UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA

FACULDADE DE LETRAS

Mervyn Peake on Tyranny

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Tese orientada pelo Prof. Doutor Miguel Tamen, especialmente elaborada para a obtenção do grau de Mestre em Teoria da Literatura

2021

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Miguel Tamen, not only for taking on such an unusual project as this but also for helping me shape it into something which, like Titus, is "all there": with "legs and arms, (...) loins, head, eyes and teeth." I would also like to thank Professor João Figueiredo for his very fruitful remark on the Carthesian aspect of Titus' adventure.

Thanks are also owed to my mother and to my good friends Zahra and Andreia, for reading this thesis at its many stages and providing useful commentary, and to Ally, for very kindly proofreading it. And finally, I would like to thank Pedro, for listening to me, encouraging me and challenging me every step of the way.

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Abstract

Mervyn Peake's most famous work, *The Titus Books* (also called *The Gormenghast Series*), has traditionally been read as a coming-of-age gothic fantasy story, laden with excentricities for decoration's sake alone. This thesis aims to argue that the author's refusal to "explain" his work should not stop the reader from looking for the meaningful patterns which make up the overarching theme of the series: tyranny. Centered around the topic of tyranny in its many forms — political, religious, familial, romantic — the story of Gormenghast and its heir Titus shows us how this authoritarian structure comes to be, what it does to those it subjugates, and what will happen to the few who attempt escape.

Keywords: Tyranny, Mervyn Peake, Gormenghast, Titus Groan

Resumo

A série de livros *The Titus Books* (também intitulada *The Gormenghast Series*), do autor inglês Mervyn Peake (1911-1968), que consiste em três romances (*Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast* e *Titus Alone*) e uma novela (*Boy in Darkness*), tem sido por norma interpretada como ficção gótica juvenil, cujas excentricidades não servem outro propósito que não o da criação de uma estética tanto original quanto absurda, escapando a qualquer interpretação que consiga ser simultaneamente abrangente e coerente. Pretendo, com esta tese, argumentar que a recusa, por parte do autor, de "explicar" o significado da sua obra não deve impedir o leitor de procurar os padrões que compõem o tema geral desta narrativa — a tirania. Argumento também que um escritor filho de missionários congregacionalistas, que testemunhou ambas Guerras Mundiais e o surgimento de regimes totalitários na Europa teria mais do que razão suficiente para escrever uma história sobre a tirania. E de facto, no castelo de Gormenghast, ninguém vive livremente. A hierarquia rígida do castelo e o calendário de rituais escrupulosamente cumprido fazem dos habitantes de Gormenghast meros fantoches, condenados a repetir dia após dia a mesma dança, dançada pelos seus pais antes deles. É para enfatizar esta terrível condição que Peake faz uso da "interpenetração da pessoa e lugar" (termo de Peter Winnington), mostrando através de descrições antropomorfizantes do castelo e de descrições arquitectónicas de pessoas que não existem demarcações distintas entre as pedras de Gormenghast e a carne dos seus habitantes. Os dois formam um monstruoso colectivo orgânico, que para além do mais se afirma o único reino conhecido (senão mesmo o único existente), e um reino que deverá durar eternamente. O direito à individualidade é, em geral, negado a todos, ainda que em diferentes graus, dependendo da posição

hierárquica: enquanto os plebeus têm dificuldade em recordar o seu próprio passado individual, a família "real" de Gormenghast vive debatendo-se com o facto de nunca poderem ser "apenas eles próprios." Recorrendo à metáfora Hobbesiana de *body politic*, o leitor poderá compreender melhor a razão pela qual o herdeiro Titus e o seu pai Sepulchrave encaram o castelo como quem encara um dos membros do seu corpo; poderá entender a razão pela qual Titus, ao abandonar o castelo, se sente simultaneamente "desenraizado" e como que arcando com Gormenghast às costas, e a razão pela qual o mordomo Flay, ao ser ostracizado pelo castelo, sente tanto que há um vazio dentro de si como que há um vazio no castelo provocado pela sua ausência; poderá entender, por fim, o efeito que Steerpike, o alpinista social que vem destabilizar o funcionamento milenar de Gormenghast, tem sobre o castelo e sobre a natureza circundante — Steerpike é o agente patológico que ao perverter a hierarquia do castelo e blasfemar contra a sua Lei e Ritual acelera a desintegração do seu "corpo." Ao comparar as prescrições de Hobbes para uma *Commonwealth* ideal com a fisionomia de Gormenghast, o leitor poderá também reconhecer as falhas que fizeram deste castelo um "corpo" condenado à "mortalidade" à partida. Argumentarei também que a novela que pertence a esta série de livros, *Boy in Darkness*, oferece um conjunto de pistas que nos permitem compreender melhor não só a formação de Gormenghast como também os efeitos desumanizantes do poder tirânico sobre os seus súbtidos. Estabelecerei paralelos tanto entre o mundo de *Boy in Darkness* e o mundo de Gormenghast, como entre o tirano desta novela, o Cordeiro, e os tiranos de Gormenghast, Barquentine e Steerpike. Falarei também de um outro curto romance de Peake, intitulado *Mr Pye*, e das semelhanças que tanto a sua narrativa como as suas personagens partilham com as da *Gormenghast Series*. Analisarei os vários tipos de deformação corpórea e psicológica que resultam da subjugação ao poder tirânico, e

discorrerei sobre as várias faces que Peake via na tirania, especialmente a face política e a face religiosa; recorrerei à poesia deste autor para compreender melhor a sua posição quanto à fé e à religião. Farei uso d'*A Genealogia da Moral*, de Friedrich Nietzsche, para compreender como a religião é transportada para o mundo de Gormenghast, substituindo-se o culto monoteísta de uma entidade sobrenatural com o culto ritualístico e politeísta dos antepassados — será aqui feita a distinção entre a sacralidade dos antepassados da família Groan e a subjugação (ainda que em condições comparativamente privilegiadas) dos Groans viventes. Considerarei também os efeitos da tirania no próprio tirano, nomeadamente a perda de uma certa *equipoise*, quer no Cordeiro, quer em Steerpike, quer em Mr Pye, quer em Cheeta, a tirana em ponto pequeno do terceiro romance desta série de livros, *Titus Alone*. Contrastarei este tipo de *equipoise* com o seu homólogo mais corriqueiro, e será também enfatizada a diferença entre a criação "artística" do tirano e a criação artística *strictu sensu*. Analisarei em seguida os vários possíveis efeitos de se abandonar esta tirania, todos eles relacionados com a perda da identidade, de uma história pessoal — se escapamos a uma tirania, deixando necessariamente para trás todas as partes da nossa identidade que a tirania tinha reclamado para si, como é que construímos de novo as partes da nossa identidade que agoram nos faltam? E como é que nos certificamos de que o edíficio da nossa identidade não rui antes de a reconstrução terminar? Levando, como era seu hábito, cada ponto ao absurdo, Peake transforma esta crise de identidade numa crise existencial Cartesiana; começando por pôr em causa os diferentes aspectos da sua personalidade, Titus acaba por pôr em causa a sua própria existência. Isto, por sua vez, permite ao leitor refletir acerca da natureza fantasmagórica de Gormenghast, assim como acerca da natureza fantasmagórica de uma tirania — elucidando, talvez, a *ambiance* gótica deste mundo. Tentarei

