

Collected Articles on Mervyn Peake

G. Peter Winnington

Introduction

THIS COLLECTION reprints some of my articles on Peake spanning the last 40 years; they are available as pdf files, with appropriate illustrations. Total length 200 pages.

Not all were published in the *Mervyn Peake Review* or *Peake Studies*. Some have appeared before only in books or other periodicals. I have grouped them more or less thematically, rather than chronologically. I consider the first two as introductory: they were written for people with little or no knowledge of Peake and his work. The first, 'Inside the Mind of Mervyn Peake,' examines how Peake spatializes the contents of the mind; the second, 'The Critical Reception of the Titus Books,' shows how Peake's novels were first received.

The second group is largely biographical in orientation, covering

- 'Peake's Parents' Years in China';
- my discovery of 'A Letter From China' by Peake;
- a piece describing 'Kuling, Peake's Birthplace' and a more recent one,
- 'Peake and Kuling,' written as a review of the British Library's publication of 'Memoirs of a Doctor in China,' misleadingly titled *Peake in China* with an ill-informed introduction by Hilary Spurling;
- 'Burning the Globe: another attempt to situate Gormenghast,' on the geography and mentality of Gormenghast; and
- 'The Writing of *Titus Groan*.'

The third group comprises articles identifying some of Peake's sources and possible influences on his work:

- 'Tracking Down the Umzimvubu Kaffirs';
- 'Peake, Knole and *Orlando*';
- 'Mervyn Peake and the Cinema' (updated with a note on recent findings);
- 'Parodies and Poetical Allusions';
- 'Peake and Alice (and *Arrietty*):' (This is the opening speech delivered at the 2011 centenary conference.)

In fourth place comes a short 'volume' relating to Peake's art, with my assessment of Peake's production as a war artist, and a piece that few people will have read before: 'The Draw of the Line.' It was written to accompany an exhibition of Peake's work in Yverdon, Switzerland, in 2009. It complements what I wrote in *Mervyn Peake: the Man and his Art*.

The fifth group comprises thematic articles:

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- ‘Fuchsia and Steerpike: Mood and Form’;
- ‘Peake’s Thing and Hawthorne’s Pearl’;
- ‘Mervyn Peake’s Lonely World’;
- ‘Peake’s Ballads: ‘The Touch o’ the Ash’ and *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb*.’

Lastly, we have articles on the editing and resulting (un)reliability of Peake’s texts:

- ‘The Misfortunes of Captain Slaughterboard’;
- ‘Editing Peake’;
- ‘On the Editing of Titus Alone’;
- ‘A Note on the Folio Texts’;
- ‘Peake de luxe: the *Collected Works* from Queen Anne Press.

References

I have abbreviated references to the books most often quoted from:

- Batchelor *Mervyn Peake: a biographical and critical exploration*. Duckworth, 1974.
- BiD ‘Boy in Darkness’ in *Sometime, Never: Three Tales of Imagination* by William Golding, John Wyndham and Mervyn Peake. Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1956, pp.155–224.
- CP *Collected Poems*. Edited by R W Maslen. Carcanet, 2008.
- G *Gormenghast* (1950). Paperback editions from the King Penguin of 1982 to Vintage, 1998.
- Gb *The Glassblowers*. Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1950.
- AWA *A World Away*, by Maeve Gilmore. Victor Gollancz, 1970.
- MP *Mr Pye*. Heinemann, 1953. (Subsequent editions contain misprints.)
- PP *Peake’s Progress*. Penguin, 1981, and the British Library, 2011. (The defective Allen Lane hardback edition of 1978 was unfortunately reprinted by Penguin in 2000.)
- PS The periodical, *Peake Studies* (www.peakestudies.com) 1988–2015.
- Smith *Mervyn Peake: a Personal Memoir*, by Gordon Smith. Victor Gollancz, 1984.
- TA *Titus Alone* (1959). Paperback editions from the King Penguin of 1981 to Vintage, 1998.
- TG *Titus Groan* (1946). Paperback editions from the King Penguin of 1981 to Vintage, 1998.
- Watney *Mervyn Peake*, by John Watney. Michael Joseph, 1976.
- WD *Mervyn Peake: Writings and Drawings*. Academy Editions, 1974)

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 II¹

When Mervyn Peake died ten years ago, he left an oeuvre 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*.² Beside this considerable achievement in prose, poetry and picture, there remained countless unpublished drawings and writings 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 came from Donatyre in French-speaking Switzerland, 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; there he met a young 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

