces an array of scruffy figures: the fishermen labouring on the shore of the river, 'some on foot hugging themselves in the cold; some in ramshackle mule-drawn carriages' (p.14). The eccentric zoo-keeper Muzzlehatch drives down to 'benefit whatever beggars wished to climb into the mouldering stern' of his car (p.15). Shortly thereafter, 'two beggars' help rescue Titus from his pursuers, presumably for no better reason than that he seems 'as ragged a creature as themselves' (p.17). The recurrent foregrounding of the under-privileged at the beginning of both *TG* and *TA* challenges the pervasive belief among critics that Dickens's influence on Peake ended with *G*, and that *TA* should be considered a separate case whose literary debts are of a different order. Manlove maintains that 'the first two books of Peake's trilogy' can be read as 'a re-creation of *Bleak House*'

(p.215), whereas *Titus Alone* may well have owed much to the book which was also the source of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (p.216). Tanya Gardiner-Scott's study, *Mervyn Peake; The Evolution of a Dark Romantic*, posits that Peake 'is closer to Dickens in the first two Titus books and dystopian fiction in the third' (p.2).

This line of argument develops from the startling change in style from *TG* and *G* (which are governed by the 'archaic manner' that Peake loved – an atmosphere of timeless decay and a ponderous accumulation of detail) to *TA*'s accelerated staccato pace and science-fictional urban setting. But to induce from this stylistic shift that Dickens's influence on Peake had abated is to underestimate both Dickens and Peake. The opposition erected by critics between Dickens's influence on *TG* and *G*, and the influence of dystopian writers such as Orwell and Zamyatin on *TA*, reveals itself as a false dichotomy once we take stock of the pervasiveness of Dickens's legacy, which played a crucial part in shaping the dystopian fiction to which he is putatively opposed, most overtly via H. G. Wells. Both Orwell and Zamyatin expressly remarked upon Dickens's influence on Wells, and upon Wells's influence in turn on their own writing,¹⁶ and scholars of dystopian fiction have done important work fleshing out these affiliations.¹⁷

Moreover, Maurice Collis claimed that Peake had always intended for Titus to go out into the world,¹⁸ which would indicate that his departure from Gormenghast was planned as an enlargement of the scope of *TG* and *G* rather than an ontological rupture. In this vein, Peake's decision to lead Titus out of Gormenghast and into the city can be read as a rejection of Tolkienesque escapism in favour of a more Dickensian urban vision. If Titus were indefinitely confined to Gormenghast, thereby confirming the Countess's assertion that 'there is nowhere else' (*G*, p.510), Peake would have been yielding to the temptation of escape into a hermetic Secondary World. Titus's departure is thus anti-escapist in itself, but the effect is redoubled by his emergence into a specifically urban environment. Clute and Grant's monumental *Encyclopedia of Fantasy (EF)*¹⁹ suggests that contrary to Tolkien's Secondary Worlds, which are 'not bound to mundane reality' (p.847), cities are the 'natural venue' for fantasies that 'tend to crosshatch the mundane world with Other-worlds' (p.976).²⁰ According to Clute, urban fantasy is by definition

'significantly *about* a real city' (p.975), its two dominant models being Dickens's London and Eugène Sue's Paris.²¹ Hence, for Peake to have transplanted Titus into a city that, as Gardiner-Scott has remarked, resembles from above 'an aerial view of London, England' defamiliarised by its placement on a mountainside (p.217), was for him to have effectively aligned himself with Dickensian London as against the reactionary sequestration advocated by Tolkien.

It may be relevant here that neither Peake nor Dickens was a born Londoner. Peake was born in China and moved with his family to Wallington, Surrey, at the age of eleven, and began commuting to London for art school in 1929.²² The Dickens family moved from Chatham to London in 1822, when Dickens was ten.²³ John Forster wrote that Dickens 'managed gradually to transfer to London all the dreaminess and all the romance with which he had invested Chatham' (I, p.15). The same could perhaps be said of Peake, who redirected the dreaminess and romance of his imagination from China to England, or from Gormenghast to the unnamed city of *TA*. Moreover, both Dickens and Peake displayed a lasting sense of wonder at the spectacles of London, which may have been rooted in their analogous fresh impressions of the city in their youth. 'We never have outgrown the whole region of Covent Garden,' Dickens wrote in a piece titled 'Where We Stopped Growing'; 'we preserve it as a fine, dissipated, insoluble mystery' (p.362). Peake gave voice to a similar feeling of reverence in his remarkably Dickensian prose sketch, 'London Fantasy' (*LF*), where he asserted that 'in the weird creatures that make up this dark hive called London', one may find 'a cavalcade hardly to be suffered for the very endlessness of its inventive fantasy' (p.3).

For Peake, more than for Dickens, however, the unfathomability of 'this dark hive called London' posed a danger to the sensitive mind. 'There is no end to it,' the narrator of *LF* exclaims with a touch of hysteria, 'the Invention is so rapid, various, profuent' (p.6), until finally 'each desperate moment, clutching Entirety, sinks with a smouldering fistful of raw plunder; sinks into nullity' (p.7). These phrases recur almost verbatim, though shifted into the past tense, with reference to the crowd of vagrants assembled to watch Titus battle Veil in the Under-River: 'There was no end to it. The inventiveness of it was so rapid, various, profuent.'

Each movement sank away, sank with a smouldering fist-feel of raw plunder: sank into nullity' (pp.132–3). Regardless of whether it was intentional, this transposition from a sketch about the fantastical qualities of London to the subterranean underworld beneath the surface of *TA's* city, lends further credence to the supposition that the city constitutes a re-imagining of London refracted through the dreamscapes of Peake's artistic vision. However fictionalised and estranged, Peake's London shines through *TA's* city as a nexus of 'inventive fantasy', as exhilarating as it is perilous.

