

Mervyn Peake's *Black House*: an Allegory of Mind and Body

PHILIP REDPATH

OUR REACTIONS WHEN CONFRONTING a large-scale work of art are reasonably uniform. Whether it be Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Stockhausen's *Donnerstag aus Licht*, or Peake's Gormenghast novels, we know that it will demand an investment of our time, concentration, and a commitment to a certain type of solitude. We enter an imaginative world with Marcel, David, or Gormenghast at its centre.

The important point is that it is an imaginative world that must be entered by the reader or listener, and the question I wish to explore here is why create a world in such enormous detail as that created by Peake? Why expend so many hundreds of thousands of words in constructing a realm that has no existence in the material world?

We might begin by moving sideways to consider the ideal world described by Borges in "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." This story chronicles the creation of Tlon, a world constructed over the centuries by a secret society of experts in various fields of human knowledge which gradually intrudes into our world until the balance tips and Tlon becomes reality. The narrator's introduction to Tlon is through the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia: "The text of the encyclopedia said: 'For one of those gnostics [of Tlon], the visible universe was an illusion or (more precisely) a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they multiply and disseminate that universe'" (28). We could add that stories also multiply and disseminate the — or at least a — universe. The narrator goes on to describe the language of Tlon since language is our means of perceiving and conceptualizing any world. It is no fortuitous circumstance that Tlon

originally appears documented in an encyclopedia: encyclopedias are ways of classifying and describing reality. If we wish to create a parallel reality what better place to situate it than in an encyclopedia? What novelist would not want to have created and written the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*?

It is significant that in Borges's story the creation of a world, which began as a monumental though calculated act of the imagination, first finds expression in language and has to be slowly and meticulously built up until man can conceptually occupy it. Given that a world can be created from language and express itself in the form of a book, there is little difference between the world (as enshrined in an encyclopedia), versions of that world, and literature:

The metaphysicians of Tlon do not seek for the truth or even for verisimilitude, but rather for the astounding. They judge that metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature. They know that a system is nothing more than the subordination of all aspects of the universe to any one such aspect. (34)

Metaphysics is, of course, the pursuit or exploration of ultimate reality. The narrator of Borge's story refuses to enter the world of Tlon. In other words, he becomes a fantasist. He prefers to immerse himself in the ideal world of Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial* which he is translating into Quevedian — a further manipulation of language from one point of view into another. Tlon thus begins as an idea and is gradually built up into an alternative which becomes reality when it is accepted by the world's population. Such is the power of ideas, language, and encyclopedias. The world of Tlon obviously has to be self-sufficient and independent of "ordinary reality" if it is to constitute a viable alternative in which men can live. But it is a world constructed first and foremost from language. The narrator describes it in language and *Orbis Tertius* will be the Encyclopedia of Tlon written in the language of that world. Like a translation, it will shift mankind's point of view from one perspective into another.

Gormenghast, like Tlon, represents a substitute for our world. Unlike Tlon, it does not attempt to displace our reality, merely to provide an alternative to it. It too begins as a colossal feat of the imagination, but if we are to recognize it as somewhere other than

our reality it needs our reality against which it can provide an alternative. What is immediately apparent about Peake's vision of Gormenghast is that it is self-sufficient, an autonomous world acting according to its own prescribed rules and its avoidance of any sort of change. If a future entails change, then Gormenghast, as best it can, attempts to abolish the future. In a letter of 24 October 1943, in the middle of writing *Titus Groan*, Peake had this to say:

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 . . . or into another imaginative world. . . . Maybe I'll have to hack it to hell and rewrite whole chapters. It gets too sane in the middle of the book, and the saner it gets . . . the more superficial it becomes. At its strangest it is nearest to being spiritual — as against materialistic. Damn novels in the sense of being NOVELS. I want to create between two covers a world, the movements of which — in action, atmosphere, and speech — enthrall and excite the imagination. (Smith 103-4)

Here we find clearly stated Peake's intention in creating Gormenghast. It is to be a world with no contact with our or any other world. It will be autotelic, being independent and constituting within itself its own reason for existing. Peake obviously had problems in maintaining the necessary distance between Gormenghast and our world; when the distance became too narrow the novels became too sane and thus too "superficial." Significantly, the farther from our world it gets the less materialistic it is in that it is divorced from the ordinary universe. Peake calls this divorce "spiritual," and if we regard Gormenghast as an idealistic world perhaps it is an appropriate description. But above all, Gormenghast is an imaginative realm, a space created by the imagination and set going at the level of the imagination. This is the world Peake wished to create between the covers of a book.