¹ First published in *Etudes de Lettres* (published by the University of Lausanne, Switzerland), Series vi, volume 2, No 1 (January–March 1979), pp.99–106. Reprinted (in part) in *The Chelsea House Library of Literary Criticism: Twentieth-Century British Literature*, edited by Harold Bloom, New York: Chelsea House, 1987, vol.4, pp.2220–21).

of what to do with Sapper Peake; after a nervous breakdown, he was invalided out of the army and then received a two 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 debut as a playwright before being overcome by Parkinson's disease. 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*,³ 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 in the cobwebbed attics of Gormenghast. This echoes another duel, earlier in the book, between the lovers of Keda, Titus's wet nurse.

The second novel, *Gormenghast*,⁴ (for which, along with his volume of poems, *The Glassblowers*, Peake was awarded the Heinemann Prize for Literature in 1951) takes up the story when Titus is six or seven, and follows him through to the age of eighteen or so 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 abruptly changes 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*⁵ is written in sparer prose, less laden with similes and metaphors, more suited to Titus's pica-

resque 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* 129 & 202), a head with hair, eyes, jaws and even teeth (*G* 101). It holds its breath (*G* 277), sweats (*TG* 413), and has a heart and pulse (*G* 17). The Tower of Flints that dominates 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* 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, moods and thoughts – even a soul (*G* 14). Not surprisingly, more than one critic has called it the principal character of the novels.⁶

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;⁷

The reverse process is also a frequent device; 'his eyes like broken glass – / The shattered panes of a deserted house'⁸ 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 happen-

ings 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.⁹

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

Or as he puts it in another poem, 'The streets of midnight wander through the Skull.'¹²

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* 125); for Lord Groan, opium builds 'within his skull a tallow-coloured world of ghastly beauty' (*TG* 205); a picture of 'a worm, wriggling its bliss through (Swelter's) brain . . . illuminated the inside of Mr Flay's darkened skull' (*TG* 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* 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?' (*G* 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* 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* 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’ (*G* 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* 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 – ‘gone was the outline of his mountainous home. Gone that torn world of towers. Gone was the labyrinth that fed his dreams’ (*TA* 9) – to the point where he begins to doubt his identity, to lose confidence in his sanity. 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* 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 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.¹³

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.’¹⁴

Notes

- 1 *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*. The quotation is from pp.282–3.
- 2 All three titles have recently been republished: *Treasure Island* and *Alice* by Methuen Children’s Books, *The Ancient Mariner* by Chatto & Windus.
- 3 Quotations are from the second edition of 1968, hereafter abbreviated *TG*. A French translation, *Titus d’Enfer*, was published by Stock (Paris) in 1974.
- 4 *Gormenghast* was first published in 1950. Quotations are from the second edition of 1968/1969, hereafter abbreviated *G*. A French translation was published by Stock (Paris) in 1977.
- 5 *Titus Alone* was first published in 1959. Quotations are from the second edition of 1970, revised from the MSS by Langdon Jones, hereafter abbreviated *TA*. A French translation is in preparation.
- 6 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).
- 7 First published in *Shapes and Sounds* (Chatto & Windus, 1941). *CP* p.88.
- 8 ‘The Boy’ first published in *A Reverie of Bone* (Bertram Rota, 1967). *CP* p.51.
- 9 *The Craft of the Lead Pencil* (Allan Wingate, 1946). Reprinted in *Mervyn Peake: Writings and Drawings* (Academy Editions, 1974), p.59.
- 10 ‘As a Great Town Draws the Eccentrics in’, *CP* p.141.
- 11 ‘Poem’ first published in *The Glassblowers*; *CP* p.140.
- 12 ‘There is No Difference’ *CP* p.195.
- 13 ‘Heads Float About Me’, first printed in *A Reverie of Bone*; *CP* p.214.
- 14 From a letter to his wife, Maeve, quoted in *AWA* 128.