Scholars have pointed out that, through its cars, police force, aeroplanes, scientists, bureaucracy, and surveillance technology, the city of *TA* ushers in the modern world that was so conspicuously absent from the previous novels. But science-fictional trappings aside, Peake's first and only novel of the city drew widely upon the imagery and themes of his favourite urban book, *Bleak House*. In the back of Muzzlehatch's car, speeding 'away down tortuous alleys still wet and black with the night shadows, Titus became aware of the nature of the city into which he had drifted like a dead branch' (pp.18–19). His discovery shares more than a passing resemblance (minus the speed) to Esther Summerson's account of her first arrival in London by coach: 'We drove slowly through the dirtiest and darkest streets that ever were seen in the world (I thought), and in such a distracting state of confusion that I wondered how the people kept their senses' (*BH*, p.37). Likewise, the London of *BH* and the city of *TA* are both wreathed in flame at dusk and dawn. The afterglow of a sunset in *BH*, contrasted with 'a lurid glare' that looms over London, conjures the mirage of 'an unearthly fire, gleaming on all the unseen buildings of the city, and on all the faces of its many thousands of wondering inhabitants' (p.450). A sunrise over Peake's city appears to 'cut its way up as though with a razor's edge, and immediately the boats and their crews and the cormoranteers and their bottle-necked birds, and the rushes and the muddy bank and the mules and the vehicles and the nets and the spears and the river itself, became ribbed and flecked with flame' (p.17).

Both novels emphasise the disparity between the gentrified areas of their city and the blighted slums. In *BH's* London, the Dedlocks' house in town, which at its best beckons 'as warm and bright as so much state

may be' (p.422), contrasts with Tom-all-alone's, where 'ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence' that 'coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in' (p.236). In *TA's* city, the 'fantasies of glass and metal' that circumscribe the marble-paved arena of its most opulent district, jar sharply with 'the tortuous, poverty-stricken town' of 'the district of Muzzlehatch' (p.32), not to mention the Under-River, 'kingdom of the outcasts; the fugitives; the failures; the mendicants; the plotters; a secret world with a roof that leaked eternally' (p.III). Indeed, the Under-River discloses the ease with which the downtrodden are excluded from the purview of the more fortunate city-dwellers, through a narrative intervention that channels Dickens the reformer as well as the fiction writer:

To those ignorant of extreme poverty and of its degradations; of pursuit and the attendant horrors; of the crazed extremes of love and hate; for those ignorant of such, there was no cause to suffer such a place. It was enough for the great city to know and to have heard of it by echo or by rumour and to maintain a tacit silence as dreadful as it was accepted. (TA, p.II2)

This extraordinary passage readily calls to mind the most wretched areas of Dickens's London – Tom-all-alone's that is 'avoided by all decent people' (p.235), and Jacob's Island in *Oliver Twist* (*OT*): 'the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London, wholly unknown, even by name, to the great mass of its inhabitants' (p.338). It likewise reverberates with Dickens's exhortations to acknowledge the disenfranchised of Victorian society, notably through the characters of Jo in *BH* and Betty Higden in *OMF*.

Dickensian London is visibly evoked in *TA* at the trial where Titus stands accused of 'vagrancy, damage, and trespass' (p.76). The Magistrate who presides over this trial embodies a light-hearted tribute to the Lord High Chancellor of *BH*, musing as he does that 'he was a symbol. He was the Law. He was Justice. He was the wig he wore' (p.81). Throughout the trial he betrays an incompetence that cements his affinity with Dickens's High Chancellor, whose benighted intellect is aptly captured in his habit of staring 'into the lantern that has no light in it' (*BH*, p.12). But where Dickens's parody of the legal system expressed his outrage at the

suffering caused by its dysfunctional practices, Peake seemed to be looking back at this ineptitude with a degree of nostalgia. Having witnessed at first hand the aftermath of the systematic mass-murder in the death camps, Peake was far more tolerant of inefficiency as a humane alternative. At the trial, Muzzlehatch compares Inspector Acreblade – who resembles the ridiculous Bow Street Runners of *OT* far more than the shrewd Inspector Bucket of *BH* – with the Orwellian helmeted pursuers who wield the true executive power in the city, to the manifest advantage of the former: ‘He, Muzzlehatch, had also picked out Inspector Acreblade (a pleasant change from the tall enigmas), for there could be nothing more earthy than the Inspector, who believed in nothing so much as his hound-like job, the spoor and gristle of it: the dry bones of his trade’ (p.79). Thus, while for Tolkien the Victorian Age was to blame for modernity, for Peake it expressed a down-to-earth, clumsy, but honest pragmatism, a solid core of humanity woefully absent from the soulless expertise of the modern agents of state authority.

At the heart of both *BH* and *TA* lies an enquiry into the secret connections that bring together the decaying edifice and the sprawling city. Ruminating upon the invisible threads that tie wealth to poverty across Chesney Wold and London, Dickens’s narrator ponders: ‘What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo, the outlaw with the broom’ (*BH*, p.235). Faced with ‘a world that appeared to have no reference to his home and which seemed, in fact, supremely self-sufficient’ (*TA*, p.32), Titus cannot but wonder about Gormenghast and the city: ‘Were they coeval; were they simultaneous? These worlds; these realms – could they *both* be true?’ (p.32). The answers offered by each novel, however, are crucially different. In *BH*, Chesney Wold and London are linked by the hopelessly convoluted web of the Law, incarnated in the Jarndyce and Jarndyce lawsuit that entangles every character and every event in the narrative, and converges upon the Court of Chancery at the heart of the London fog, ‘which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire’ (p.13).

Gormenghast and *TA*’s city, in contrast, are not connected by a concrete socio-political force as in *BH*, but rather more tenuously linked by Titus’s groping mind. Once he leaves home, Titus’s imaginative powers

become embedded in his mental image of Gormenghast, which he expressly calls ‘the kingdom in my head’ (p.195). He carries this mental image with him into the city, surrounding him with an aura of mystery that attracts a range of city dwellers from Muzzlehatch and Juno to the three vagrants from the Under-River. But the kingdom in his head often appears more real to Titus than the city in which he has temporarily settled, leaving him constantly wondering, ‘Who are these people? What are these happenings?’ (p.195). The connection between Gormenghast and the city thus appears fragile at best, and Peake’s city accordingly lacks the solidity of Dickens’s London. The two cities’ varying degrees of substantiality may be attributed, among other causes, to the historical differences between Victorian and mid-twentieth-century London.