compreender como Titus consegue vencer a sua "crise Cartesiana" e ganhar de uma vez por todas independência em relação ao seu passado — cultivando a descrença, rejeitando corajosamente a possibilidade de "pertencer a algo maior," e praticando uma desconfiança Foucauldiana para com toda a espécie de constrangimento, compromisso ou estabilidade. Tentarei também explicar o sucesso desta série de livros, postulando que foi a lucidez particularmente aguda de Peake que lhe permitiu diagnosticar de forma acutilante o dilema com que um certo tipo de indivíduo certamente se confrontará, ao longo da sua vida: a ideia de que a existência humana é um jogo que não se pauta por regras justas, mas que exige ser jogado. Tentarei igualmente argumentar que a literatura, por oposição à sociologia ou psicologia, é (ainda que insuficiente) a melhor forma possível de se explicar este ou qualquer outro problema da vida humana. Por fim, refletirei sobre o percurso do herói Titus, muitas vezes encarado pelos críticos como um alter-ego do autor, e sobre como o ideal de eremita errante deste protagonista se repete em outras obras de Peake, tal como se repetem os avisos quanto a influências tirânicas. Ponderarei a concretização, quer política quer pessoal, destes ideais na vida de Peake, e considerarei, quer no que diz respeito ao autor quer aos seus leitores, outros tipos de errância e de liberdade que talvez nos possam mostrar qual era, para Peake, o grande propósito da ficção.

> Every man is a whole sufficient unto himself prior to the existence of the law.
>
> Manent, 2000 [1994]: 35

Between the 1940's and 60's the English writer Mervyn Peake wrote a series of books, whose target audience can hardly be defined, called *The Titus Books*, or *The Gormenghast Series*. The series, made up of three novels and one novella, tells the story of the Groan family and of their lives in the titanic castle of Gormenghast, under a Law and Ritual (enforced by a Master of Ritual) which serve to perpetuate the ancestral customs of the family line. The first two novels accompany the childhood and adolescence of the young heir Titus, as well as the insidious rise of Steerpike, who through his sinister talents consolidates his theocratic power over the castle's inhabitants. The second novel ends with Steerpike unmasked and defeated by Titus, who then abandons his ancestral home in search of a life free from Ritual and Law. The third novel accompanies Titus in this perilous journey, and the novella narrates a series of events which may or may not have been more than a dream.

Peake's novels have been universally labelled "kooky" for kookiness' sake alone, as "an extended meditation on nonsense and the unique perspective on the

world it lends us" (Introduction by R. W. Maslen to CN, p. 11).[1] Critics insist that *The Titus Books* "[resist] the shelling-out of a central sermon or warning" (Introduction by Anthony Burgess to TG, p. 9), and that those who search for an overarching meaning to these books are searching in vain (Winnington, 2009: 215). This dissertation rests on the absolute opposite assumption. It assumes that Peake, prolix and eccentric though he may have been, possessed a special sort of lucidity which informed the Gormenghast novels, though these insights were then cloaked with many layers of the strange. It assumes that the son of congregationalist missionary parents, who lived through both World Wars as well as the rise of European totalitarianism, would have good reason to write a story about tyranny, and what it does to people. It is this "central sermon," obscure though it may be, which has won the book series its popularity and "contemporary classic" status. I will begin by analyzing how some of the text's narrative idiosyncrasies lead us to the Hobbesian metaphor of the body politic, and how this metaphor in turn sheds light on questions left unanswered by the author; this analysis will then prompt an exploration of the concept of "tyranny" within the novels — its formation, its consequences and its end. Finally, by drawing parallels between the majority of Peake's works, I will reflect on the notion of "escape": what it means to the characters, the author, and to his readers.

[1] Abbreviations for Peake's poetry and prose:

TG: *Titus Groan*, G: *Gormenghast*, TA: *Titus Alone*, BD: *Boy in Darkness*, CP: *Collected Poetry*, CN: *Complete Nonsense*, P: *Mr Pye,* PP: *Peake's Progress*

I. The Body Politic

The Titus Books are unique in many ways, with the most noticeable peculiarity perhaps being the "interpenetration of person and place" (Winnington, 2009: 148). There exists in Gormenghast a sort of promiscuity, or undifferentiation, between the stones of the enormous castle and the flesh of its inhabitants. Characters are frequently described with architectural terms and the castle is characterized through the repetitive use of personification. The Grey Scrubbers, who every morning clean the Gormenghast kitchens, have faces which, "through daily proximity to the grey slabs of stone, (...) had become like slabs themselves," with mouths like harsh cracks and eyes as grey as the walls (TG, p. 28); Nanny Slagg and Doctor Prunesquallor are said to be as much a part of the castle as the Tower of Flints is (TG, p. 72 and G, p. 186-187); the Earl's first servant, Mr Flay, whose voice seems part of the "cold narrows stairway[s] of stone and iron" (TG, p. 47), has been "woven into the skein of the castle's central life" (G, p. 9); and the seventy-sixth Earl himself, Sepulchrave, refers to himself at his son's christening as a "continuer of the blood-stock of the stones" (TG, p. 116). The castle in turn has a spine (TG, p. 206), teeth and a jaw (G, p. 46), a pulse (TG, p. 22 and G, p. 287) and, naturally, a heart (G, p. 363); its towers resemble pointing fingers (TG, p. 15), its stones seem capable of climbing, its windows of yawning (TG, p. 497), and its bricks of breathing (G, p. 173).

But when it comes to this aspect of the narrative, as with many others, not all characters are made equal. Whereas the Grey Scrubbers are battered down by the daily grind of their servitude, becoming lifeless, simian creatures (TG, p. 27-28), and the kitchen hands are stupefied by the heat of the kitchen (TG, p. 31) and the tyrannical rule of the head chef Swelter (TG, p. 32), the Groan family not only suffers

no such “erosion” but seems, in fact, to be “influencing” the space around them. Had Sepulchrave been born an inch taller or a shade lighter, “another set of archaic regulations” would have been chosen to determine the ceremonial procedure of all the days of his life (TG, p. 66); his wife, the Countess Gertrude, is accompanied virtually at all times by a bizarrely large entourage of cats and birds; his daughter, the Lady Fuchsia, finds in the secret attic above her bedroom a territory to claim as her own with poetry books, giant roots and large stuffed animals; and his sisters, the Ladies Cora and Clarice, pride themselves on having built their “Room of Roots,” which, as the name suggests, is a room filled with brightly coloured, entangled roots.

Similarly, whereas servants are described as *part* of the castle, Titus and Sepulchrave view the castle as one of *their* limbs. Just as it is senseless for them to love their own hands, or to try to interpret their meaning, loving or “explaining” the castle seems equally nonsensical (TG, p. 62 and TA, p. 77). They *are* the castle — and, consequently, its inhabitants. In *Titus Alone*, Titus thinks of himself as “part of something bigger,” as a “chip of stone” broken off from a mountain, as a leaf without a tree (TA, p. 102), which shows us that his relationship with the castle is a symbiotic one. Though the servants are a part of the castle and the castle is a part of the Earls, the Earls are in turn a part of the castle as well, or at least a part of Gormenghast as links in the dynastic chain of the Groans. The same point could be made about the following line, which refers to Titus: “there is no calm for those who are uprooted” (TA, p. 69). Titus has been uprooted from the Groan line. Gormenghast and its denizens are at times indistinguishable, as when Nannie Slagg goes to procure a wet nurse from the Outer Dwellers (who live outside castle walls), speaks in the name of “The Castle” (TG, p. 93), and is referred to by the outsiders as “Gormenghast” (TG, p. 91).