The Critical Reception of the Titus Books

I predict for Titus a smallish but fervent public, composed of those whose imaginations are complementary to Mr Peake's. Such a public will probably renew itself, and probably enlarge, with each generation, for which reason I hope the book may always be kept in print. —Elizabeth Bowen

Tatler & Bystander, 3 April 1946, pp.23 & 28

When *Titus Groan* was published in book-hungry Britain at the end of March 1946, it was generally well received – with reservations. Mervyn Peake was already known as a poet and illustrator; many reviewers compared his novel with his previous work, and found it less successful. For the novelist Howard Spring, *Titus Groan* was full of the macabre power that makes Mr. Peake's drawings notable. But [he] has not yet learned how to apply this power effectively to the writing of fiction' (*Country Life*, 6 December 1946, p.1108). The anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* expressed similar reservations: 'Mr. Peake's distinctive talent, as in his poetry, painting, and book illustration, should not go unrecognized. Yet the impression he leaves is not quite that of as novelist' (23 March 1946, p.137). Several reviewers regretted the absence of illustrations; Peake had wanted to illustrate his book, but his publisher turned down the idea on the grounds that it would have placed the novel in a different category. (The drawings in the present edition were added in the late 1960s.)

Placing *Titus Groan* in a category remains a problem, which explains the ambivalence of many of the reviews. Much depended on the reviewers' attitudes towards the 'grotesque', the 'fantastic' and the 'Gothic'. A few, like Kate O'Brien, were openly dismissive: 'bad, tautological prose . . . a large, haphazard, Gothic mess' (*Spectator*, no. 176, 29 March 1946, pp.332 & 334); others, like the celebrated novelist and short-story writer, Elizabeth Bowen (quoted above), were more enthusiastic: 'Titus Groan defies classification:

* Written for and printed in the Overlook Press edition of *Titus Alone* (1992).

it certainly is not a novel; it would be found strong meat as a fairy-tale. Let us call it a sport of literature (for literature, I, for one, do find it to be) – one of those works pure, violent, self-sufficient imagination that are from time to time thrown out.

On balance, the reviewers were largely positive, with some lengthy eulogies in major periodicals. Herbert Reed said, 'I do not think I have ever so much enjoyed a novel sent to me for review' (*New Statesman and Nation*, 4 May 1946, p.323). Peake's friend Maurice Collis devoted a page of *Time and Tide* (11 April 1946, p.354) to a serious assessment of the book; and R.G.G. Price (in the *New English Review*, vol. 12, no. 6, June 1946, pp.592–93) concluded rhetorically: 'Grandiloquent? Thank Heavens. Verbose? Why not, if the words are good ones? Interesting and effective? Certainly?'

By this time, a few articles had appeared on Peake, but they were mostly profiles of him as an illustrator. The exception was perceptive little article by Quentin Crisp, which is reprinted as preface to the Overlook paperback edition of *Gormenghast*. Then known only for his eccentric appearance and profession as an artists' model, Crisp had made Peake's acquaintance several years before; in particular he had persuaded him to illustrate Crisp's literary oddity, a limerick sequence called *All This and Bevin Too* which was published as a stapled brochure in 1943 and remains delightful period piece.

When it came to the publication of *Titus Groan* in America, Peake was dismayed to find that the publisher had added a subtitle, 'A Gothic novel' to the cover and title page of the book; this inevitably coloured the reviews. *Titus Groan* came out late in 1946 after a flourish of advance publicity, as in the *New York Herald Tribune*: 'Just as we were struggling with *William Blake* by Mark Schorer, Will Cuppy came in and asked out of a clear sky "What is that new novel about a character named Ug or Awk, but not by Vardis Fisher?" We knew right away he meant *Titus Groane* [sic] by Mervyn Peake' (1 September 1946).

It left many reviewers puzzled, and they sought in vain for a meaning in the work: 'He would be a brave man indeed who offhand would attempt to determine the meaning of the story,' commented John Cournos, beating a retreat in the *New York Sun* (5 November 1946). 'An allegory it may well be. But of what?' wondered Orville Prescott in *The New York Times* (8 November 8, 1946); he felt that the 'dark jewels of *Titus Groan* are buried deep and must be dug for through masses of slag and dirt.' Thomas Sugrue was equally perturbed by it: 'Perhaps *Titus Groan* is meant to represent a dream. Perhaps it is surrealistic. Perhaps it is just a dull book, without humour, without vitality, yet tumbling on for a dreadfully long

time' (*New York Herald Tribune*, 24 November 1946). *The New Yorker* concluded that 'readers who look for hidden meanings may find themselves wondering whether Mr Peake has done anything more solemn than produce a work of extraordinary imagination while having himself a very fine time' (16 December 1946).