His outburst towards the end of the quotation is revealing: "Damn novels in the sense of being NOVELS." Novels traditionally tell stories, are fictive, but Peake is asking for something more from Gormenghast. Gormenghast is an imaginative space, an area of autonomy in which the imagination can dwell. Like Tlon, it is a linguistic construction that is intended to be more than

merely fictional. In Gormenghast Peake has created a world which is as fully realized as he can make it and in which he can exist imaginatively. Its linguistic status is described by Muzzlehatch in *Titus Alone*:

“Words can be tiresome as a swarm of insects. They can prick and buzz! Words can be no more than a series of farts; or on the other hand they can be adamantine, obdurate, inviolable, stone upon stone. Rather like your ‘so-called Gormenghast’.” (145)

Muzzlehatch’s “so-called” implies that Gormenghast does not really exist. But it does. It exists in one-and-a-quarter thousand pages of text and well over half-a-million words. We do not enter it with our bodies but with our minds when we read, gradually consolidating Peake’s lurid vision.

What Peake asked of Gormenghast was that it would provide an area into which he could imaginatively escape. He was always out of place, or at least an outsider, in the contemporary world. Ronald Binns describes him as “a writer who almost always endeavoured to retreat from the world rather than engage with it” and talks of his “monk-like retreat from society wherever possible” (23-24). Certainly he was much more at home in the world of Gormenghast than in the real world. In this he resembles William Golding who is imaginatively much more at home in the world of pre-Dynastic Egypt than in the contemporary world. Peake sought an imaginative centre and created it in Gormenghast. C. N. Manlove describes it as

the natural home of his imagination, his creative idiom. In fact, so much does the castle of the Groans dominate his imagination, that where other writers strive to get in to their fantastic worlds, Peake struggles to get out; to increase rather than lessen his distance from it. There can be few fantasies so immune from the charge of escapism as Peake’s trilogy, unless we indict the author for trying to cut himself free from his own imaginary landscape. (217)

Manlove is correct to stress that Peake is no escapist, Gormenghast is not a fairy-tale world in which we can free ourselves from the harshness of reality. If, as Eliot claimed, “human kind cannot bear very much reality,” the imaginative area of Gormenghast is as violent, disturbing, and cruel as our reality without being so

divorced from it as to constitute a total fantasy in which we securely know that it is all just make-believe. Peake does not present himself or his readers with an easy or pleasant alternative. He was fully aware of the dangers of living in an imaginative area apart from the material world. Sepulchrave, Seventy-sixth Lord of Gormenghast, is an example of such escapism in *Titus Groan*. Even the endless round of ritual is a release for him :

Of companions with whom he could talk upon the level of his own thought there were few, and of these only one gave him any satisfaction, the Poet. On occasion he would visit that long, wedge-headed man and find in the abstract language with which they communicated their dizzy stratas of conjecture a temporary stir of interest. . . .

The many duties, which to another might have become irksome and appeared fatuous, were to his Lordship a relief and a relative escape from himself. He knew that he was past all hope a victim of chronic melancholia, and were he to have had each day to himself he would have had to resort constantly to those drugs that even now were undermining his constitution.

This evening, as he sat silently in the velvet-backed chair, his mind had turned to many subjects like a black craft, that though it steers through many waters has always beneath it a deathly image reflected among the waves. Philosophers and the poetry of Death — the meaning of the stars and the nature of these dreams that haunted him when in those chloral hours before the dawn the laudanum built for him within his skull a tallow-coloured world of ghastly beauty. (205)

Sepulchrave is neither at home in the ideal world of abstraction (language) nor in the world of Gormenghast. He exists uneasily between both. When the abstract world is destroyed (appropriately, his library is burnt) he becomes unbalanced, out of place, and constructs for himself his own half-light, owl-infested world:

His home of books was on fire. His life was threatened, and he stood quite still. His sensitive mind had ceased to function, for it had played so long in a world of abstract philosophies that this other world of practical and sudden action had deranged its structure.