Victorian London, for all its social injustices that Dickens assiduously brought to public attention, was the capital of the British Empire and thus, in the eyes of many, the focal point of the western world. When Peake wrote *TA* in the 1950s, however, London was struggling to rebuild itself after the Blitz, and the British Empire had been reduced to its last vestiges. The immigrant author V. S. Naipaul, who had come to London in 1950 expecting to behold ‘the London I had got from Dickens’ (p.122), was thus destined to find ‘a city that was strange and unknown’ (p.123). Indeed, Naipaul’s arrival was part of that change – 1950s London was a city in transition, no longer an imperial power, but taking its first steps towards becoming a new kind of metropolis, a locus of immigration, multiculturalism, and multinational exchange in an increasingly globalised world. As Jerry White’s *London in the Twentieth Century* has shown, ‘the Londoner was remade in the second half of the twentieth century: an “alloy of the people of Britain” in the 1940s, an alloy of the people of the world just forty years later’ (p.130). According to White, ‘this was a change irrevocably established in just a decade and a half, between the mid-1950s and the late 1960s’ (p.131). Peake had arguably intuited this transformation, which led him to configure the city of *TA* as an unstable, at times insubstantial, site of a world-shattering confrontation of difference, an encounter between modern urbanites and the abdicated Earl of Gormenghast who strikes them as ‘something as mysterious and elusive as a ghost’ (p.89). For each side of this encounter, then, the Other appears unreal, a disassociation only overcome by

degrees, primarily through the burgeoning friendship between Titus and Muzzlehatch.

The case can be made, accordingly, that the controversial ending of *TA* dovetails well with both Peake's historical moment and the tenor of the novel. By sending Titus down a track 'that he had never known before' (p.263), Peake anticipated the opening up of fictional and socio-political space in a postcolonial age where, to borrow Yeats's immortal phrase, 'the centre cannot hold'.²⁴ He thus renewed his refusal to lock Titus in a Tolkienesque hermetic world, and moved beyond it to likewise reject the implicit assumption of Dickensian fiction that all narrative roads lead to London. Hence, it is the villainess of *TA*, Cheeta, who undermines Titus's sense of continuous and unbound space by collapsing Gormenghast and the city into a false spectacle that is neither one nor the other: 'He thinks that to move about is to change places', she declaims. 'He does not realize that he is treading water' (p.231). Here Cheeta is echoing another woman who had tried to control Titus, his mother; she told him: 'You will only tread a circle, Titus Groan' (*G*, p.510). Both women sought to persuade him that his is an insular world, where space either folds in upon itself or operates as a closed circuit; both are proved wrong by the narrator's panoramic sweep over 'bone-white, cave-pocked, barren mountains, the fever-swamps and jungles to the south, the thirsty lands, the hungry cities, and the tracts beyond of the wolf and the outlaw' (*TA*, p.35). Moreover, when Titus defies them and chooses the road not taken, he is heeding the advice given him by Muzzlehatch, his staunchest friend from the city: 'Get on with life. Eat it up. Travel. Make journeys in your mind. Make journeys on your feet. To prison with you in a filthy garb! To glory with you in a golden car! Revel in loneliness. This is only a city. This is no place to halt' (p.107).

Titus's journey is left open-ended on the path newly taken, and we cannot say exactly where his travels were to have led him. But one thing seems assured – Peake's legacy has never halted. The call to make journeys in your mind has been taken up by a stable of writers that Peake's admirer Michael Moorcock has termed 'the modern school of urban fantasy' whose 'heroes include the likes of Mervyn Peake and Clark Ashton Smith' ('Facing the City', p.183). Their fables of the fantastic city, Moorcock asserts, can be read as 'the gritty opposite of the Tolkien

school,' by virtue of their appeal 'to readers not merely seeking escape but looking for versions of their own experience' (p.183). The contemporary authors who most openly celebrate Peake's influence on their work are accordingly Moorcock and China Miéville, two luminaries of urban fantasy, both of whom have called for a reappraisal of *TA*.²⁵

Dickensian influences are also discernible in their urban fantasy novels,²⁶ but Miéville has downplayed Dickens's impact by claiming that any such allusions have made their way into his writing via Peake.²⁷ From this point of view, one may venture to suggest that across the tangled web of intertexts, transpositions, and inspirations that make up the history of any genre, Dickens may be no less indebted to Peake than Peake was to Dickens. Peake ensured that Dickens's shadow remained long and deathless, by adding his own shades of darkness and light to the enduring literary tradition of fantastical reimaginings of London, that city which both authors had recreated with 'all the dreaminess and all the romance' of their inimitable imaginations.

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Notes

- 1 This word is extremely difficult to make out. After several attempts, I can say with a high degree of certainty that it reads 'rabble', as the first three letters emerge as 'rabb' when compared against other words in Peake's handwriting, and the final letter forms either an 'e' or a 'c', with only the 'l' conjectural.
- 2 I am most grateful to Peter Winnington, who referred me to this address and deciphered the better part of its contents well before I approached the matter. He has generously allowed me to build upon his work for this article. For that and much more, my warm and humble gratitude.
- 3 Reproduced with the kind permission of the Mervyn Peake Estate and The British Library Board.