There is, however, a notable exception to prove the first of these rules: the upstart Steerpike, though not a Groan, is not only *not* eroded by his service to the castle,[2] but is also in fact the one who most influences the halls of Gormenghast — mapping out its many floors and rooms, claiming a number of rooms as his own, and setting up a series of strategic peepholes.

Having all these textual peculiarities in mind, it would not be out of place to make use of the Hobbesian notion of "body politic". In his work *Leviathan*, Hobbes describes an ideal Commonwealth, where a plurality of voices and wills submits itself to a single voice and will, thereby finding true unity (chap. XVII) — such that the sovereign, in his "public" acts (meaning acts "warranted in his Letters [or] by the Lawes"), is said to act in the name of all (chap. XXII). As explained by Oakeshott, there is in *Leviathan* no *confusion* of wills, but only *submission*, since the choice of the sovereign is not his subjects', but merely on their behalf (1975 [1937]: 66).[3] Peake's story takes this notion and, as with countless others, stretches it to bizarre proportions: the monism of Gormenghast is such that "there [are] no two ways of thinking" (G, p. 341), and doubt constitutes the highest form of blasphemy (G, p. 267). And just as in Gormenghast the servants belong to the castle and the castle belongs to its Earls, or *is* its Earls, so too is Hobbes' sovereign the *soul* of the

[2] On the contrary, it is the *disservice* that Steerpike does to Gormenghast which slowly but surely begins to chip away at his looks and capabilities. This will be explored with further depth below, in the section entitled "The Foundation of Tyranny."

[3] The concept of body politic was developed in the Middle Ages by John of Salisbury in the *Policraticus* (Bollermann and Nederman, 2016) and by Christine de Pizan in the *Livre du corps du policie* (Green, 2010: 6).

Commonwealth (chap. XXIX), whose ears are its public ministers, whose eyes are its private ministers (chap. XXIII), and whose memory is its counsellors (chap. XXV).

This Hobbesian metaphor has typically been used to describe or refer to any society or nation. However, as Hobbes himself argues, when it comes to groups of people, contrary to what happens among bees or ants, common benefit differs from the private — hence the impossibility of all members of a Commonwealth following the same direction (that of common benefit) without the influence of some awe-inspiring coercive power (chap. XVII). If we wish to use it as faithfully as possible, then the notion of "body politic" — of a political body moving coordinately in a *single* direction — is most adequately applied when it describes or explains a *tyranny,* which is also the likely label our modern eyes would attach to the Commonwealth described by Hobbes.

In Gormenghast, nobody lives freely. Servants are chained to their roles by hereditary succession — the son of a Grey Scrubber is sure to become one himself (TG, p. 333) — and are frequently described as collectives. Kitchen hands are a "pleasant lot of little joints" (TG, p. 36), who laugh, applaud and speak in unison (TG, p. 31 and 35); Gormenghast's professors move through the corridors like a "black, hydra-headed dragon with a hundred flapping wings," "little legs of blackness" letting fall "their echoing feet" (G, p. 119); and the inexpressive faces of the Grey Scrubbers are "simply slabs" from which they "[speak] occasionally, [stare] incessantly, [hear] with, hardly ever" (TG, p. 28). So overbearing is the affront against individuality that several characters have but a faint memory of their past: Headmaster Bellgrove erroneously assumes he was a virile bachelor in his heyday (G, p. 242), as does his staff (G, p. 228), and the Master of Ritual Barquentine has trouble remembering whether or not his long lost wife had borne him a child (G, p. 267-268).

The Twins, like Steerpike, are an exception to the rule. It is due to their dim-wittedness, their *defective* nature — being, so to speak, rotten branches of the Groan family tree — that they are robbed of their individuality to a comical degree. With vocal chords "snipped from the same line of gut" and faces "identical to the point of indecency" (TG, p. 109), the Twins have no need for mirrors, and would find no use for a telepathic device, as their thoughts are at all times identical (TG, p. 245).[4] They are only individual as a pair. It is as if each twin sister is only worth half a Groan, and so it is only together that they form a whole. It could also be argued, were one to follow Gormenghast's logic, that it was due to their very frustrating role as powerless sisters to the Earl that they eventually developed a form of epilepsy, leaving most of their limbs "starved" (TG, p. 250).

But even the (true) Groans, though allowed an eccentric degree of individuality,[5] are oppressed in their own way. Sepulchrave, Gertrude and their children live firmly "cornered" by the Master of Ritual and by that which he represents — the Law, Ceremony, and all the ancestors of this illustrious family — in other words, "'Groan' in the abstraction" (TG, p. 452-453). And this is because the divinity of Gormenghast's "system of belief" is not the Groan family as a number of living individuals with the surname Groan, but "the Groans" as a phantasmagorical family line, whose customs and memory *must* be reverently perpetuated by

[4] With the only exception that, though they both think the same thoughts about each other, Cora thinks the word "Clarice" and Clarice "Cora" (TG, p. 398).

[5] This same generosity is shown towards commoners like Doctor Prunesquallor, his sister Irma Prunesquallor, the head chef Swelter, Mr. Flay, Nannie Slagg and Steerpike, but this can be attributed to their being more than plain background characters, and therefore needing to be "fleshed out."

Gormenghast's inhabitants so that the castle can remain sound.[6] In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche tells us that the worship of a deity is the final result of what began by being the veneration of one's ancestors. If a race exists solely "by virtue of the sacrifice and achievements of [its] forefathers," then any new advantage the race enjoys constitutes a debt towards these forefathers, which must be paid with festivities, choirs, salutes, and, above all, obedience. The most powerful races would therefore have truly titanic creatures for ancestors, which would, with time, become as sinister and inconceivable as a God (2§19). Gormenghast, whose dominion extends far beyond the horizon, does not even recognize the *existence* of other kingdoms (G, p. 510).[7] Whenever leaving Gormenghast is for whatever reason mentioned or discussed, there necessarily follows the question "Where to?" (TG, p. 43 and 447); and even when Flay secretly witnesses what is evidently the careful planning of his murder by Swelter, his thought is not of *leaving* the Castle, but only of escaping

[6] Even if not perfectly similar to what readers would consider institutional religion, this unusual system of belief is the closest thing Gormenghast has to it. This is hinted at by the adjectives used to describe the Master of Ritual and all his proceedings; an especially poignant example occurs in the early chapters of *Titus Groan*: "This complex system was understood in its entirety only by Sourdust — the technicalities demanding the *devotion* of a livetime, though the *sacred spirit* of tradition implied by the daily *manifestations* was understood by all." (p. 66-67, my emphasis).

[7] There are, however, many confusing references made by the *narrator* to the world outside of Gormenghast (TG, p. 69, 79, 172 and 312, and G, p. 19, 53, 151, 214 and 495), which I attribute to a purposeful lack of rigor on Peake's part. It seems impossible that an incongruence such as this should have accidentally escaped both writer and editor.