(318)

In his derangement Sepulchrave does the logical — he gives himself up to the owls in the Tower of Flints.

There is something manic about the whole idea of Gormenghast. It is constructed so carefully, the detail is of such an intense exactitude, that what we are presented with is a crazy over-use of language, a neurotic precision. The static world of Gormenghast recalls Beckett's static tableaux in both *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape*. But whereas Beckett reduces his language to a stark minimalism, Peake writes from a generosity, a lavish abundance. It is an insanely extravagant gesture. And yet both Peake and Beckett arrive at the same point; Clov's dream in *Endgame* is a reality in Gormenghast: "I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust" (39). Stasis and a voice out of the darkness fills their worlds. One has to, as the narrator of Beckett's *Company* exhorts us, "Imagine" (7).

The size of Peake's imaginative achievement should not be neglected. William Golding's novel *The Spire* seems to me to be a similar feat but on a much smaller scale. Gabriel Josipovici describes the imaginative triumph of *The Spire*: "As the spire rises, foot by foot, pushed up by Jocelin's will, so the novel moves forward page by page, the product of nothing but the writer's will" (251).¹ The cathedral and its environs map out an extremely restricted space. The two hundred and twenty-three pages of *The Spire* is physical evidence of how much smaller, though no less successful, it is compared to the one thousand two hundred and sixty-three pages of the Gormenghast novels. Peake's imaginative will has to hold the vast extents of Gormenghast together and the scale of the vision is breathtaking. A quotation from *Titus Groan* will illustrate the point:

Within the first hour from the time when he had awakened, he had descended a long sloping roof, after dropping nine feet from the parapet, and had then come upon a small, winding stone staircase which led him across a gap between two high walls to where a cluster of conical roofs forced him to make a long and hazardous circuit. Arriving at last at the opposite side of the cluster, faint and dizzy with fatigue and emptiness and with the heat of the strengthening sun, he saw spread out before him in mountainous facades a crumbling panorama, a roofscape of Gormenghast, its crags and its stark walls of cliff pocked with nameless windows. (135)

Towards the end of *Gormenghast*, the stone kingdom, like Tlon, seems to be extending itself, freeing itself of limits and displacing everything outside:

the castle could be seen heaving across the skyline like the sheer sea-wall of a continent; a seaboard nibbled with countless coves and bitten deep with shadowy embayments. A continent, off whose shores the crowding islands lay; islands of every shape that towers can be; and archipelagos; and isthmuses and bluffs; and stark peninsulas of wandering stone—an inexhaustible panorama whose every detail was mirrored in the breathless flood below. (504)

Perhaps Peake was becoming aware of the danger Gormenghast posed to his stability. Like Sepulchrove, to live wholly in an abstract world (a world of language) would lead eventually to derangement. Indeed, at the end of *Gormenghast* the Countess warns Titus that there is no escape from the stone kingdom: “There is nowhere else. . . . You will only tread a circle Titus Groan. There’s not a road, not a track, but it will lead you home. For everything comes to Gormenghast’” (510). The only escape from Gormenghast for Peake was to take Titus beyond it, to place him in *Titus Alone* in a world recognizably related to our own.

Part of the power of Gormenghast as an imaginative area is attributable to the thoroughness with which Peake establishes it. A great deal of the first two novels is taken up with painstakingly accurate descriptions of every aspect of his world. Peake performs the Prospero-like activity of blurring the line between fiction and reality by creating a fiction which seems as substantial as reality itself:

There was an all but forgotten landing high in the southern wing, a landing taken over for many a decade by succeeding generations of dove-grey mice, peculiarly small creatures, little larger than the joint of a finger and indigenous to this southern wing, for they were never seen elsewhere.

In years gone by this unfrequented stretch of floor, walled off on one side with high banisters, must have been of lively interest to some person or persons; for though the colours had to a large extent faded, yet the floor-boards must once have been a deep and glowing crimson, and the three walls the most brilliant of yellows. The banisters were alternately apple-green and azure, the frames of the doorless doorways being also this last colour. The corridors

that led away in dwindling perspective, continued the crimson of the floor and the yellow of the walls, but were cast in a deep shade.