The source can be examined in The British Library, in a manuscript listed as "Ideas for Book Two" (*Titus Groan* chapters 60–61), MS 88931/1/3/9, notebook viii. Access to the notebook itself has been restricted, but a scan of its pages is freely available. For the scanned image of the address, see the file with the suffix '_f002r'. For the scanned image of the false starts, three consecutive paragraphs on a single page, see the file

- with the suffix ‘_fooriv’. In the above quote, the minor additions in square brackets have been made by Winnington and myself, for greater clarity.
- 4 For reproductions of Peake’s illustrations for *BH*, see *Sketches from Bleak House*. Note that Peake also made the cover drawing for Humphry House’s *The Dickens World* (2nd ed. 1960).
 - 5 Winnington, *Voice of the Heart*, p.174.
 - 6 Winnington, *Vast Alchemies*, p.81.
 - 7 Winnington, *Vast Alchemies*, pp.85–6.
 - 8 In two of the three earlier attempts to compose the address, Peake used the phrase ‘heterodox language’ in conjunction with the phrase that carried over to the final version, ‘fresh approach to the art of writing’.
 - 9 See, for example, Juliet John’s splendid study, *Dickens’s Villains*, particularly pp.114–21; Grahame Smith, *Dickens and the Dream of Cinema*, pp.36, 71–3; Chris Louttit, *Dickens’s Secular Gospel*, pp.10–14; Elaine Freedgood, ‘Realism, Fetishism, and Genocide’, in her study, *The Ideas in Things*, pp.81–110.
 - 10 Tolkien’s ‘On Fairy-Stories’ was developed from the Andrew Lang Lecture Tolkien delivered at the University of St. Andrews (1939). It was expanded into essay form for publication in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (1947), revised again for the volume *Tree and Leaf* (1964), and appeared in its final version in *The Monsters and the Critics* (1983). This article uses the final version of 1983. For a comprehensive analysis of the essay across its various stages of composition, see Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*.
 - 11 Tolkien’s disdainful remarks refer to what he calls ‘*Mooreffoc*, or Chestertonian Fantasy’ after Dickens’s disciple G. K. Chesterton, but Tolkien is clearly addressing a strain of fantasy that Chesterton developed from Dickens, and moreover, the example Tolkien showcases is lifted from Dickens’s autobiographical fragment: ‘*Mooreffoc* is a fantastic word, but it could be seen written up in every town in this land. It is Coffee-room, viewed from the inside through a glass door, as it was seen by Dickens on a dark London day’ (*FS*, p.146). Tolkien’s foregrounding of the *Mooreffoc* episode in Dickens’s early life incidentally highlights another parallel between Dickens and Peake. Peake named Rottcodd, the curator of Gormenghast’s Hall of the Bright Carvings, after seeing

- the word ‘doctor’ on the windscreen of his father’s car: from inside the vehicle it reads ‘rotcod’ (see *Vast Alchemies*, p.135). Dickens’s autobiographical fragment was reproduced in Forster’s *Life of Dickens*, vol. I, pp.20–36, with the ‘Mooreffoc’ episode on pp.26–7. The episode was eloquently discussed in Chesterton’s *Charles Dickens*, p.42.
- 12 Dickens, ‘The Fine Old English Gentleman’, pp.29–31 (repeated as a refrain).
 - 13 In his illustration of a gryphon for Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, Peake hybridised it still more by adding a pair of dainty human arms and hands, a bold use of artistic licence considering Carroll’s emphasis on the gryphon’s ‘paws’. See Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass; with sixty six illustrations by Mervyn Peake*, p.79. The gryphon’s ‘paws’ are mentioned on pp.76, 77, & 80.
 - 14 Reproduced in *Sketches from Bleak House*, p.37, and on the front cover of *Writings and Drawings*.
 - 15 The narrator explicitly asserts that Titus’s ‘longing to escape had been fanned by his passion for the “Thing”. Without her he would have never dared to do more than dream of insurrection’ (*G*, p.506).
 - 16 See Orwell’s ‘Charles Dickens’ (1940), ‘Wells, Hitler and the World State’ (1941), and ‘The True Pattern of H. G. Wells’ (1946), and Zamyatin’s ‘On Language’ (1919–20) and ‘H. G. Wells’ (1922).
 - 17 See Gordon Beadle, ‘George Orwell and Charles Dickens’; Wayne Warncke, ‘George Orwell’s Dickens’; Philip Rogers, ‘Dystopian Intertexts: Dickens’s *Hard Times* and Zamiatin’s *We*’; and Emily Finer, ‘Dickens in Twentieth-Century Russia’. My own doctoral dissertation (in progress) examines a tradition of urban fantasy that concatenates Dickens, Wells, Orwell, Peake, and China Miéville.
 - 18 Collis recalled a meeting with Peake on 17 May 1951, when ‘he had started on the third volume of the story ... [that] deals with the adventures of Titus Groan in the world’ (p.37). To this Collis adds: ‘I remember when I first met Peake in 1942 or thereabouts ... he told me that he was contemplating these books and sketched the story’ (p.37).
 - 19 The *EF* has been digitalised and revised online over the years. For the most up-to-date version, see <<http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php>> [accessed 23 Nov. 2014].

The following abbreviations indicate different entries in the *EF*, all of which were written by John Clute: *UF* for ‘Urban Fantasy’, in *EF*, pp.975–6, or <http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=urban_fantasy> [accessed 23 Nov. 2014]; *SW* for ‘Secondary World’, in *EF*, p.847, or <http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=secondary_world> [accessed 23 Nov. 2014]; *JRR* for ‘Tolkien, J(ohn) R(onald) R(euel)’, in *EF*, pp.950–5, or <http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=tolkien_j_r_r> [Accessed 23 Nov. 2014]; *CD* for ‘Dickens, Charles (John Huffham)’, in *EF*, pp.268–9, or <http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=dickens_charles> [Accessed 23 Nov. 2014].