"from a region of the castle that could house such a fiend" (TG, p. 212). It is, of course, contradictory that people who cannot imagine an "outside Gormenghast" should assume that a missing person has *left*, instead of assuming that this person is lost or hidden somewhere within the castle. It is almost as if the existence of an outside is not truly denied (there is, after all, talk of "defending" Gormenghast against "the incursions of alien worlds" [TG, p. 493], whatever those might be), but its exact configuration is wilfully ignored. The debt of the living Groans to this monstrous and seemingly all-encompassing castle is so heavy that it reduces them to mere symbols. Sepulchrave and, later, Titus, wade day-to-day through one bizarre ritual after another (the more incomprehensible, the more profound), and are forbidden, along with Gertrude and Fuchsia (and the Twins) from establishing too intimate a relationship with either servants or Outer Dwellers (G, p. 354 and 407).[8] They are "royalty," but they are not *just* themselves (TG, p. 459).

Unsurprisingly, this results in a nearly incapacitating solitude, calling for all sorts of coping mechanisms — some more successful than others. Sepulchrave wastes away in his library, soothed by laudanum, only to lose his grip on reality once this library is destroyed in a fire; Fuchsia spends her hours enacting play after play in her secret attic, and takes to going on long walks once the exclusiveness of her sanctum is ruined by Steerpike; Gertrude is the most successful of all, with her hordes of pets and

[8] The best example of this is perhaps Sepulchrave's failed attempt to share the news of the birth of his son with Master of Ritual Sourdust, who, oblivious to the Earl's voice, keeps his eyes on the clock, to ensure that Breakfast should end exactly at 10 o'clock, as the Law commands (TG, p. 67).

her ability to stay in a trance-like aloofness for hours on end; and Titus amuses himself with his boyish spelunking and his constant fantasies of escape.[9]

The concept of the "body politic" allows us to see more clearly three further aspects of the narrative: the exile of Flay, the desertion of Titus, and the predation of Steerpike. A series of unfortunate events results in the excommunication of Flay. Deprived of "his security, his love, his faith [and] his devotion" (TG, p. 377), Sepulchrave's first servant remains within the periphery of the castle, living out his days in the woods of Gormenghast Mountain. In the words of Peake, "excommunication is a kind of death" (G, p. 9), and indeed Flay behaves precisely like a phantom limb, which insists on showing signs of life despite having been amputated (TG, p. 414). But it is not only that Flay has disappeared from the castle's landscape "as though from an accustomed skyline of towers one had been broken down" (TG, p. 414); the servant also feels within himself a "crater-like emptiness" (TG, p. 414), as if his heart had been "dug out with its long roots" (G, p. 142). The interpenetration of person and place makes this emptiness a two-way street — and one particularly painful for Flay, whose loyalty is such that whenever there is need of him in Gormenghast, he feels his body be involuntarily propelled either forwards or upwards (TG, p. 376; G, p. 290 and 299). It is arguable whether Flay's double-edged suffering can be seen as the exact parallel of Titus' — whether Gormenghast is his heart just as it is Titus' hand. When Titus leaves Gormenghast, what he finds missing in himself is not his hand, but his certainty of the actuality of his own existence. But if one tries to argue that Flay's heart serves more as a metaphor of his passion and

[9] Though the Twins, as previously discussed, do not entirely belong in the "Groan club," it could still be argued that their embroidery, their Room of Roots and their constant plotting of a *coup* constitutes their own form of escapism.

devotion than as a synecdoche of an organ, limb, or part, then one also realizes that there is no reason *not* to argue that Titus' hand symbolizes that which is ordinarily a part of us, to which we are *so* accustomed that it simply escapes our notice. These alternative interpretations are also helpful in understanding the text, but though the contradiction that gives way to them constitutes an inexplicable loose end in the overall "body politic" theme, it is not significant enough to make it come apart at the seams.

Titus leaves Gormenghast of his own free will only to find himself torn between a compulsive nomadism and a desperate need to return to Gormenghast. Throughout the course of *Titus Alone*, the titular character jumps from one sort of life to another and reveals himself incapable of establishing any kind of long-lasting human connection. The love of Juno, who kindly takes him into custody to appease the Law, expresses itself in terms quite similar to those of Gormenghast castle, when Titus confesses a wish to leave her: "Where could you go? You do not belong outside. You are my own, my discovery (...)" (TA, p. 101). It is no wonder that Juno's following lover, Anchor, tells her he had previously watched Titus "beating the great branches [of her cedar grove] with his fists (...) as though to let his soul out" (TA, p. 149). He refuses the love of Black Rose and that of Cheeta even more promptly, though torn between his longing for isolation and his concern that he could become a kind of brute, "destined to destroy both love and friendship" (TA, p. 143). He is initially thankless to Muzzlehatch for repeatedly saving his life and tries his best to refuse the help of Crack-Bell, Crabcalf and Slingshott (TA, p. 188). Simultaneously, however, he suffers from the "heartburn of the displaced" (TA, p. 20), holding on to a flint from the Tower of Flints as "his only anchor" (TA, p. 21-22), his only proof of Gormenghast's existence. The deserter is appalled that this alien realm in which he

finds himself "should be able to exist in a world that appeared to have no reference to his home" (TA, p. 32), "no knowledge of Gormenghast, which was of course the heart of everything" (TA, p. 28-29).

If Gormenghast is a sort of body, then Steerpike surely functions as its pathological agent. He is the popular and ambitious subject which Hobbes describes as one of the potential threats to the Commonwealth, because he may through his flattery and reputation persuade other subjects to follow *his* orders, and not the sovereign's (chap. XXIX). It could be argued that both Hobbes and Peake find in the proud man the reason for the State's existence: for Hobbes, the State must rule over proud men (v. Strauss, 1952 [1936]: 13), and for Peake, the proud man must rule over all others. Hobbes sees the State as a necessary evil, whereas Peake sees it as a monstrous one. Steerpike appears on stage as a kitchen hand of unknown origin, oblivious to the castle's customs but armed with an acuity and charisma which not only elevate him from his degrading role in the kitchens but also help him progressively stand out as an apprentice of Law and Ritual. He goes from kitchen hand to fugitive, to doctor's assistant, to apprentice to the Master of Ritual, and then, at long last and with a few homicides under his belt, Steerpike becomes himself Master of Ritual. Despite his efforts to charm those he sees as instrumental in his plans, Steerpike, whether because of his "flexuous talents and expanding ambition," (G, p. 14) or because of his habit of transgressing the castle's hierarchical limits through sheer brilliance and competence (meaning, because he *is* different and because he *acts* differently), is always seen as an intruder (TG, p. 273) who, try though he might, cannot disguise his foreign and even repellent nature (G, p. 266 and p. 147).