The balcony banisters were on the southern side, and, in the sloping roof above them, a window let in the light and, sometimes, the sun itself, whose beams made of this silent, forgotten landing a cosmos, a firmament of moving motes, brilliantly illumined, an astral and at the same time a solar province; for the sun would come through with its long rays and the rays would be dancing with stars. Where the sunbeams struck, the floor would flower like a rose, a wall break out in crocus-light, and the banisters would flame like rings of coloured snakes.

But even on the most cloudless of summer days, with the sunlight striking through, the colours had in their brilliance the pigment of decay. It was a red that had lost its flame that smouldered from the floor-boards.

And across this old circus-ground of bygone colours the families of grey mice moved. (49)

Even when apparent inconsistencies arise, our eyes are so firmly rivetted on what is presented to us by the author and our attention is so absorbed in taking in the mass of Gormenghast, that we simply do not follow them through. To question Gormenghast is not part of the design. This province of the mind is so densely realized that we are only concerned with what exists in it and not what is lacking. For example, after their marriage in *Gormenghast*, Irma and Bellgrove decorate their home with "powder-blue curtains and dove-grey carpets" (450). There is no evidence in the novels that Gormenghast has the facilities for producing objects of interior decor. The castle thrives on decay, not decoration. But as Binns notes, there are questions

we might ask about the absences in Gormenghast (producers, police, politics) but Peake never invites them. The density of the description is so lavish, the canvas so broad, that the gaps or ambiguities are all but invisible. (27)

Gormenghast is built up, then, stone upon stone, shadow upon shadow, an area in which Peake could imaginatively dwell. It is an abstract home for his mind, and this raises an interesting observation in *Titus Groan*.

"How could he love this place? He was a part of it. He could not imagine a world outside it; and the idea of loving Gormenghast

would have shocked him. To have asked him of his feelings for his hereditary home would be like asking a man what his feelings were towards his own hand or his own throat." (62)

How do we love something that is so intimately a part of ourselves? Gormenghast is an extension of Peake and he could obviously experience the same feelings about it as he would about a part of his own anatomy — a concern, an indifference, an acceptance that it is. Yet there is also a deep love expressed, a love of place and a sense of belonging:

The love of the painter standing alone and staring, staring at the great coloured surface he is making. Standing with him in the room the rearing canvas stares back with tentative shapes halted in their growth, moving in a new rhythm from floor to ceiling. . . . His world: a rented room, and turpentine. He moves towards his half-born. He is in love. (77-78)

Having performed this God-like act of creation, the writer cannot rest secure in his world. Dangers threaten. Peake has exhaustively created a logosphere, a world of words. But any such act bears with it the seeds of withdrawal, of solipsism. Wittgenstein makes this startlingly clear in the *Tractatus*: "We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot say either. . . . For what the solipsist means is quite correct; only it cannot be said, but makes itself manifest. The world is my world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of language (of that language which I alone understand) mean the limits of my world. The world and life are one. I am my world" (57). Gormenghast is its author's world, but it is a world of the mind, not of the body. For Peake it is a freedom from physical limits and restraints through the act of participating in the imagination:

His love was always elsewhere. His thoughts were fastidious. Only his body was indiscriminate. Behind him, wherever he stood, or slept, were the legions of Gormenghast . . . tier upon cloudy tier, with the owls calling through the rain, and the ringing of the rust-red bells. (*Titus Alone*, 189)

The phantoms of destruction wheel around this vast act of creation as inevitably as they visit themselves upon Steerpike, Fuchsia, and Flay. A man cannot exist in an extreme solipsism.

During the 1950s Peake tried to adapt himself to the world by writing a popular novel — *Mr Pye* — and a successful stage play — *The Wit to Woo*. Neither venture succeeded and it is likely that this anxious engagement with the world of material pressures helped to trigger his long and fatal illness. His body slipped from his control.