- 20 Granted, sometimes the cities of urban fantasy are so strange and immersive that they may be deemed Secondary Worlds in their own right, but these too are of a different order from Tolkien’s Faërie, by dint of an epistemological ambiguity quite unlike the ontological transparency of Middle Earth. Where Tolkien’s Secondary Worlds must above all induce ‘Secondary Belief’ and accordingly be ‘legible’ (*JRR*, pp.951–3), urban fantasies are ‘told from within, and, from the perspective of characters acting out their roles, it may be difficult to determine the extent and nature of the surrounding Reality’ (*UF*, p.975). On Secondary Belief, see also *FS*, p.132.
- 21 See *UF*, p.975, and *CD*, p.269.
- 22 Biographical information from Winnington, *Vast Alchemies*; Gilmore, *A World Away*; and Smith, *Mervyn Peake*.
- 23 There are numerous biographies of Dickens, from as early as Forster’s *Life of Dickens* (I, 1871), to as recently as Michael Slater’s *The Great Charles Dickens Scandal* (2014). Two excellent biographies published in the last few years are Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens* (2011), and Slater, *Charles Dickens* (2009).
- 24 From W. B. Yeats, ‘The Second Coming’ (1920), p.187.
- 25 Moorcock’s 1983 ‘Preface’ to Gilmore’s *A World Away* avowed that Peake ‘certainly had considerable influence on what I think is my own best work’ (p.xiii). Moorcock likewise wrote the introduction to the recent German edition of *TA* (2011), where he argued that ‘in many ways *Titus Alone* is for me the most interesting of the three books Mervyn Peake wrote concerning the young Lord of Gormenghast’ (p.257). In the Acknowledgments in *Perdido Street Station* (2000), China Miéville

wrote: ‘to M. John Harrison, and to the memory of Mervyn Peake, my humble and heartfelt gratitude. I could never have written this book without them.’ He likewise stated in an online interview (2000) that ‘the nicest thing anyone ever said about *Perdido Street Station* was that it read like a fantasy book written in an alternate world where the *Gormenghast* trilogy rather than *Lord of the Rings* was the most influential work in the genre.’ Miéville composed the introduction to the most recent collected edition of the Gormenghast trilogy, where he paid special tribute to *TA* as ‘that last, so-strange, scandalously neglected volume, changeling among changelings’ (p.ix). For more on Miéville and Peake, see Alice Mills, ‘Inspiration and Astonishment’.

- 26 For Dickens’s influence on Moorcock, see Angela Carter’s ‘Introduction’ (1991) to *Death is no Obstacle*, pp.xi–xii. Moorcock himself stated in an interview in the same book: ‘People have made comparisons between *Mother London* and *Ulysses*, but it’s not true. I’m still a popular novelist. My role model can’t be James Joyce; it has to be Charles Dickens’ (p.98). For Dickens’s influence on Miéville, see Carl Freedman, ‘Perdido Street Station by China Miéville (2000)’, p.1201; M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas, ‘China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station* [2000]’, p.311; and my article, ‘The Labyrinthine City: *Bleak House*’s Influence on *Perdido Street Station*’.
- 27 In a 2003 interview, the interviewer Joan Gordon told Miéville: ‘Your names – of places, people, etc. – are very evocative, Dickensian’. Miéville replied that ‘they’re probably more Peakeian than Dickensian, really’ (p.369).

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HADAS ELBER-AVIRAM is an ORS-funded doctoral candidate at University College London. Her dissertation charts the development of fantastical urban literature from Dickens's densely figurative representations of London, through the metropolitan science fiction of H. G. Wells and George Orwell, and the vertiginous, fragmented city of Peake's *Titus Alone*, to the array of steam-punk and science-fictional cityscapes of China Miéville's interstitial fiction. Hadas has been awarded Israeli and UK scholarships for work on the undergraduate and graduate levels, and has published on topics ranging from Dickens's influence on Miéville, through the representation of vampires in science-fiction, to the affiliations between urban archaeology and urban fantasy.

News Roundup

Ride a Cock-Horse

In February 2015, the British Library brought out a new edition of Peake's volume of illustrated nursery rhymes, *Ride a Cock-Horse*, in a hardback edition priced at £7.99 (ISBN 978 0 7123 5786 9). Their catalogue correctly states that it was first published in 1940, but goes on to claim that it is 'now reissued for the first time.' This is inexcusable, for there is no reason to ignore the fine edition, in both hardback and paperback, brought out by Chatto & Windus in 1972. Of all the publishers in the world, the British Library is the best equipped to get the facts right when it comes to this sort of thing. Although we requested a review copy of this new edition, nothing has reached us yet. Perhaps that spared us another bad shock, for we have heard from early purchasers that the colouring in it is 'absolutely awful.'

Monsieur Noir

Can you imagine the story of *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* retold as social satire in a comic book? Two Belgians, Jean Dufaux (script) and Griffo (artist; real name Werner Goelen), teamed up around 1990 to produce *Monsieur Noir* in two volumes (published in 1994 and 1995; now available from the French publisher Dupuis in a single volume). It's as though they took all Peake's motifs and characters, shook them up in a kaleidoscope, and then drew the result. (They acknowledge their debt to Peake in a postface to the single volume edition.) The story is set in a castle called Blacktales that's a personality in itself and forever growing, orchestrated by seven hundred and forty-eight distinct rituals. Apart from Fuchsia, who is renamed Fanny, all the central characters bear the names of dances: Lord Sepulchre is Lord Charleston (who smokes opium) and the Countess is Lady Habanera. She has a cat called Black Bottom which plays a crucial part in the plot – for plot there is, much more so than in Peake. The Twins are male, Mambo and Tango, and they speak like Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-



Fanny facing Surf in the kitchen of Blacktales castle in *Monsieur Noir*

the only allusion to Lewis Carroll in the book: Fanny is as much Alice in Wonderland as she is Fuchsia. The Thing becomes Fanny's double. The illustrator Giffo (who clearly knows Peake's art as well as the Titus books) appropriates motifs like Steerpike's spy-holes and Peake's dizzying verbal perspectives, along with Swelter's cleaver, into dramatic artwork. His Swelter (Surf) owes not a little to Captain Slaughterboard – and to Walt Disney of course. The book is cleverly done and a visually stunning homage to Peake.

Titus on the couch

In an article that quite escaped my attention back in 2007, E. B. Frohvet (a pseudonym) presented 'a psychiatric overview' of the characters of

the Titus books (in *Banana Wings*, No.29, February 2007, pp.12–14). Examining the mental health of the inhabitants of Gormenghast, Frohvet diagnoses their respective conditions, and concludes that Titus is a normal adolescent – see the blogger's comment at the end of 'Performing Peake' (below). (E. B. Frohvet contributed an article, 'The Tragedy of Fuchsia Groan,' to *Peake Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (November 1998), pages 43–5.)