As the pieces of Steerpike's plan start falling into place, the castle and the natural world around it begin to suffer from an all-encompassing miasma. Something has changed, in a world where change is sacrilegious; and what started off as a mere uneasiness becomes a sort of sickness which hangs in the air. The inhabitants of Gormenghast feel that everything around them has been covered with a veil of unreality (G, p. 340), turning the castle into something hardly worth believing in (G, p. 344). The malaise hits its peak when Steerpike, caught red handed, eludes his captors: it is then that torrential and uninterrupted rains cause a flood of biblical proportions which stops the criminal from abandoning the domains of Gormenghast. It is that deluge, along with a systematic persecution on the part of Gertrude and her subjects, which result in the siege and death of Steerpike. With Steerpike's death, the rain ceases, and peace returns to Gormenghast: "There was no more rain. The washed air was indescribably sweet. A kind of natural peace, almost a thing of the mind, a kind of reverie, descended upon Gormenghast." The castle, however, is left in a convalescent state: "within the castle, as the flood subsided and the water drained away from the upper levels, it could be seen how great was the destruction that the flood had caused" (G, p. 501). It is as though the body of Gormenghast has purged itself of a vital threat through some sort of immunological response. Steerpike represented *vital* danger because although at that time he had not yet managed to replace the sovereign *de jure*, Titus, he had indeed replaced the sovereign *de facto*, Barquentine. It would seem that Gormenghast suffers from another of the ailments described by Hobbes: its sovereign does not possess enough power to successfully rule the Commonwealth (chap. XXVIII) — in fact, Titus and Sepulchrave do not rule *at all*. The Earls function as mere puppets, subject to the "instructions" of the Master

of Ritual under penalty of imprisonment (G, p. 19, 100, 144 and 147).[10] Just as Deadyawn, the former Headmaster at the school for the children of Gormenghast, is the "arch-symbol of delegated duties, of negation and apathy" (G, p. 113), so too are the Earls.[11] The Master of Ritual, on the other hand, is described as "perhaps the most indispensable figure of all" (G, p. 10) and "the keystone of the castle's life" (G, p. 505). If Barquentine is presented as "the small smouldering *symbol* of the law" and "the dirty *core* of ritual" (G, p. 159 and 164, my emphases), it is merely because, besides executing the Law, he also represents it.[12] And here we find another of Peake's great departures from Hobbes, according to whom, as Strauss describes him, "religion must serve the State and is to be esteemed or despised according to the services or disservices rendered to the State" (1952 [1936]: 74). Gormenghast is a topsy-turvy Commonwealth, where the Church rules the State and the sovereign seems nothing more than an actor.

The only occasion in which a member of the Groan family goes beyond their ceremonial role and acts as the autonomous sovereign of Gormenghast can be found in the end of the second novel, when, there being no "ruling" Master of Ritual (since

[10] This would seem particularly appalling to Hobbes, for whom "to be subject to Lawes, is to be subject to the Common-wealth," which would mean that the sovereign is subject to himself, "which is not subjection, but freedome from the Lawes" (Chap. XXIX).

[11] Another character that might be added to this group is the Magistrate in *Titus Alone*, who hardly seems able to keep himself awake or aware of what he was doing before he fell asleep.

[12] The adjective "small" refers not to a lack of power but to Barquentine's incredible pettiness, as well as to the fact that he is, after all, a dwarf.

Barquentine has been murdered and Steerpike is on the run), Gertrude seizes the reins of power and begins a merciless campaign to capture and execute Steerpike (G, p. 387 and 389). This shift is punctuated by a very symbolic (though not ritualistic) gesture:

> When the Countess had been told by Prunesquallor of the finding of the Twins, the manner of Flay's death, and of Steerpike's escape, she had risen from the upright chair in which she had been sitting, and without any change of expression in her big face had lifted the chair from the floor and had methodically broken its curved legs off one by one, and had then, in what seemed to be a state of abstraction, tossed the chair-legs one after another through the glass-panes of the nearest window.
>
> *Gormenghast*, p. 387

The person who actually kills Steerpike is not Gertrude but Titus, who nonetheless insists on how he intends to act, to borrow Hobbes' words, "represent[ing] no man's person but his own" |(chap. XXII):

> 'I do not care if it was rebellion against the Stones — most of all it was theft, cruelty and murder. (...) 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.'
>
> *Gormenghast*, p. 459

As her campaign comes to an end, Gertrude returns to her old role:

> She had risen to an occasion. The uprooting of Steerpike and the salvaging of the flooded castle. Now she drew back into herself. Her brain began to go to sleep again. She had lost interest in it and the things that it could do.
>
> *Gormenghast*, p. 506

Apart from extraordinary situations, it is the Master of Ritual who in fact "governs" Gormenghast, as much as a place like Gormenghast requires it. He does so by carefully interpreting the tomes of the Law and putting into practice its instructions for the daily ceremonies. And here Peake's reader may ask: who writes the Law and who may alter it? We know of four occasions in which the Law was altered, and two of these changes were indeed initiated by an Earl (TG, p. 91 and 387), but the reader is also told that the ceremonial alternatives, at times contingently required,[13] were prescribed throughout the centuries by the leaders of the faith — that is, the Masters of Ritual. There are two occasions in the story that appear to contradict this tendency, but which are not without a plausible alternative explanation:

> 'By the least hair of the child's head,' said the Countess, interrupting, in a voice of deadly deliberation — 'if he should absent himself a hundred times an hour I will not have his misdemeanours bandied about in public. (...) My son is no chattel that you can discuss, Barquentine, with your pale lieutenant. Leave me. The occasion will proceed. Find a substitute for the boy from the tyros' benches. You will retire.'

[13] These being the bulk of the Law's concessions, since Gormenghast is not likely to suffer *too* much change under normal circumstances.

Gormenghast, p. 175

> At first they had imagined that the young earl had fainted in the heat. This had occurred to the Poet,[14] who with the permission of the Countess disappeared into the room at the rear of the balcony.

Gormenghast, p. 406

Though readers may be surprised to find the Master of Ritual being chided, this is not so difficult to understand if one considers that, powerful though he may be, the Master of Ritual is the supreme head of worship for the Groan line, therefore owing it the greatest reverence. And although we are well aware, as it is often repeated throughout the narrative, that "no individual Groan (...) could awake in [Barquentine] this loyalty that he felt for *'Groan'* in the abstraction" (TG, p. 452-453), it is nonetheless clear that the living Groans are at least owed a modicum of respect, and should not to be loudly criticized in public. If the Master of Ritual is out of line, then the Earl (or Countess) is there to "put him back in his place." As for the Poet's deference, his recent change of role seems enough to account for a certain inexperience, a certain tendency to revert to his previous modes of interaction with the Groan family.

It would thus be accurate to describe Gormenghast as a Commonwealth where the Civil power is subordinate to the "Ghostly," and where there is consequently no (true) sovereignty but that of the Ghostly power (chap. XXIX). Like Hobbes, Steerpike understands that "powers divided mutually destroy each other" (chap. XXIX), and plans to fix the conundrum:

[14] Who by then had succeeded Steerpike as Master of Ritual.

> in the all but invulnerable position of being the only one who had access to the tomes of reference and procedure, he was making a list of duties which he would insert among the ancient papers. He had been able to unearth some of the original paper, and it was only for him to forge the copper-plate writing, and the archaic spelling and invent a series of duties for Titus which would be both falling and, on occasion, sufficiently hazardous for there to be always the outside chance of the young Earl coming to grief. (...) And with the death of Titus, and with Fuchsia in his power, the Countess alone would stand between him and a virtual dictatorship.
>
> *Gormenghast*, p. 349

By killing Titus (and, presumably, Gertrude) and marrying Fuchsia, whose seduction he planned to finalize soon, Steerpike would be uniting temporal power with the spiritual one, thus becoming supreme tyrant of Gormenghast.