Not only was Peake physically altering but Gormenghast was also changing. Another reason for Peake's cursing novels is perhaps because they demand plot and development. Ideally Gormenghast is a static world, but the need for story (which is kept to a minimum in the books) meant that certain changes must occur, action must have a direction and purpose. Steerpike is the major agent of change in Gormenghast. It is important to note that he does not wish to destroy the castle — he is dependent upon it for his existence. What he wishes to do is substitute himself for the Groan dynasty. This means change, and in Gormenghast that implies destruction since the castle is so rigidly ordered that any change in one part requires the removal of something else to make way for it. Change poses an almost impalpable threat in *Titus Groan*:

It was only Irma who put her finger on the spot. The others were involved with counting the portentous minutes before their own particular clouds broke over them, yet at the back of their personal troubles, hopes and fears, this less immediate trepidation grew, this intangible suggestion of change, that most unforgivable of all heresies. (409)

Steerpike is not a common criminal. John Batchelor describes him as a "natural fascist" (85), but in the world of Gormenghast he is something far worse, an heretic, an unbeliever. Gormenghast, itself an act of imaginative belief, depends upon belief from inside as well as from outside. Change cannot be accommodated without a risk to the vast structure Peake has erected "tier upon cloudy tier" in a crazy balancing act dependent upon nothing but his will for its existence.

But Manlove makes the perceptive point that "Gormenghast needs the notion of change to define its changelessness" (226). Any absolute implies its opposite. How do you measure something unless you have something against which to measure it? Gormen-

ghast needs Steerpike in order to gauge its resistance to change. In this need is the threat of destruction. Also Titus, as the central character of the novels, inevitably changes as he grows older. It is worth noting that none of the other characters appear to age except Titus. Although we are told that Fuchsia develops into a woman, mentally she has not developed an iota since we first met her and it comes as a shock to realize that she is around thirty when she commits suicide. Titus and Gormenghast exist in a state of mutual dependence. He is not yet two years old at the end of the first novel and Gormenghast seems to be a far more important presence than he, but it is not for nothing that this book bears his name as its title. Titus carries the novels forward if for no other reason than that he grows up. Against the passage of time measured by Titus's growth, Steerpike's unfolding machinations can be assessed. Indeed, it allows us to see how many years Steerpike's plans take to realize themselves.

By the end of *Gormenghast*, Titus has developed to the edge of manhood. But in rejecting his ancestral home he becomes not merely an outcast but a traitor. Several critics have asked why, when their objectives appear to run parallel, does Titus kill Steerpike at the end of *Gormenghast*, and then abandon the castle? Very few satisfactory reasons are provided in the texts:

"He stole my boat! [says Titus]. He hurt Fuchsia. He killed Flay. He frightened me. I do not care if it was rebellion against the Stones. . . . What do I care for the symbolism of it all? What do I care if the castle's heart is sound or not? I don't want to be sound anyway. . . . I want to be myself, and become what I make myself. . . . That is my reason! He must be caught and slain. He killed Flay. He hurt my sister. He stole my boat. Isn't that enough? To hell with Gormenghast." (459)

Titus already hates the endless round of ritual to which Gormenghast condemns him. In effect he is a rebel who hates the reduction of his individuality by the need to conform to meaningless acts. The ending of *Titus Groan* has been regarded as unsatisfactory, but it does provide a warning of what is to come in the next volume:

Through honeycombs of stone would now be wandering the passions in their clay. There would be tears and there would be strange laughter. Fierce births and deaths beneath umbrageous ceilings. And dreams, and violence, and disenchantment.

And there shall be a flame-green daybreak soon. And love itself will cry for insurrection! For tomorrow is also a day — and Titus has entered his stronghold. (505-6)

“Insurrection” will be performed not only by Steerpike but also by Titus. This places Steerpike and Titus on a shared plane against Gormenghast. Why, then, do they hate each other so mortally? The answer has already been implied. Steerpike will have to destroy the Groans if he is to attain his goal of total power. Titus is a Groan and Steerpike will also have to kill him. Titus’s slaying of Steerpike is not an act of loyalty to the Stones, but a simple act of self-preservation.