Performing Peake

Heralded by a good deal of pre-performance publicity, a troop calling itself Carabosse put on an adaptation of *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* at the Chrysalis Theatre, in Milton Keynes last autumn.

Peake Studies reader Jim Boyd found the theatre 'very spacious and comfortable. The decor tried to depict the castle stones with the growth of ivy on them. The set used two levels, divided into six individually lit 'sites.' Unfortunately, it wasn't dark or oppressive enough and initially gave an air of pantomime.

'Steerpike and Fuchsia were excellent in costume, appearance and acting, and to me their scenes were the best. The costumes were elaborate; they tried, successfully I think, to remain faithful to Peake's illustrations. On the other hand, some were ill fitting, and little attempt was made to dress the kitchen boys and schoolboys appropriately; they appeared to be just children on the stage. In fact, the cast was larger than in previous adaptations of the story.

'The whole production was over-ambitious. By trying to act out the whole of *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast*, it watered down crucial scenes for lack of time. Thus Steerpike's mischief was diluted by other themes. What was made of Titus' schooldays, Irma's party and other aspects of the books took time away from, in my opinion, more crucial scenes.

'Overall, the acting was good, particularly Steerpike, Fuchsia, Prunesquallor, Flay and Bellgrove. On the other hand, Lord Groan was weak and underplayed. The scenes between Lady Groan and Titus could have been more dramatic throughout and the ending was disappointingly weak.

‘Unlike other productions I’ve seen where those unfamiliar with the books were left bewildered, this production managed to appeal to a wider audience.’

A blogger called Notkoshka wrote on 3 November 2014 that, for her or him, ‘Steerpike managed to be the perfect mix of awkward and evil; Fuchsia, who could’ve been so overdone, was perfect; Lord and Lady Groan were wonderfully terrible parents; Cora and Clarice, Flay, the Prunesquallors, Swelter and Nanny Slagg all as mad as they should have been; and Titus, although only on stage towards the end, was great as the voice of sanity in the midst of chaos.’

<http://fightthepatriarchy.wordpress.com/2014/11/03/review-carabosse-adaption-of-gormenghast/>

The Lost Uncle for Children

There was an adaptation of *Letters from a Lost Uncle* in Sligo, Ireland, at the end of 2014. Kate Winter reported on 21 December:

‘Bob Kelly is a rather accomplished Sligo actor, with strong ties to the award winning Blue Raincoat Theatre Company and distinguished qualifications from L’Ecole de Jaques Lecoq in Paris. He’s a terrific teacher of drama, screen and stage actor, improviser of comedy and all round talented fellow. His most recent incarnation, as Thaddeus M. Whimsicleese, in “How To Wrestle A Polar Bear” is another inspired performance for young and old alike.

‘From the moment you enter the foyer area at The Factory, you are transported into a different world. A palpable sense of old-fashioned adventure and the beautiful attention to detail in the set design draw the audience instantly into a tale inspired by the classic works of Mervyn Peake. A tale of fantastical creatures, life-or-death battles, unlikely escapes and quirky survival tips – feeding cheese to sharks and using hungry vultures for a handy airlift, anyone?’

‘With this tale of self-worth and self-actualization, delivered with such a cunningly gentle hand, the youngsters in the audience don’t for a moment suspect that they might be learning any kind of life lesson here...

‘It’s a tale which starts with a rather tough little infant running away from home and ends with the poignant and powerful image of a huge mythical creature freezing in place on his throne, while a horde of delighted children throw handfuls of snow at their parents and guardians with magical abandon.

“How To Wrestle A Polar Bear” is a beautiful, considered piece of work, perfectly pitched to its audience of 5–14-year-olds but also enthralling and engaging for all ages, particularly with a few wry and witty improvisation moments thrown in to keep the adults on their toes. Full audience participation keeps the attention of even the littlest member, and Bob/Thaddeus’s thoughtful interactions keep the crowd in the palm of his hand.

‘If this returns to the stage next Christmas, or if another such production should happen along in the meantime, this is the best date you could choose to kidnap your favourite little friend for. Armando and I thoroughly enjoyed ourselves, and from the wide eyes and huge grins on all the other faces we saw, so did everyone else.’

<https://sceneinsligo.wordpress.com/2014/12/21/how-to-wrestle-a-polar-bear-tribe-theatrebob-kelly-the-factory-sat-20th-december>

A powerful and haunting production

As we write, a new adaptation by Gareth Murphy of *Boy in Darkness* is being performed at the Blue Elephant Theatre, Camberwell (13 March to 4 April, 2015). Stuart Olesker reports:

From time to time an intrepid director or actor will, as a labour of love, rise to the challenge of dramatising *Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast*, *Titus Alone* or ‘Boy in Darkness’. It is not difficult to guess why. There is an innate theatricality and dramatic tension in the dialogue between the mutually hostile grotesques of Peake’s dark fantasies. One thinks of Flay and Swelter, Deadyawn and Bellgrove, Prunesquallor and his sister Irma. Indeed, in many ways these dialogues are more dramatic than those that feature in some of Peake’s actual plays.

However, there is still the challenge of finding the most appropriate theatrical form for an effective adaptation of a Peake novel or

novella. To my mind, the most successful adaptations have been those that capture the spirit of Peake's text rather than adhere too strictly to the letter. Two examples of productions that found an equivalent theatrical language would be the stylised choreography and visual invention of David Glass (*Gormenghast* and *Titus Groan*) and the bizarre and unsettling antics of Curious Directive ('Boy in Darkness').

Would, I wondered, a one-man version of Peake's 'Boy in Darkness' be able to do justice to its source? Would it find a theatrical style that would distil the essence of this complex, elusive and terrifying nightmare? I'm happy to say that at the Blue Elephant Theatre there was no cause for concern. John Walton, the Director, had a clear and coherent vision of the staging of the piece, creating a compelling piece of physical theatre. The versatile and highly skilled Gareth Murphy (resembling Marcel Marceau both in features and mime artistry) employed every ounce of physical and acrobatic energy to persuade us that he was, by turns, Narrator, Boy, Goat, Hyena and Lamb. The audience, on all three sides of the thrust stage, were clearly absorbed and convinced.

