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## Memory Emancipated: The Fantastic Realism of Mervyn Peake

### Abstract

Examines Peake's experience of World War II (and in particular a post-war visit to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp) as significant sources for *Titus Alone*.

### Additional Keywords

Concentration camps—Relation to *Titus Alone*; Peake, Mervyn—Biography; Peake, Mervyn. *Titus Alone*—Sources; World War II in Mervyn Peake

# Memory Emancipated: The Fantastic Realism of Mervyn Peake

Tanya Gardiner-Scott

"... you might define realism as fantasy pretending to be true; and fantasy as reality pretending to be a dream."<sup>1</sup>

To define Mervyn Peake as a fantastic realist in Alexander's terms would appear to be somewhat paradoxical: nevertheless at the point of consequence of this definition lies the 'departure from consensus reality' (to use Hume's phrase in *Fantasy and Mimesis*) of *Titus Alone*.<sup>2</sup> Where *Titus Groan* (1946) and *Gormenghast* (1950) are 'straight' fantasy in that they are other than the world around us while keeping what Tolkien calls 'the inner consistency of reality'. *Titus Alone*, first published in 1959 and re-edited by Langdon Jones in 1970, is a hybrid<sup>3</sup> -- of the fantastic picaresque (in that it is another realm that Titus is wandering through), science fictional elements, residual magical elements, and the kind of realism hinted at by Gordon Smith in his memoir *Mervyn Peake*:

"He wanted, he told me, to include... more of the modern world, its aeroplanes for instance, or pylons, and yet to make them acceptable as part of the ambience of Gormenghast".

Thus we are faced with a text concerned with more than the unfettered play of the imagination. In an interview with me in July 1981, Maeve Peake made the following comments:

"*Titus Alone* is contemporary satire, with most powerful ideas of the world. It was written after his journey through a devastated Europe and the visit to Belsen. It is a much surer novel, dealing with the impact of what was happening to him and the world and in this sense it touches the imagination and the heart... Peake saw something awful ahead. By the time he wrote it, really a contemporary satire, the dreadful implications of Belsen had sunk in as time went on. His illness was beginning, and this heightened things".

It would seem that Peake was making a very conscious effort to extrapolate from the world around him.

But even before we examine Peake's encounter with 'a devastated Europe', and, in particular, Bergen-Belsen a month after its liberation, it is important to note the existence of war-influenced interpretations of *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast*. In *The Literature of Terror*, David Punter describes all three novels as 'a partly traumatized attempt to deal with the war itself and with the issues of social organization associated with it'. Anthony Burgess, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of *Titus Groan*, suggests that the 'burning of hundreds of years of tradition and the madness of an era deprived of his sustaining props of ritual... seem to be reflections out of an era of horrors... symbols of the end of true,

historical, centuries of order'.<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite the temptation to impose a quasi-political allegorical framework on them, with Steerpike as a Hitler-figure, Gormenghast as Imperial Britain, and Steerpike's rise and fall as an imaginative transformation of the rise and fall of Nazism. *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* must be left open-ended. *Titus Alone* is somewhat different in kind.

Peake continues the 'ambience of Gormenghast' in *Titus' head*; *Titus'* emotional ties with Gormenghast are so strong that Cheeta's demonic parody of them almost turns his brain. In his quest for freedom and search for his own identity, Titus can be paralleled with the concentration camp survivors, carrying inside his head the knowledge of a place with which nobody else is familiar, regarded as mad by, and insulated by his experience from, those around him. The survivors too had their pre-camp memories of communities destroyed by the war, and their knowledge of what Langer calls 'univers concentrationnaire' in his book *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*.<sup>5</sup> Gormenghast is *Titus'* focus (focus being another secondary meaning of 'concentrationnaire'). As Langer puts it, the writers who encountered the Holocaust were 'the ones... destined to recreate in their art a unique portion of contemporary history, a nightmare of fantasy that co-existed daily with the possible, the familiar and the real'.

It is over forty years since World War II, and the images, feelings and impact of the war have inevitably been diluted by time. Those alive at the time are slowly dying out, and, as new generations of readers emerge, it is essential to be aware of possible sources and analogues for the fiction of the period so that a writer's settings, characterization and creative transmutations -- in short, his or her craftsmanship -- can be recognized as such.