Also, Titus’s desire to be an individual is a reaction against the role that has been carved out for him in Gormenghast centuries before he was born. Peake, keenly aware of his own individuality, obviously sympathized greatly with Titus. He too found having to obey orders and meaningless regimentation distressing. In a letter to Gordon Smith, Peake wrote of a realization that came to him while he was in the Army: “I bent down to do up by boot-lace when I suddenly realized that I could never obey another order again, not ever in my whole life” (77). Clearly if Titus is to be an individual he could not remain in Gormenghast — an area that demands that he submit his individuality to it. The threat Gormenghast posed to Peake’s own stability has already been discussed. So for reasons of plot, character development, individuality, and sanity Titus had to leave his hereditary kingdom.

In many ways *Titus Groan* is reminiscent of Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. In both works there is a slow, leisurely progress, an almost total absence of the titular hero, and an ending that is open, promising more. In *Tristram Shandy* the narrator is menaced by death. He attempts to escape it by fleeing to the Continent. But in fact all of the running is done through the writing of the novel. To write takes longer than to live, and if Tristram can continue writing about his life before death became a threat, he can continue to exist in the written space of the novel. By the end of the book Tristram (the subject) and Tristram (the narrator/writer) have not chronologically coincided. At least one of them, therefore, will survive. By the time he came to write *Titus Alone*, illness was seriously

threatening Peake physically and mentally. He had moved Titus out of the imaginative space of Gormenghast into a world more recognizably that of the real, modern world of himself and his readers. But this was the world in which Peake was dying. *Titus Alone* therefore chronicles a desperate attempt to return to the imaginative realm of Gormenghast in which the mind divorced from the sick body could exist. The problem was that, in many respects, Gormenghast was a mental *and* a physical reaction. The mind could not be divorced in Cartesian terms so completely from the body. Peake admitted that *Titus Groan* was something he had to purge from his body "rather like having to be sick" (Smith 105). When he tried to reconstruct Gormenghast he found himself prevented by his sick body and the toll his illness took on his concentration. *Titus Alone* can thus be read as a commentary on the imaginative feat of *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* and on the impossibility of returning to the world created in them. The tragic irony is that Gormenghast is a world created of words, it is self-sufficient and can continue to exist without its architect. If it is a solipsist's dream come true, it also turned into Peake's nightmare.

Although there are three Titus books, the work is not properly a trilogy. *Titus Alone* is unfinished in that it is composed of fragments which its author would have worked out and expanded into a more acceptable form than that which we now have. The fragments that comprise the one hundred and twenty-two short chapters are indicative of Peake's failing powers of concentration, but it was concentration that was required if the castle was to be rebuilt.² Because of illness Peake had to stop writing, and death took him forever out of Gormenghast. Titus's escape from the castle is a form of self-imposed banishment from the area Peake felt so threatening to his sanity. But as Mr Flay, a reluctant exile from Gormenghast, implies in the second book, illness and banishment in this context are closely related: "Ill, Lordship? No, boy, no . . . but banished'" (137). Peake's own self-banishment from his kingdom was also accompanied by illness.

The opening of *Titus Alone* can be read as a commentary on Peake's feelings about having left Gormenghast:

To north, south, east or west, turning at will, it was not long before his landmarks fled him. Gone was the outline of his mountainous

home. Gone that torn world of towers. Gone the grey lichen; gone the black ivy. Gone was the labyrinth that fed his dreams. Gone ritual, his marrow and his bane. Gone boyhood. Gone. . . .

He only knows that he has left behind him, on the far side of the skyline, something inordinate; something brutal; something tender; something half real; something half dream; half of his heart; half of himself. (9-10)

In its place Peake constructs a nightmare world of mechanical spying devices, technology, and, worst of all, the horrifying factory:

From the motionless building there came a kind of rumour; an endless impalpable sound that, had it been translated into a world of odours, might have been likened to the smell of death: a kind of sweet decay. . . .

Letting his eye dwell for a moment on a particular window, he gave a start of surprise, for in its minute centre was a face; a face that stared out across the lake. It was no larger than the head of a pin.

Turning his eyes on the next of the windows, he saw, as before, a minute face. A chill ran up his spine and he shut his eyes, but this did not help him, for the soft, sick, sound seemed louder in his ears, and the far musty smell of death filled his nostrils. He opened his eyes again. Every window was filled with a face, and every face was staring at him, and most dreadful of all else, every face was the same.