Difficulties of classification again proved a handicap to success, and praise was often overshadowed by such comments as 'it is almost impossible to classify' (*Call Bulletin*, San Francisco, 7 December 1946), and 'a flight of allegorical fantasy that defies classification' (*Beloit News*, Wisconsin, 5 December 1946, repeated in the Burbank, California, *Review*, 8 January 1947).

Overall, however, American reviewers were quite as favourable as British. 'With all its defects,' concluded Hermes Nye in the Dallas, Texas, *Times Herald*, 'this remains a book for the man who relishes the fantastic, the puckish and the beautiful' (8 December 1946). Writers again proved to be Peake's most sympathetic readers. August Derleth informed subscribers to the Milwaukee *Journal* that 'this novel offers rich rewards to anyone who exercises the patience and imagination to stay with it' (17 November 1946), and the celebrated novelist Robertson Davies, writing in the Peterborough (Canada) *Examiner* as Samuel Marchbanks, concluded: 'it is an astonishing work of art.... It has been condemned as unhealthy and absurd, but in my opinion it is neither, but a very fine book, well removed from the beaten path of contemporary fiction. I recommend it highly' (10 December 1947).

During the three following years, Peake lived on the Channel island of Sark; there he completed *Gormenghast* which was published in September 1950 to critical acclaim. 'No novel involving any comparable effort of imagination and fancy, of will-power and word-power, has appeared in English since the war,' wrote Emyr Humphreys in *Time & Tide* (21 October 1950, pp.1065–66), and R.G.G. Price, who had already been captivated by *Titus Groan*, called *Gormenghast* 'the finest imaginative feat in the English novel since *Ulysses*,' although he then spoiled the compliment by adding, 'even though *Ulysses* is of course still much the greater book' (*Punch*, 22 November 1950, p.507).

By this time, readers had begun to appreciate that in Peake's work the story is less important than the telling. Several reviewers emphasized the escapist nature of his fiction: 'a holiday in the land of a dream' (Lionel Hale in the *Observer*, 17 September 1950) and 'as a complete holiday from reality, it is a country that will bear a third visit' (*Liverpool Post*, 3 October 1950), which boded well for *Titus Alone*. The following year, Peake received

the Heinemann Prize from Royal Society for *Gormenghast* and his collection of poems, *The Glassblowers* (also 1950). But there was no American edition of *Gormenghast* until 1967.

During the 1950s, Peake found it increasingly difficult to maintain his position as an author and illustrator. On the one hand, his style and sense of humour were increasingly at variance with the spirit of the age, which led to the relative failure of his light-hearted novel, *Mr Pye*, in 1953, and the complete flop of his verse play, *The Wit to Woo*, staged briefly at the Arts Theatre Club in 1957. On the other hand, his health was declining to the point where he could no longer hold his pen or enunciate his words clearly; whether it was Parkinson's disease or (as a contemporary doctor put it with brutal brevity to Peake's wife, Maeve) 'premature senility', it was to render him unable to work by the early 60s and kill him before the end of the decade.

His publisher encouraged him by commissioning his novella about Titus, 'Boy in Darkness', for a volume called *Sometime, Never*, which contained stories by William Golding and John Wyndham. Published in 1956, it later became a successful paper back, winning a Nebula Award, and drawing welcome attention to Peake's work. But that was in the 1960s.

In 1958, Maeve assembled a version of *Titus Alone* from Peake's various manuscript drafts and submitted it for publication. In response to her request for suggestions, the publisher proposed a number of cuts to avoid, in particular, 'the direct allegory of the scientist and his death ray' (letter from Maurice Temple-Smith to Peake, 29 July 1958, printed in 'Editing *Titus Alone*', *Peake Studies*, Vol. I, No. 4, Summer 1990, p.20). But Peake was beyond making revisions himself; with a heavy heart, Maeve blindly followed the suggestions. 'I can clearly recall the script coming back to me with what I had intended simply as pointers to the author accepted as if they were the final version of the book, ready for publication' (letter from Maurice Temple-Smith to GPW, printed in *Peake Studies*, 1:4, pp.26–27).