Here a biographical approach is helpful. *Titus Alone* was written when Peake had had time to assimilate the events of the war. Drafted in early 1940. He was invalided out of the Army in 1943, and worked as a War Artist for the Ministry of Information. In 1945, he was commissioned as an illustrator for the London *Leader Magazine*, and went through Europe with Tom Pocock, a British journalist who would write the text for which Peake would do drawings.

Peake went to Belsen concentration camp alone in late May 1945, a month after it had been liberated. There he spent an afternoon visiting the makeshift hospital wards and sketching the victims dying of typhus. Along with almost every critic who has written on *Titus Alone*, Pocock comments, "Several years later he was to write the image of the dying girl into the last of his trilogy... in the character of the Black Rose, who suffers much and dies as her head touches a white pillow"; this comes from his own account of his trip with Peake in his recent memoir *1945: The Dawn Came Up Like Thunder*.<sup>6</sup>

In *Modern Fantasy*, Manlove cites Mrs. Peake as suggesting that Belsen was a source for the portrayal of the Under-River in *Titus Alone*.<sup>10</sup> I would like to suggest another possibility. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell pinpoints certain oral traditions that passed into the literature of both world wars: of these one is particularly significant in an analysis of the Under-River. Fussell calls it the "finest legend of the war, the most brilliant in literary invention and execution, as well as the richest in symbolic suggestion". It is of a group "somewhere between the lines" of "half-crazed deserters from all the armies, friend and enemy alike" who "harboured underground in abandoned trenches and dugouts and caves, living in amity and emerging at night to pillage corpses and gather food and drink".<sup>11</sup> Fussell sees it as a distorted image of ordered life in the trenches, a cohesive focus of disorderliness as a reaction to authority and the madness of war.

Peake's Under-River, between the towns on either side of the river banks, with its secret sign and its group of social outcasts from all walks of life united by an unspecified hope, can be seen as a creative transformation of the London Underground during the Blitz. Peake was in London intermittently during the 1942 bombardments, and knew that sections of it were used as air raid shelters. Another artist, Henry Moore, made the following observations for his drawings of the shelters on the Tilbury shelter in London's East End:

Figures showing faces lit up -- rest of bodies in silhouette. Figures lying against platform with great bales of paper above also making beds...

Dramatic, dismal lit, masses of reining figures fading to perspective point -- scribbles and scratches, chaotic foreground. Chains hanging from old crane. Sick woman in bath chair...

Dark wet settings (entrance to Tilbury). Man with shawls to keep off draughts, women wearing handkerchiefs on heads.

Much rubbish and chaotic untidiness around.<sup>12</sup>

It could be a description of the Under-River.

The characterization of Muzzlehatch is equally suggestive; he moves freely among both Under-River and town dwellers. He can appear and disappear unobtrusively, at the Cusp-Canine party, in the Under-River fight with Veil and at the Black House, for example, and his reflexes are those of one with combat training. When he and Titus are hiding after Titus has disrupted the party, Titus speaks unexpectedly, making Muzzlehatch raise "his hand as though to guard himself from attack" (p. 55). Later, he suspects an eavesdropper at the keyhole of their hiding place; he "strode to the door and, opening it quietly, discovered a young man bent double. He had been given no time to rise from the key hole, let alone escape" (p. 60). Later, when Muzzlehatch climbs into the firelit room in Juno's house where Titus and Juno are sleeping, a sound startles him:

With a reflex stemming from far earlier times his hand moved immediately to his hip pocket. But there was no revolver there and he brought back his empty hand to his side. He had swung in his tracks at the sound... (p. 96)

Again, when Titus is fighting Veil, he sees "something massive yet absolutely silent: something that moved inexorably forward inch by inch... heavy, agile and alive... There was no computing the weight and speed of Muzzlehatch as he crushed the 'Mantis' to the slippery ground" (p. 137). It is only in the Black House, his revenge on science complete, that he loses his caution and dies from the Helmeteers' stabs in the back.