It was then that from far away there came the faint sound of a whistle. At the sound of it the thousands of windows were suddenly emptied of their heads.

All the joy had gone from the day. Something ghastly had taken its place. (167-68)

Titus is clearly lost in this world; he is as out of place as Peake was in the world of military and financial institutions. Although he befriends Muzzlehatch and has a physical relationship with Juno, the absence of Gormenghast still leaves a vacuum at the centre of his life. *Titus Alone* is simply the quest to refind Gormenghast.

Titus grows increasingly uncertain about his home throughout the novel. Gormenghast, as a location, becomes doubtful if only because it is nearly impossible to adequately describe the imaginative act required to create and enter it. Even its name becomes twisted into "gorgonblast" (84). In a court of law in which Titus is being tried for vagrancy and vandalism, the magistrate asks "What is this Gormenghast? What does it mean?" Titus's answer

is reminiscent of Sepulchrave's reactions to his feelings about the place:

"I do not know . . . what is meant by such a question. You might just as well ask me what is this hand of mine? What does it mean?" And he raised it in the air with the fingers spread out like a starfish. "Or what is this leg?" And he stood on one foot in the box and shook the other as though it were loose. (77)

Titus will admit "'I am the last of my Line. I have betrayed my birthright. I have betrayed my home. I have run like a rat from Gormenghast'" (85). But when the magistrate asks for more information about Gormenghast, Titus can only reply that

"It spreads in all directions. There is no end to it. Yet it seems to me now to have boundaries. It has the sunlight and the moonlight on its walls just like this country. There are rats and moths — and herons. It has bells that chime. It has forests and it has lakes and it is full of people." (85)

As an autonomous realm, Gormenghast is only fully accessible to conceptualization from inside. While we are there, while we are reading the novels, we can describe our experience. But if we are asked to describe or explain Gormenghast itself we cannot because it only exists in our imaginations, not in reality. Peake's and Titus's problem is to return to that imaginative region. Once there, Gormenghast is everything. Titus carries a stone from the Tower of Flints to assure him that Gormenghast does exist and is not something he has created in a moment of delirium or dream. As readers, we too carry a reminder and proof of Gormenghast's existence — the physical texts filled with words. When he loses the flint Titus becomes centreless:

"And without my flint I am lost . . . even more lost than before. For I have nothing else to prove where I come from, or that I ever had a native land. And the proof of it is only proof for me. . . . I have nothing to hold in my hand. Nothing to convince myself that it is not a dream. Nothing to prove my actuality. Nothing to prove that we are talking together here, in this room of yours. Nothing to prove my hands, nothing to prove my voice." (105)

Again, Gormenghast is linked to the body which is in doubt if Gormenghast does exist. Peake, attempting to return to the castle,

finds himself at the mercy of his physical illness, his body blocking the effort of imaginative will and concentration needed to rediscover his mind's natural idiom.

The closest Gormenghast comes to being reconstructed in *Titus Alone* is in the travesty Cheeta stages at the Black House. If Gormenghast has been an image of Peake's imaginative powers in the two previous novels, the decayed house and the debacle staged within it is an image of Peake's waning imaginative fertility in the third. Cheeta means to unbalance Titus's mind, but Peake had already lost stability. Travesty of the earlier achievement is all that he can manage. The Countess and Fuchsia are presented to him:

Something was emerging from the forgotten room. Something of great bulk and swathing. It moved with exaggerated grandeur, trailing a length of dusty, moth-eaten fustian, and over all else was spattered the constellations of ubiquitous bird-lime. The shoulders of her once black gown were like white mounds, and upon these mounds were perched every kind of bird. . . .

As the Lady moved on with her prodigious authority, one of the birds fell off her shoulder, and broke as it hit the floor. . . .