When the book was published at the end of October 1959, the reviewers' praise was qualified with terms that damned it at the same time, and sales were poor indeed. 'The remarkable thing is that so intensely subjective an experience can be communicated at all. Even when one is confused by the private symbols, one accepts their reality for the author, and re-reading may give one deeper understanding' (John Davenport in *The Observer*, 1 November 1959). 'Mr Peake must be allowed a monstrous fertility of invention, a genuine feeling for the magnificence of the macabre, but the air of *Gormenghast* and the surrounding country is difficult to breathe' (*The Times Weekly Review*, 5 November 1959, p.10). 'Nonetheless, this book is a

fine piece of fine writing – if you can take it – as we are likely to see for a long time' (*Times Literary Supplement*, 13 November 1959). However, a phrase in R.G.G. Price's review in *Punch* (18 November 1959) pointed the way things were to move: 'Mr. Peake has created a new genre: he wrote, 'gothic fairy tales without fairies'.

During the last decade of his life, Peake continued to write, but his texts were disconnected and his handwriting almost illegible. From these years two fragments have survived: his attempts at a fourth Titus book, which inspired *Titus Awakes* by his widow, Maeve Gilmore, and the story of Foot-Fruit and his dog, which is included (complete) at the end of *Complete Nonsense* (2011).

Nineteen sixty can now be seen to be the turning point in the history of Peake's reputation, for that summer appeared the first of Michael Moorcock's articles on Peake, and the first scholarly assessment of his work. Having read the Titus books, and gone to visit their author, Michael Moorcock (then only twenty-one) became Peake's champion, and promoted his work whenever he could in the science fiction magazines that he edited. On the academic front, there was an article in the *Chicago Review* (vol. 14, summer 1960, pp.4–81): 'The Walls of *Gormenghast*: an introduction to the novels of Mervyn Peake' by the Scottish poet, translator and university lecturer (later professor) Edwin Morgan. Starting from the position that 'Poetry has to be periodically brought down to earth; the novel has to be periodically lifted off; he claimed that Peake's work possesses 'a narrative energy and descriptive brilliance not commonly found among more conventional novelists today'. This was followed up, in 1964, by an article in the *Cambridge Review* by Michael Wood, who was the first to compare Peake's work with Kafka's as 'a world which can really be discussed only in its own terms – the reverse of an allegory' (23 May 1964, pp.440 & 443).

Then in the mid-60s came the meteoric rise to popularity of Tolkien's three-volume *Lord of the Rings*, and suddenly fantasy literature was back in favour. In 1967, a new American publisher, Weybright & Talley, hoping they had found another instant cult classic, brought out a fine uniform edition of Peake's Titus books, enriched with sketches from the manuscripts, and called 'The *Gormenghast* trilogy'. The reception was decidedly mixed, largely because of the explicit comparisons the publishers made with Tolkien – and admirers of the one are not necessarily admirers of the other; in fact, 'they are night and day' (H.A.K. in the *Boston Globe*, 19 November 1967). Stephen J. Laut, S.J., set the tone in *Best Sellers* (1 November 1967, p.305) by calling the books 'a quasi-chivalric adventure' in

a ‘pseudo-medieval setting.’ ‘Could the whole thing simply be a gigantic put-on?’ he wondered, and unearthed all the negative phrases from the American reviews of *Titus Groan*, including his favourite, ‘baroque nonsense.’ All because ‘Peake is no Tolkien, nor a T. H. White, nor even a Malory.’ He was echoed by ‘a long and very sad groan’ from Dick Adler in *Book World* (7 January 1968, p.4), and by: ‘maybe it just wasn’t our hogshead of tea’ from Aurora Gardner Simms (in the *Library Journal*, 1 December 1967, pp.4434–5), for she found it ‘dreadfully long and slow.’

There were, however, more appreciative readers: in a wide syndicated piece, Beverly Friend, a teacher in English at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle, claimed that ‘although [Peake’s work] is not completely without flaws – needless scenes and characters – it can stand with the best that has been done in the English language: in theme, in method, and in scope’ (*Chicago Daily News*, 6 January 1968). Writing in the *National Observer* (Washington D.C.), Robert Ostermann concluded that the books ‘are, in short, a triumph.... The trilogy will be read and reread as a treasure by those who so regard *Don Quixote* or *The Divine Comedy*. Reckless comparisons? Not for this eccentric, poetic masterpiece’ (11 December 1967).

A three-volume paperback edition came out from Ballantine on 28 October 1968, less than a month before Peake’s death. Compared with the reactions to the hardback edition, the reviews were harsh: *Publishers’ Weekly* was ‘too overcome by ennui to discover just what this trilogy was to be all about’ (16 September 1968, p.72), and Robert Armstrong decided that ‘anyone who is left on the edge of his chair after finishing a chapter or book has a posture problem’ (*Minneapolis Tribune*, 27 October 1968). Yet this edition remained in print throughout the 1970s.