In order to decide which disease, whether the internal (the division of power) or the external one (Steerpike), is truly fatal, we must take into account another of Gormenghast's idiosyncrasies. Every bit as ubiquitous as the "interpenetration of person and place" are the descriptions of Gormenghast as a castle in a progressive state of collapse:

> [Titus] had been born and bred to the assumption that buildings were ancient by nature, and were and always had been in the process of crumbling away. The white dust lolling between the gaping bricks; the

> worm in the wood. The weed dislodging the stone; corrosion and mildew; the crumbling patina; the fading shades; the beauty of decay.
>
> *Titus Alone*, p. 31

There are, then, two possible interpretations available to us. The first: Gormenghast is a body and Steerpike functions as some sort of infection, posing the real threat to its organism. The constant decay of the castle is, in this case, a sort of generalized inflammation which ages but never kills the body — Gormenghast is, the characters insist on telling us, eternal both in time and in space. Gertrude, Sepulchrave and Barquentine all express a wish for there to be no ending to the line of the Groans (TG, p. 399, 402, 452-453),[15] and Gertrude tells Titus, with a very mysterious certainty, that "there's not a road, not a track, but will lead [him] home. For everything comes to Gormenghast" (G, p. 510).[16] Although it may at first sight seem "a dark and

[15] One can look at this timelessness as the literalization of Hobbes' "artificial eternity" (chap. XIX). In Hobbes, the eternity of the ruling power is artifically maintained through the succession of kings; in Gormenghast, every Earl is a link in a never-ending chain (TG, p. 116).

[16] It is perhaps due to this timelessness that Peake seems to have the running joke of never getting his character's ages right twice. In *Titus Groan*, whose narrative takes place within the space of a year, Nannie Slagg is said to be sixty-nine but also over seventy years old (TG, p. 115 and 373); she is said to have known Doctor Prunesquallor for a decade, but also to have been present for the delivery of Fuchsia by Prunesquallor, fifteen years prior to the events of *Titus Groan* (TG, p. 73 and 75); though described twice as being fifteen at the time of Titus' birth, Fuchsia is said to be nineteen when Titus is seven (TG, p. 51 and 89; G, p. 7 and 190); Irma

shambling affair," it retains a certain "consciousness beneath the surface," which listens and watches (G, p. 304). Its (true) leaders — first Sourdust and later Barquentine — may shock the reader with their persistent coughing (TG, p. 408) and tattered clothes (TG, p. 303 and G, p. 159), but the truth is that both meet their end at Steerpike's hands, instead of dying of old age or of some pulmonary affliction.[17]

But the fact is that the Earls of Gormenghast are numbered — Sepulchrave is the seventy-sixth and Titus the seventy-seventh. There was once a first Earl of Gormenghast, and, for an (earthly) kingdom which had a beginning, one assumes the existence of an end. That being so, we come to the second interpretation: Gormenghast suffers since its inception from this disease of the division of power, and just as a mortal body is doomed to lose its life, so too is Gormenghast destined to meet its end. Steerpike works as a catalyst, no doubt: it is his evildoing that eventually brings Titus to a breaking point, and emboldens him to leave.[18] With Titus gone, and

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Prunesquallor is described as forty years old both in *Titus Groan* and in *Gormenghast* (TG, p. 397 and G, p. 223), despite at least seven years having elapsed (the first novel begins with Titus' birth and the second with Titus being seven years old).

[17] It is of course very implausible that *all* Masters of Ritual were murdered throughout Gormenghast's history, but this we must attribute to Peake's focus on the events of the story itself, to the neglect of Gormenghast's prior history (to the extent that a fictional kingdom can have a "prior history").

[18] A parenthesis must here be made for the character called "The Thing." Having been Titus' foster sister, she is his equal and his mirror, but being female, she is also an object of his desire: he not only lusts after her body but also longs for the freedom which she represents. Even without calling into play the *bonne sauvage* label, The Thing can still uncontroversially be read as a symbol for the state of nature; her

his sister, aunts and father all dead, the reader can safely assume, though he or she never enters Gormenghast again,[19] that the castle's end is nigh. His desertion is, in fact, foreshadowed throughout his infancy: during his christening, Titus, placed on top of the Book of Baptism, slips, loses his metal crown and grabs hold of one of the book's pages, tearing it off (TG, p. 119); and during his "earling" (meaning, his "coronation"), he drops the sacrosanct symbols of a kingly orb and sceptre (a stone and an ivy branch) into the depths of a lake (TG, p. 496). It would seem that the doom of Gormenghast had already been foretold. And it is arguable that Titus would perhaps *not* have left his ancestral home had his life as Earl consisted of more than handling symbolic objects day in and day out:

> in spite of [Titus'] anger, the heady wine of autocracy tasted sweet upon his tongue (...) — for he was only now learning that he had power over others, not only through the influence of his birthright but through a native authority that was being wielded for the first time — and all this he knew

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existence, however, is not a harmonious one, but parasytical — she lives at odds with the communities around her. Though Titus is no parasite, he too is in constant conflict with his home. When The Thing dies — and struck by lightning, no less — it becomes clear to the reader that, like in the case of this girl, Gormenghast is a noxious environment for Titus (as it is for everyone) and he will not survive it "whole." To keep his body from suffering deformity, he must leave; in this sense, it is not only Steerpike who serves as a catalyst for Titus' desertion, but also The Thing. This metaphor of bodily deformity will be further expanded upon in the following section, titled "The Foundation of Tyranny."

[19] Except in the *Titus Awakes* fragment, which barely constitutes two pages.

> to be dangerous, for as it grew, this bullying would taste ever sweeter (...) and (...) freedom would become no more than a memory.
>
> *Gormenghast*, p. 469

Perhaps the promise of *true* power would have been *truly* persuasive, but reigning as a puppet is, in young Titus' words, "a rotten trick!" (G, p. 306).

II. The Foundation of Tyranny

Having discussed the end of Gormenghast, we will explore its beginning. A more accurate speculation on Gormenghast's inception requires, in my view, a look at the series' novella, *Boy in Darkness*. This short narrative accompanies a fourteen-year-old Titus on a nocturnal escapade. The getaway takes a downturn when Titus soon finds himself lost, and falls asleep from exhaustion on the bank of a very wide river he had crossed. He wakes up several hours later with the strange feeling that he has travelled to another world, "for it seemed to him that some new quality hovered between him and the sun." Despite this, "his sight appeared to be keener than ever, as though a film had been taken from his eyes (...)" (BD, p. 20). In that world, Titus meets the anthropomorphic Goat and Hyena, who promptly kidnap him with the intention of gifting the boy to their terrifying master, the Lamb. The Lamb would know full well what to do with Titus, for:

> it was [his] exquisite pleasure to debase. To work upon and transform in such a way that through terror and vile flattery subtly intertwined, his unwary victims, one by one, ceased to have a will of their own, but began to disintegrate not only morally, but palpably.
>
> *Boy in Darkness*, p. 58

By identifying the latent animalistic essence in each man, the Lamb bestializes them. This sculpting (or deforming) is similar to that described by Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morals* as the process through which States are first brought into existence:

> the oldest 'state' (...) emerged and endured as a fearful tyranny, as a crushing and thoughtless machinery, until such a raw material of common people and half-animals was finally not only thoroughly kneaded and malleable but also formed.
>
> "'Guilt,' 'bad conscience,' and related matters", §17

The tyrant of this first State is a sort of artist (as the Lamb is "a pianist manacled, the keyboard before him" [BD, p. 78]), who creates "a living structure of domination, in which parts and functions are demarcated and articulated, where only that which has first been given a 'meaning' with respect to the whole finds a place" *(*"'Guilt,' 'bad conscience,' and related matters", §17).[20] For Hobbes, "the specific difference between man and all other animals is reason" (Strauss, 1952 [1936], 9), and indeed the tyranny of the Lamb bestializes men because it robs them of their reason, "the brain running away too sharply from the body or the body leaping like a frog in search of the brain" (BD, p. 74). Just as the Lamb sculpts his subjects, Gormenghast fuses its inhabitants with the architecture, making them parts of an articulated and coherent whole. And just as the Titus in *Boy in Darkness* discovers with horror that the Lamb has begun transforming him into a monkey (BD, p. 111), the Titus in

[20] Peake repeats the idea of a manipulative, violent tyrant as a sort of artist in one of his children's books, *Mr Slaughterboard Drops Anchor*. In its preliminary version, the short story "Mr Slaughterboard," the titular main character uses his "artistic conscience" as justification for ordering the deaths of his ship's crew members one by one (PP, p.69).