Murphy as Narrator sets the scene, announcing that it is Titus's 14th birthday. As 'Lord of a Tower'd Tract' Titus must endure endless and pointless rituals in a dessicated world. The Narrator then becomes the rebellious Titus whom we follow in our imagination into a landscape more barren and fearsome in its own way than the one he has left. In this unfamiliar and unwholesome 'no man's land' he encounters two sickeningly real characters, part man, part beast: the ingratiating, fawning, sycophantic Goat and the brutal, dominant, sadistic Hyena. There is also their Lord and Master, the Blind Lamb to whom they will offer up the Boy to be 'bestialized'.

These feral creatures come disturbingly alive through Murphy's perfectly controlled muscular contortions and wide vocal range. As the nightmare engulfs both the Boy and the audience, we hear the bleating scream of the blind Lamb (a grotesque parody of 'Our Lord?') and we fear for the fate of the Boy.

The small, intimate stage area and auditorium of the Blue Elephant Theatre are exploited to the full both in terms of vertical and

horizontal space. Subtle use of lighting and sound ensure that, throughout the performance, we suspend our disbelief as we journey with the Boy in Peake's haunting and unnerving world.

This splendidly directed and performed version of 'Boy in Darkness' deserves a wider audience. Is a national or international tour in the offing? © Stuart Olesker 2015

On 16 March, Rebekah Ellerby wrote that this production 'has a childlike quality of storytelling that is both delightfully riveting and desperately compelling. It is 'tinged,' as the Boy says, 'with sweetness and menace.' . . . There's a darkness and sadness to the story, and more humour and lightness than the 'gothic fantasy' genre implies. It is a play about young heroism, as the Boy uses his wits, intelligence and imagination to triumph over adversity.

'The small, black box studio space of the Blue Elephant Theatre becomes cliffs, rocks and gullies, as the Boy makes his dangerous escape from his castle home. Murphy clammers up on the radiators, around the walls, and behind the audience, who are on chairs and cushions around three sides of the performance space. By breaking beyond the low level thrust stage, the whole theatre can become the world of John Walton's production.

'Murphy – who creates the narrator, boy, and all the other characters – has the physical presence and agility of a contemporary dancer. The Goat has a hunched back and an affected bleat while the Hyena vaunts around the stage, shoulders thrust strongly back, like a Latin dancer. Beautifully controlled, he negotiates the space with astonishing speed and accuracy. Edging close to the audience and balancing on the rustic, wooden set – a wide ladder with a tarnished mirror backdrop – he finds his footholds with ease. His background as a mime artist finds its way into unobtrusive gestures that evoke the boundaries of the world and its characters. . . .

'The production is testament to the honourable risks this little theatre has taken over the two years of development. Its physical eloquence and bold storytelling do justice to Peake's fantasy realm.'

<http://www.ayoungtheatre.com/review-boy-in-darkness-blue-elephant-theatre/>

‘A great showcase for Murphy’s acting talent: he gives a multi-faceted performance that is pure magic’ — Anna Forsyth, 19 March 2015.

<http://everything-theatre.co.uk/2015/03/boy-in-the-darkness-blue-elephant-theatre-review.html>

Dark Arteries

Coming to the Sadler’s Wells Theatre (Rosebery Avenue, London), 12–16 May 2015, is the world first brass band dance work, called ‘Dark Arteries’ – a quotation from Peake’s celebration of Welsh mining community in the Rhondda Valley. Music composed by Gavin Higgins (who wrote the opening piece for 2014’s Last Night of the Proms) and directed by Mark Baldwin.

The Things They Say

Melvyn Burgess, a young-adult author in the *Guardian* on 14 August 2014: ‘Gormenghast is a fantasy written in a very Gothic style, with these long, gorgeous sentences, which just land on a sixpence. It was a character-driven fantasy and there’s just nothing like it?’

<http://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2014/aug/14/melvin-burgess-junk-first-teen-book>

Caitlin Perry, a writer from Vancouver, Canada, opined: ‘I don’t think that I have ever read anything that was simultaneously so clever and so beautiful?’

<http://caitlinperry.com/wordpress/tag/book-review/>

Posted by The_Wanderer in February 2015:

‘*Titus Groan* is one of the 20th century’s most beautifully written stories.’ <http://atg-reviews.com/books-and-comics/titus-groan-book-review/>

A long review of Peake’s work was posted on Goodreads by J. G. Keely (whose writing was already been quoted at length here, just a year ago) on 17 May 2014.

‘Mervyn Peake was, by all accounts, a powerful presence, an electric character, and a singular creative force. While Tolkien’s poetry is the part everyone skips, Peake’s invigorates his books. His voice and tone are unique in the English language, and his characterization is delightfully, grotesquely vivid. As an illustrator, he was perhaps somewhat less precise than Dore, but more evocative than Beardsley.

‘His life and his vision were singular, from his birth in China to his years on the channel island Sark, and finally, his slow deterioration, until, unable to speak, he drew only clowns in profile, capped as dunces. Though many suggest this deterioration marks the perceived failure of *Titus Alone*, Peake would complete his final illustrations more than a year later, and did not succumb to death for another decade.

‘There were some editorial problems with *Titus Alone*, and though

they have been mostly repaired, there are still dissatisfied grumblings about the final form. The ultimate Titus book is not easy to come to terms with, and indeed it took me long thought and consideration. However, I will not coax or argue mitigating circumstances: this book is Peake's vision, and while not as expansive or exacting as the others, it stands as its own work, and completes Peake's philosophical and literary journey as well as we might wish.

'Peake was never one to pander. He did not write for any crowd, and he certainly did not write to facilitate escapism. He may have fashioned his work by an aesthetic, so as to mesmerize or mystify the ear, tug at the mind, and certainly to tickle the eye, but he did not give comfortable or simple answers.