[A]nd close behind her, walking like a duck, was a wicked caricature of Titus's sister. She wore a tattered dress of diabolical crimson. Her dark dishevelled hair reached to her knees. . . . Her face was blotched with black and sticky tears, and her cheeks were hectic and raw. . . . [S]he stared pathetically this way and that, and then stood grotesquely on her toes as though she were looking for someone. (233-34)

Muzzlehatch's words to Titus that "There is no point in erecting a structure . . . unless someone else pulls it down. . . . There is nothing in life unless there is death at the back of it" (26-27) have become prophetically true. At the back of Gormenghast is the threat of death. To exist in the world Peake has built into a complex structure might provide a dwelling for the imagination, but the body cannot be ignored. When illness came to the body it affected the mind and Peake could never again return to his natural realm. We reach a point of extreme and desperate pessimism which could equally well be a description of the author's state of mind as of Titus's:

and while the world unveiled itself, valley by valley, range by range, ocean by ocean, city by city, it seemed that the earth wan-

dered through his skull . . . a cosmos in the bone; a universe lit by a hundred lights and thronged by shapes and shadows; alive with endless threads of circumstance . . . action and event. All futility: disordered; with no end and no beginning. (258)

It is not surprising, then, that Titus could not return to Gormenghast either. Quite simply, Peake could not take him there; a travesty is all that he can present to Titus. But, Peake had positive evidence that Gormenghast existed. That Titus can doubt Gormenghast is itself evidence of the castle's authenticity. As Manlove notes: "The paradoxical situation is that Titus's doubts as to the reality of Gormenghast are a guarantee that it is real. Gormenghast is an island universe, an absolute form of being: that beyond its bounds it has no existence guarantees its enormous reality within them. Anyone who leaves it must therefore of necessity begin to doubt that there ever was such a place" (250-51). And if nothing else Peake had the novels, all those thousands of words, as talismans, like Titus's flint, to verify the castle's existence.

Gormenghast is not a reaction against reality: it constitutes an imaginative reality — the reality of language. The black marks on the white page may be no more than a network of signifiers which are open and available to all readers, but writing also guarantees a certain concreteness, a state of permanence. What Peake's books will always signify is Gormenghast and its existence as a signified in the minds of the readers. Titus, therefore, does not need to return to Gormenghast; without even seeing it at the end of *Titus Alone* he can turn away assured of its existence, its autonomy, and its permanence:

His heart beat out more rapidly, for something was growing . . . some kind of knowledge. A thrill of the brain. A synthesis. For Titus was recognising in a flash of retrospect that a new phase of which he was only half aware, had been reached. It was a sense of maturity, almost of fulfilment. He had no longer any need for home, for he carried his Gormenghast within him. (262-63)

Peake could also turn from Gormenghast, certain that if he could no longer inhabit it it was because of a failure of the physical body and not of the imagination.

NOTES

- ¹ Josipovici's theory of the modern novel applies to Peake's works: "the act of reading, as of writing, is made the subject of the fiction, and, by being recognized, as a specific activity, a form of violence done to the world instead of being simply equated with the world, both its true nature and that of the world is revealed. For the world is that 'other' which encroaches slowly on the mind of the protagonist, the pull of gravity in its simplest form, but also the stone and the wood and the wind which form the physical reality of the construction" (254).
- ² Langdon Jones, who compiled the version of *Titus Alone* we now possess from three different versions, points out in his Publisher's Note that the second version was a typescript that "had been prepared to the editor's directions in his attempt to make the book coherent, for Mervyn Peake was already suffering from his final illness at the time of submission. . . . Had Peake been able to continue there is no doubt that he would have polished the story still more" (7-8).

WORKS CITED

- Batchelor, John. *Mervyn Peake: a Biographical and Critical Exploration*. London: Duckworth, 1974.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Company*. London: Picador, 1982.
- . *Endgame*. London: Faber, 1976.
- Binns, Ronald. "Situating Gormenghast." *Critical Quarterly* 21. 1 (1979): 21-33.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." *Labyrinths*. Trans. James E. Irby. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979: 27-43.
- Josipovici, Gabriel. *The World and the Book: a Study of Modern Fiction*. London: Macmillan, 1979.
- Manlove, C. N. "Mervyn Peake (1911-68) — The 'Titus' Trilogy." *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978: 207-57.
- Peake, Mervyn. *Titus Groan*. 1946. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.
- . *Gormenghast*. 1950. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.
- . *Titus Alone*. 1959. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975.
- Smith, Gordon. *Mervyn Peake: A Personal Memoir*. London: Gollancz, 1984.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. London: Routledge, 1978.