Gormenghast jerks himself to his feet out of fear of being absorbed into the stones of the Hollow Halls (G, p. 180-181).

There is, of course, the matter of whether or not the events of the novella were nothing more than a nightmare. Though the reader knows that by the time Titus makes it back to his home "his adventure had melted from his mind" (BD, p. 114), the lack of a single reference to this ordeal throughout *Gormenghast*, with which its chronology partially coincides, may lead him or her to doubt the actuality of the nightmarish fable. Dreams do, in fact, often melt from our minds the moment we wake up.[21] And there is even a quote in *Gormenghast* which directly contradicts the adventure: "[Titus] had thought before, of Escape. Escape as an abstract idea. But he had never thought seriously of where he would escape to, or of how he would live in some place where he would be unknown" (G, p. 402).[22] In *Titus Alone*, however, we are told the exact opposite:

> This was not the first time that Titus had been suddenly accosted in regions as apparently remote. He had escaped before, and now, as his boat danced away on the water, he remembered how it was always the same — the sudden appearance, the leap of evasion, and the strange following silence as his would-be captors dwindled away into the distance, to vanish... but not for ever.

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[21] Here, Peake's wife, Maeve Gilmore's succinct description of the novella leaves us none the wiser: "It was called *Boy in Darkness* and was Titus outside the Titus books" (Gilmore, 1999 [1970]: 105).

[22] At this time, Titus is past the age of fourteen: "The boyish proportions of his face were clear evidence that he was no more than his seventeen years" (G, p. 412).

This quote heavily reminds the reader of the sudden appearance of the Goat, Titus' would-be captor. What is the reader to make of such a contradiction? This inconsistency, like many others in *Titus Alone*, could be attributed to the advanced state of Peake's Parkinson disease at the time of its writing, succinctly explained in the publisher's note to the 1998 edition of the novel, thus shelving *Boy in Darkness* away as one of the several strange dreams had throughout the series. But there is, I think, reason to believe that it is the quote from *Gormenghast* that Peake would have wanted to correct, if one considers not only that *Boy in Darkness* was written in between *Gormenghast* and *Titus Alone* (the publishing dates being 1950, 1956 and 1959, respectively), but also that there exist a number of similarities between Gormenghast and the Domain of the Lamb.

The old mines which make up the Lamb's sinister underground palace are just as vast and labyrinthine as Gormenghast castle, which Titus describes as "his citylike home" (G, p. 96); they "[yawn] with silence" like Gormenghast's windows also seem to yawn (BD, p. 52 and TG, p. 497). The Goat addresses Titus as "you from the white-dust region" (BD, p. 47), and rightly so, considering white dust or ash is often mentioned in the novels (G, p. 26 and 53; TA, p. 31); but it is also repeatedly remarked that the Goat is covered in white dust himself, and that the Hyena has a habit of cracking bones with his jaw and spitting out a cloud of white powder (BD, p. 41). The Goat and the Hyena themselves seem a sort of *pastiche* of the inhabitants of Gormenghast. The Goat addresses the Hyena as Doctor Prunesquallor would address his belligerent sister ("I don't quite understand you, Hyena, my love" [BD, p. 40]),[23]

[23] "God forbid, my love." (G, p. 205)

and often makes use of Prunesquallor's defining linguistic idiosyncrasy ("By the splendour of your mane, Hyena, dear, you are despising me" [BD, p. 38]).[24] His smile resembles a graveyard (BD, p. 40-41), just as Prunesquallor's often does (e.g., G, p. 29).[25] But with the following breath, the Goat becomes the spitting image of Barquentine: "Only once did [the Goat] stop (...) in order to scratch his head deep down in the undergrowth of his dusty, verminous curls where his forehead and his crown were itching as though his head was on fire" (BD, p. 31).[26] The Goat occasionally walks with "sidelong step[s]" (BD, p. 26), reminding the reader of Steerpike's "curious, swift and sideways manner" of walking, "shuffling and edgeways-on" (TG, p. 449 and 469), but Steerpike himself shares many more resemblances with the Hyena, namely his bodily strength, his walking-cane/swordstick, his mad laughter and his "raw vitality of the blood" (BD, p. 33-36 and G, p. 26). The Lamb, who is as timeless as Gormenghast (for he is both very old and very young [BD, p. 90-91]), spends his days seated on a high chair, surrounded by walls lined with books and a blood-red carpet before him (BD, p. 56), just as Barquetine, clothed in crimson rags (G, p. 159), sometimes sits in the library of the

[24] "'Is there nothing he can't do?' muttered Prunesquallor to himself. 'By all that's versatile, he frightens me.'" (G, p. 374). The frightening person in question is, naturally, Steerpike.

[25] Professor Mulefire's teeth are on one occasion compared to tombstones (G, p. 448), but since this single occurrence pales in comparison to the number of times Prunesquallor's smile is described in an identical or similar way, we can overlook it.

[26] "Barquentine had no notion that in easing the itch between his blades he was incapacitating an army [of ants]. He worked his back against the rough wall, to and fro (...) in a way quite horrible in so old and stunted a man" (G, p. 161).

Master of Ritual on a high chair surrounded by high tiers of books (G, p. 265 and 267).[27]

The reader is also told that there was a time when the Lamb's room had resembled a cathedral, a veritable *sanctum* with its candlesticks, incense, and congregation (BD, p. 75-77). In a poem entitled "No creed shall bind me to a sapless bole," Peake shows his animosity towards the Christian creed, and maintains that every time he gazes at the beauty of a cathedral, he will do it "to feed [his] sense, not [his] soul / Which [he] would keep deliberate and whole, / Hard and unfingered of the sugar-smear" (CP, p. 61-62). Peake feels towards Religion the same way as he feels towards the State, as both are, for him, nothing but expressions of power, and that may be why, in Gormenghast and in the world of the Lamb, a single figure represents both. It is against these that Peake would keep his soul "deliberate and whole, / Hard and unfingered of the sugar-smear"; he would save himself from the "degradation" brought about by the Lamb when his *finger* runs down the brow of his victims and slides down their profile to their chin (BD, p. 93), and he would shut his ears to the Lamb's voice, which is "as sweet as honey and as light as birdsong" (BD, p. 93). Furthermore, the Lamb himself resembles, at times, the types of artistic depictions one might fight in a church:

> the Lamb, the *creator as it were of a new Kingdom*, a new species, sat on his *high-backed throne*, the dull blue membrane covering his eyes, his breast sumptuous with *soft and peerless curls*, his *hands folded*, his faintly *tinctured lips* the most delicate of mauves, and on his head, on

[27] It is worth noting that the aforementioned Mr. Slaughterboard's most prized possession is his ship's library.