'The first two books are rather congruous, despite the subtle shifts, the advances and retreats, the many skirmishes Peake engages the reader in, only to return the veil before any clear victory or defeat can be claimed. It was not Peake's intention to stroke and comfort his readers, but to take them from high to low, to present them with wonder and with a vast, unconquerable world of wretched beauty.

'Over the long stretch of the first two books, the reader becomes accustomed to the castle Gormenghast, to identify with Titus' everyday struggles against plodding tradition. Characters die, others take their place, filling out the ranks, buttressing the ancient walls with their very breath.

'There is a safety in tradition, in the comfort we slowly gain from it, as we do in Gormenghast itself: always separate from the world without, unknown and forbidden. Like Titus, we imagine that the outside world must be like the inside one: it cannot be so different, after all, from this crumbling castle, this place which has become another home to legions of awestruck readers.

'But any reader content to watch it all play out so familiarly has not been paying attention – has not been listening to Peake. Though there is always the susurrant coo of that comfort, that tradition, we must not forget that, for young Titus, tradition is death, is rot, is black and stagnant waters.

'Many readers find themselves utterly thrown when they first begin to encounter the world outside Gormenghast, and realize that

it is not what they expected. However, it is difficult for me to imagine how such readers could at once praise Peake for the singular, spectacular world of the first two books, and then become upset when he continues to expand his vision. They find themselves well-seated by yesterday's revolution, and resent such an unwelcome start.

'Peake continues a thread of literary exploration which draws through the great epics, from Homer to Virgil, Tasso, Ariosto, and Milton, to Byron, to Eliot. Like these great works, Peake explores the role and nature of the hero: his connection to tradition, and the purpose chosen for him.

'Originally, the epic hero was governed by his own mind, like Odysseus, a mind devious beyond measure, as it turned out. Then Virgil created his hero of piety, of submission. Aeneas grasped hold of tradition, trusting in it to lead him. This was a message to the populace: trust in our ways, our traditions, and our Emperor to provide all that you might need. While this message is useful to an empire, it can be rather destructive to the individual, asking that he give up himself to the greater good.

'Milton eventually continues this tradition, except he promotes subservience to Church instead of Empire (though there was little enough difference at the time). However, Milton included the old, violent, self-serving hero as a cautionary tale: humility and piety are Adam's strengths, while Satan has the "false" strengths of warlike might and Odyssean skepticism.

'Many later writers, including Byron, found that the Satanic mode of heroism was more appealing to the individual, especially to the iconoclast and artist who was tired of being told to "pipe down" and "follow orders". Nietzsche would carry this sense of heroic individualism to the cusp, when he stated that mankind would have to demolish all tradition, and each individual would have to create a whole philosophy of meaning for himself, and thus become a philosopher of the future known famously as the *Übermensch*.

'Of course, there is a point when we all must question the whole of tradition, and just as we did when we first learned the art of speech, test what happens when we respond to all questions and demands with a resounding "no!" These later rebellions, these exis-

tential crises can happen at any time, whenever we find ourselves struggling to make a place for ourselves.

‘Titus leaves home – as he must to become himself. He cannot honestly accept or reject Gormenghast and its tradition unless he can see it objectively, which requires that he develop a more worldly point of view. Like anyone progressing from childhood to adulthood, he questions the fundamental assumptions of his parents and teachers, and by extension, their whole world, and so he sets out on his own. Also, like any of us on the brink of adulthood, he learns that the world the adults promised doesn’t really exist.

‘The real world is stranger, more daunting, and far more vast than the “right and wrong” of parental morality, or the far-flung imaginings of the child. Even though his readers have been through this shift themselves, and should know to expect it from a changing young man, new to the world, Peake still manages to catch us off guard. Like Titus, the reader expects the world to be different and challenging, but like Titus, they cannot imagine how truly different it will be when it arrives.

‘*Titus Alone* has a self-contained plot. It has its own allies and antagonists, its own places, its own conflict, and its own climax. They all add to Peake’s running themes of change, growth, beauty, and meaning, but they are their own. However, the climax in *Titus Alone* is only a dress rehearsal for the true climax, which comes only at the very end, and remains unsure until then, as pivotal and sudden as the twelfth book of the Aeneid.

‘This resolution is the culmination of Titus’ childhood, of all his former conflicts, of his life and purpose and individuality. It is the thematic culmination of the *Bildungsroman*. It is the philosophical conclusion of Peake’s exploration of the role of the hero, the self, and of tradition. It is also the fulfillment of his vision, his unyielding artistic drive. It is the final offering to the reader, his companion and rival on this journey.

‘He ends with beauty, with questions, with verve, and with a wink.

‘It still confuses me that many readers seem to expect Peake to follow works notable for their strangeness and unpredictability with something familiar and indistinguishable. There are many writers

who do this, it is true. There is the revolutionary who topples the regime only to supplant it with his own. There is the mountain climber who tops Everest, and then imagines that the greatest challenge is to do so twice.

‘You get no higher no matter how many times you climb the mountain. The true visionary adventurer climbs the mountain, and then, as an encore, paints the ceiling of a cathedral. It may not be expected, it may not please those fans who only want more of the same, but anything less is an admission of defeat. Peake earned his laurels in the first two books; while we could hardly blame him for resting on them, he refused to.

‘Perhaps many readers become comfortable with his rebellion, his iconoclasm. They sympathize with his rejection of tradition, and then happily accept that rebellion as their new tradition. Like Aeneas, they leave crumbling Troy, trusting in their patron deity to carry them through. Peake, however, was not content simply to add a new wing to his masterwork. He showed his authorial humility and his commitment to art by razing his own cathedral simply because it was more interesting than leaving it standing.

‘As Nietzsche said: push everything, and abandon whatever topples, no matter how familiar it had become. He who can apply this to himself and to his own works is the only artist who truly deserves the title – and such is Peake.’

<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/46276484>

Have you seen something in the press or on the web, or read a good book that mentions Peake? Remember to pass on the news and your views to the Editor for inclusion here!