Muzzlehatch is a father-figure/protector for the young man. When Titus is on the run, having destroyed a sophisticated surveillance device, it is to Muzzlehatch that he turns, thus inadvertently bringing the vengeful rage of the scientific community on the head of the latter and causing the destruction of his precious zoo which triggers his resultant insanity (in a sense a parallel with Steerpike's burning of the Earl's library, though Muzzlehatch is an anarchic figure). Muzzlehatch also shows him how to escape to the Under-River, the site of a marginalized, if not overtly criminal community. It is not surprising, then, that Titus encounters in this literal subculture, this home of the equally displaced, the Black Rose, a camp survivor, and her guard, Veil.

It is impossible to analyze the depiction of the Black Rose without looking at that of Veil; the two are intertwined in a sadomasochistic bond. Veil reminds her of her degradation in the camps and then by him.

"They whipped you, and then they broke your pride. You grew thinner and thinner. Your limbs became tubes. Your head was shaved. You did not look like a woman. You were more like a..."

"I do not want to think of that again... leave me alone."

"...And mercy I gave you, didn't I?"

"Yes, oh yes."

"In exchange, as you promised, for your body." (p. 127)

Veil is dressed in black, as were the SS guards, but he seems to be more a combination of SS guard and prison kapo. As one survivor says, "They are true creatures of the devil... and are no longer human. Cold, cruel, sadistic -- had I not seen with my own eyes the obscene delight they take in beating us, I never would have thought it possible... the kapos beat the women at will, or, even worse, force them to become prostitutes".<sup>13</sup>

Peake presents Veil (an anagram of "evil" and an oral pun -- "veil"/"vile") as a symbol of pure evil, a Gothic villain laughing even as he dies, but the interaction Veil has with his victim psychologically parallels the memories of some camp survivors:

In fact, their very brutality pointed up their power, their command of the situation, and in a perverted way reassured us, who had absolutely no power, no control over our lives, that the world had not disintegrated completely.<sup>14</sup>

The Black Rose tries again and again to escape without him, but Veil maintains his psychological and physical hold over her even though they have left the camp. Having found a secret opening to the Under-River, he keeps her there for a year, threatening to abandon her if she does not escape with him. Peake describes Veil in insect images, as a spider man and a mantis man, a "Thing of scarecrow

proportions", an efficient killing machine, suggesting a total dehumanization. Titus is repelled by Veil's cruelty, gratuitous as it is, and yet he is aware that this, too, is part of life.

"Veil shot out his long left arm and plucked the crouching rat from where it lurked, and crunched with his long fingers the life out of the creature. There had been a scream and then a silence more terrible, for Veil had turned on Titus. "And now you," he said... The man had been born with his bones and his bowels. He could not help them. He had been born with a skull so shaped that only evil could inhabit it". (pp. 134-5; 136)

But the Black Rose is the character Peake depicts most fully in relation to Titus here, and his depiction is most obviously contemporary, not only in the details he gives of her past but also in the close linguistic parallels between his poem, 'The Consumptive, Belsen 1945', quoted by Tom Pocock, and her reactions after she is struck by Veil.<sup>15</sup> The narrator describes "those eyes of hers, those irises, as black, it seemed, as their pupils so that they merged and became like a great wide well that swallowed what they gazed upon. But before they closed a kind of ghost appeared to hover in the eyes. It was no reflection, but a terrible and mournful thing... the ghost of unbearable disillusion" (p. 129)

Compare lines 19-25 of his poem:

There lay the gall  
Of that dead mouth of the world.  
And at death's centre a torn garden  
trembled  
In which her eyes like great hearts of  
black water  
Shone in their wells of bone,  
Brimmed to the well-heads of the  
coughing girl,  
Pleading through history in that white  
garden. (ll. 19-25)

The well image, of a source of life poisoned and ravished, a continuous, all-encompassing source of pain, is shared by both.

At the time Peake writes of his shame at seeing "the ghost of a great painting, line and hue" in the victim, and the dulling of his reactions.

... Nightmares pass  
The image blurs and the quick  
razor-edge  
Of anger dulls, and pity dulls. O God,  
That grief so glibly slides!

Years later, he gives Titus similar reactions to those expressed in the poem -- "She goes through hell... She wades in it, and the thicker and deeper it is, the more I long to escape. Grief can be boring." Titus was immediately sickened by his own words. They tasted foul on the tongue" (p. 139).