In Britain, the publication of new, illustrated, hardback editions of the Titus books was spaced over several years: while *Titus Groan* (with an the introduction by Anthony Burgess) and *Gormenghast* came out in January and December 1968, *Titus Alone* did not appear until June 1970. They were welcomed with diminishing praise, starting with Paul Green’s review in the *New Statesman*: ‘*Titus Groan* . . . is a magnificent exception any literary pigeon-holing . . . Underneath the superficially farcical and grotesque aspects of the novel, there is a pagan grandeur and sense of desolation which is as meaningful as any allegorical or sociological interpretation’ (26 January 1968, pp.14–15). And on the same day, Henry Tube ended his long review in the *Spectator* with the conclusion that we must see Peake, the writer and illustrator, ‘not as a man with two talents, but as a genius with two nibs’ (pp.105–6). On 15 February, Hilary Spurling devoted much of her 850-word review in the *Financial Times* to an extended comparison

with Kafka: ‘what is interesting is that Peake and Kafka use such similar, often identical, means for exactly opposite ends.’

Despite the help of an Introduction by Burgess, the three Titus books met with more tepid praise, along with some frankly hostile comments, like Oswald Blakeston’s outburst in *Books & Bookmen*: ‘I can’t see any real reason for critics to inflate this whole castle which is already too big for its boots’ (February 1969, p.14). Even R.G.G. Price found himself tempering his previous judgements: ‘The trilogy is a freak, though a brilliant one, not a great novel.... On the other hand, it is more than a somber *jeu d’esprit*’ (*Punch*, 1 January 1969).

The second British edition of *Titus Alone* introduced a new version of the text put together by Langdon Jones. He reinstated passages from the manuscripts that had been dropped from the first edition; they ‘principally affect Chapters 24 (an entirely new episode), 77, 89, and from Chapters 99 to the end where the original published text has been considerably built up’ (from the ‘Publisher’s Note’ at the beginning of the edition). Some scholars are critical of Langdon Jones’s work – see, in particular, Tanya Gardiner-Scott’s book, *Mervyn Peake: the evolution of a dark romantic* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), chapter III – but ‘any attempt to reconstruct Mervyn Peake’s original text of *Titus Alone* must fail because there never was such a thing’ (Maurice Temple-Smith in *Peake Studies*, 1:4, p.27).

Alongside the hardbacks, paperback editions were brought out in Britain by Penguin in their series of Modern Classics. Despite the absence of really favourable reviews, they (and their successors from the Random House group) have fulfilled Elizabeth Bowen’s hopes by remaining available ever since. The only textual change came with the King Penguin editions of 1981/82, for which I provided limited corrections (see ‘Editing Peake’ below, pages 00–00); all subsequent editions follow these amended texts, although some misprints were introduced when the texts were reset in later years.

Within two years of Peake’s death, his Titus books were all in print, in Britain and America, in both hardback and paperback, and his widow, Maeve Gilmore, had published her moving memoir, *A World Away*. Then there was a major exhibition of his work at the National Book League, London, in January 1972. The world began to take notice; more thoughtful articles started to appear, ranging from an appreciation of the man and his work by Marcus Crouch in *The Junior Bookshelf* (December 1968, pp.346–49) to scholarly studies like ‘Gids voor Gormenghast’ by Professor Herman Servotte of the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium (in *Dietsche Warand en Belfort*, no. 116, 1971, Englished as ‘Guide for Gor-

menghast' in *The Mervyn Peake Review*, No. 3, Autumn 1976, pp.5–9). This was followed by Hugh Brogan's sensitive assessment of Peake's work, 'The Gutters of Gormenghast', in the *Cambridge Review* in 1973, by John Batchelor's 'biographical and critical exploration' in 1974 and, in 1976, by John Watney's official biography. Thus Peake's reputation became more firmly established and, by the end of the decade, reference works were at last including Peake among the significant writers and illustrators of the post-war period.

In 1975 a Mervyn Peake Society was founded, based in England and issuing *The Mervyn Peake Review*. For ten years, the *MPR* provided a forum for discussion and critical debate of Peake's work. Then this need was answered by an independent periodical, *Peake Studies*, which appeared twice a year from 1988 until 2015.