Titus is terrified to show kindness to the Black Rose; he sees his helplessness in the face of her pain. Although he pits his life against Veil's when he knows that she is hurt, later he "longed for isolation, and in his longing recognized that same canker of selfishness that had made itself manifest in his attitude towards the Black Rose in her pain" (p. 143). Titus' instinct

for self-preservation, callous though it is at points, is given a context in which we can weigh it -- the voice of the omniscient narrator and Muzzlehatch's reactions.

The Black Rose is ashamed of her present condition and mourns her lost beauty, but her main wish is to "lie down quietly forever, on linen. Oh God, white linen, before I die" (p. 143). This can be read as a desire for lost purity, but again it has connotations wider than the purely symbolic: these details, too, are reminiscent of the recorded reactions of some of the Belsen survivors. On the arrival of the British soldiers, one camp inmate records, "A deep despair came over me. I felt like Adam when he first knew he was naked: horribly and irremediably ashamed."<sup>16</sup> Bertha Federber-Salz, a survivor of Belsen, describes a visit to her block supervisor's hut in her memoir *And the Sun Kept Shining*; she specifically mentions the "bed with snow-white sheets" along with tables and chairs, symbols of a world far removed from her own crowded one of squalor and abuse.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps Peake tried to talk to the survivors or the staff at Belsen; he certainly picked particularly salient details on which to focus -- as artist and poet. The response he hoped to arouse through his poetry and his sketches in making "... articulate/Earth's desolation on the alien bed" (ll. 40-41) is suggested by Muzzlehatch, as he and Titus part. "Grieve for this broken creature... She is the weak of the world" (p. 145).

When, towards the end of the novel, Muzzlehatch destroys the factory, one of the details that horrifies him as much as it does Titus is that the people in it are identical. This detail is prompted perhaps by photographs of the Fascist rallies, the refugees and the spectacle of the camp survivors; it is a common theme in poems and novels of the time. As Colin Greenland has pointed out, the camps and the factory have similar features.<sup>18</sup>

When Titus first sees the factory (p. 167):

Out of the slender, tapering chimneys  
arose, like incense, thin columns of green  
smoke... 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...  
The soft, sick, sound seemed louder in his  
ears and the far musty smell of death filled  
his nostrils... 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.

When Cheeta goes to the factory to find her father, she, like Titus, notices the smell, and, when she is trying to locate her father onscreen, she switches inadvertently to "a scream":

"No, no, no!" came the voice. 'I want to live.'  
'But you are very poor and very ill,'  
said another voice, with the consistency of  
porridge. 'You're unhappy. You told me so.'  
'No, no, no! I want to live. I want to  
live. Give me a little longer.' (p. 204)

The desire of the victims to live at any cost has

been well documented; see Feig's book *Hitler's Death Camps* for further details.<sup>19</sup> Peake evokes associations of the medical experiments the Nazis performed on their unwilling victims, both here and when Muzzlehatch thinks of his animals who "lived or partly lived in cells sealed from the light of day" (p. 157).

But there is more. In *1945: The Dawn Came Up Like Thunder*, Tom Pocock quotes a letter from the British actress Sybil Thorndike to her son, describing her visit, while on tour with an ENSA company, to Belsen, within days of Peake's afternoon there:

When we got through the white building, which looked so clean, there crept in on me... the most awful and depressing smell. I said, 'What's that awful smell?' The doctor said, 'That's living children's bodies, that awful smell is...' I said, 'I'll never get this sight and smell out of me again.' We played that night in the theatre in Hamburg... but I was in a haze, a nasty, evil-smelling haze. I'll never forget this all my life.<sup>20</sup>

In *Titus Alone*, Peake has used this detail of his visit to Belsen to make the death factory he creates in his novel particularly memorable.

This particular death factory is destroyed by Muzzlehatch's explosion, and Veil's death is another exorcism of evil, but Titus cannot return to live in his home as if everything were unchanged. Peake tries to ascribe this to his maturity in not needing the physical signs of Gormenghast to prove himself any more. Titus rejects his past, as symbolized by the external castle, and his last act is to leave once more, in a new direction.

In *Modern Fantasy*, Colin Manlove strenuously protests this ending:

Here, after a book-long account of Titus' longing and homesickness and guilt, and of his inability to stay sane without the reality of Gormenghast; here, after all talk of the joys of adventures over the horizon has long ceased; here after a trilogy that has so massively shown that there is neither escape nor the desire to escape from Gormenghast -- Titus turns his back. It is unacceptable, a complete and opaque denial of all that has gone before.<sup>21</sup>

When seen in a Holocaust context, with his new knowledge of the world, the survivor can only continue on, as in Titus the wanderer's case, thrusting himself as the living link between past and future. But the reader is left with a haunting emptiness, put into words by Muzzlehatch just after his bomb has exploded, leaving "a lot of ash in the air" (p. 251). As he says, "What is there now but a vast shambles of the heart? Filth, squalor, and a world of little men" (p. 250).

It is this world of ours, in mood, pace, the themes of freedom and identity, the preoccupation with death and the tensions between what Punter calls 'the fear of the deadly embrace of the past' and 'a fear of what progress might entail in a world which has accepted the possibility of total war'<sup>22</sup>, that Peake is portraying in *Titus Alone* -- a fantasy, 'reality pretending to be a dream'. In terms of settings, characterizations, images, the creative transformation

of details of the war, Belsen, the displaced people he encountered and the dusty ruins he saw, Peake is very much drawing on realism, 'fantasy pretending to be true'. Or, as Ezrahi puts it in *By Words Alone*, he brings the contemporary reader to a deeper awareness that 'art as a version of historical memory can provide form without fixing meaning, insight without explanation for the recovered events'.<sup>23</sup> In this lies Peake's strength and generic open-endedness in the fantastic-realistic crafting of *Titus Alone*.

#### Notes

- 1 See Lloyd Alexander, "Wishful Thinking -- Or Hopeful Dreaming", p. 143, in *Fantasists on Fantasy*, eds. Boyer & Zahorski (New York: Avon, 1984).
- 2 See Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (London: Methuen, 1974), p. xi.
- 3 See J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin, 1964), p. 43.
- 4 See Mervyn Peake's *Titus Alone* (1st ed. 1959); London: Penguin, 1970). All further page references are given in the body of the text; pagination in Penguin and Methuen is identical.
- 5 See Gordon Smith, *Mervyn Peake: A Personal Memoir* (London: Gollancz, 1984), p. 110.
- 6 See David Punter, *The Literature of Terror* (London: Longman, 1980), p. 376.
- 7 See "Introduction", p. 13 to the Penguin edition of *Titus Groan*.
- 8 See Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Yale U.P., 1975), pp. 20-21; 35.
- 9 See Tom Pocock, *1945: The Dawn Came Up Like Thunder* (London: Collins, 1983), p. 142.
- 10 See Colin Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1975), p. 215.
- 11 See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1975), p. 123.
- 12 Quoted by Robert Heverson in *Under Siege* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972), p. 40.
- 13 See Hanna Levy-Hass, *Inside Belsen* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 50.
- 14 Quoted in "Clara's Story" by Michael Selzer in *Deliverance Day* (New York: Lippincott Press, 1978), p. 24.
- 15 Pocock, pp. 141-142. All further references have line numbers appended to the text.
- 16 "Clara's Story", p. 27.
- 17 See Bertha Federber-Salz, *And the Sun Kept Shining* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1980), p. 123.
- 18 See Colin Greenland, "From Beowulf to Kafka: The Difficulty of *Titus Alone*, The Mervyn Peake Review 12 (Spring 1981), p. 6.
- 19 See Konniyn G. Feig, *Hitler's Death Camps* (New York & London: Holmes & Meier, 1981) for further details.
- 20 Quoted in Pocock, pp. 144-145.
- 21 Manlove, p. 256.
- 22 Punter, p. 378.
- 23 See Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi's illuminating study *By Words Alone* (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1980), p. 4.

continued from page 3

the Society's Scholarship Award. I had the honor of spending a day and night at his home in England in 1975, and admiring his extensive book collection. The mansion is reputedly built on the ruins of the Green Knight's Castle -- from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. His learning and goodness are missed.

--GG (with thanks to David Bratman)