> rare occasions, *a crown* of delicate bones exquisitely interwoven, bleached to a whiteness that rivalled the very wool that was his raiment.[28]
>
> *Boy in Darkness*, p. 75-77

It would seem that Titus, by crossing the aforementioned river and falling asleep, wakes up in a sort of allegorical world where he is able to see better than ever — and it is with this sharpened power of sight that Titus understands what Gormenghast truly is: a world in which tyranny, represented by this agent or that one, invades both the moral and the *physical* integrity of its victims and molds them, robbing them of their self-sufficiency. The misshapen creature which results is the backbone of the tyrannical structure. In *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault quotes J. M. Servan on the basis of empires:

> A stupid despot may constrain his slaves with iron chains; but a true politician binds them even more strongly by the chain of their own ideas; it is at the stable point of reason that he secures the end of the chain; this link is all the stronger in that we do not know of what it is made and we believe it to be our own work; despair and time eat away the bonds of iron and steel, but they are powerless against the habitual union of ideas, they can only tighten it still more; and on *the soft fibres*

[28] My emphasis.

> *of the brain* is founded the unshakable base of the soundest of Empires'.[29]
>
> Foucault, 1975: 102-103

In another one of Peake's novels, *Mr Pye*, the titular main character travels to the British isle of Sark in order to turn it into "a *living entity*, a cosmos of healthy and far-reaching love" (P, p. 58), only to be comically incapacitated by wings that grow on his shoulder blades and horns that protrude from his forehead. His first victim, the Spartan bachelorette Miss Dredger, gives in after only a couple of days:

> She poured herself a gin and tonic. For a fleeting moment the last *thin fibrous thread* from the one-time solid root of her independence twitched in her, but died away for lack of support.[30]
>
> *Mr Pye*, p. 64

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[29] My emphasis. The original quotation is from Servan's *Discours sur l'administration de la justice criminelle*: "Un despote imbécile peut contraindre des esclaves avec des chaînes de fer; mais un vrai politique les lie bien plus fortement part la chaîne de leurs idées; c'est au plan fixe de la raison qu'il en attache le premier bout; lien d'autant plus fort que nous en ignorons la texture, et que nous le croyons notre ouvrage: le désespoir et le temps rongent les liens de fer et d'acier; mais il ne peut rien contre l'union habituelle des idées, il ne fait que la resserrer davantage, et sur les molles fibres du cerveau est fondée la base inaltérable des plus fermes empires." (Dufey,1821: 293-294)

[30] My emphasis.

The independent fibres of Miss Dredger's brain give way to far softer and more malleable threads, just as the Lamb's victims feel their brain and their body break apart (BD, p. 74).

The villain of this fable is in fact foreshadowed in the beginning of *Gormenghast*, in a way that seems to tie the two stories even closer together. Titus' tenth birthday, as that of every royal child before him, is celebrated with an elaborate play, with four gigantic, lofty characters: a Horse, a Lamb, a Wolf and a Lion. The Lamb's description rings several bells: a "mass of pale golden curls," he is an image of "unspeakable sanctity," with hands clasped upon "its own unspotted breast" (G, p. 330). The Lion, with "grandiloquent, absurd yet impressive" gestures, shakes its "purple mane" (G, p. 331); the Horse, carrying a parasol and a book of poems, inclines its head to the Lamb "with a sort of sad and smirking deference," surprising Titus with its "expression of (...) fatuous melancholy" (G, p. 330); and the Wolf, all the while, advances towards the Lamb with a "terrible, side-long progress" and a poison bottle in his hand (G, p. 331). This Lamb is the theatrical counterpart of the novella's monster, "seraphic in its purity" (BD, p. 52), whose "soft and peerless curls" and folded hands I previously mentioned; he therefore represents the Master of Ritual, or the true source of power. The Lion, whose mane is of *royal* purple, represents with his grandiloquent yet absurd gestures that which an Earl is supposed to be: impressive, but powerless. The Horse, showing deference to the Lamb, represents what Earls many times *end up* being: emasculated (the Horse is described as a "giantess" [G, p. 329] and holds a parasol [G, p. 330]), ridiculous puppets, wasting away in melancholy and escapism. The Horse reminds the reader specifically of Sepulchrave, who, having taken most of his life to produce a male heir (and thus being liable to criticism for lack of masculinity), spends his days in a library which

seems infected by his own dark dejection (TG, p. 204). The Lion and the Horse are then representations of mere *symbolic* power. The Wolf, with its sidelong steps and its poison bottle, is naturally Steerpike, whose "vulpine snarl (...) whet[s] his evil cunning" (G, p. 471), and who after receiving a basic education in chemistry from Prunesquallor, takes it upon himself to produce all sorts of dangerous concoctions (TG, p. 189);[31] the vulpine creature then stands for the usurper of power.

Although the Lamb and Barquentine are linked by Peake through the aforementioned descriptive details (i.e. a library, the colour red, a designated chair), it must be understood that through this Peake is linking the Lamb with Barquetine's *position*, and not with Barquentine himself. The crucial difference between the two characters is one of belief, and to explore that we turn to Nietzsche once again. Nietzsche tells us that it would be a mistake to assume that the founders of systems of moral oppression truly believe that which they preach: echoing Plato, Nietzsche maintains that a "moral apparatus" results from a "sacred lie" premeditated in cold blood (NF 1888 15[42], 15[45]).[32] According to Nietzsche, a great moralist should be, above all, a great actor, for if we wish to fight for the supremacy of virtue, we must abandon all hope of ever being virtuous ourselves (NF 1887 11[54]). Perhaps this might explain why, as far as the reader knows, Steerpike was the only person in all of Gormenghast's "history" to become Master of Ritual despite having no hereditary legitimacy for such, and also why he was the only one to diagnose the great problem

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[31] Whether or not Steerpike used one of these mixtures to assassinate Nannie Slagg is unclear.

[32] For the source of these two quotations and the paraphrasis in the sentence that follows, I refer the reader to Nietzsche's posthumous fragments, collected in the *Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe Werke und Briefe.*

of the division of power. Steerpike is a born actor, who changes his mask faster than he can bat an eyelid (TG, p. 136, 157, and 188; G, p. 471), and his track record of manipulation, kidnapping, arson and homicide shows us that immorality is to him like an old friend. Barquentine, on the contrary, is a true fanatic whose face is so unbelievably expressive that it makes all *other* faces seem like masks (TG, p. 451).[33] Gormenghast has been ruled by Sourdusts and Barquentines, but it was not founded by that sort of man, but indeed by someone capable of the gravest of manipulations, whether moral (as in Steerpike's case) or palpable (as in the case of the Lamb). And that is why Steerpike, like the Lamb, is an artist, whose musings label his homicidal plans as one of the great arts (G, p. 269).

Furthermore, it is significant that both Steerpike and the Lamb show difficulty in maintaining a sort of "equipoise". What begins by being a mere comical eccentricity of habits in Steerpike, who takes to walking on his hands to mimic the "predatory gait of a starling" (G, p. 184-185), develops into a fatal lack of emotional control which makes him blunder the homicide of Barquentine:

> Perhaps, for that sharp second, he remembered in spite of himself that to kill a man involved a sense of guilt: and perhaps it was because of the momentary distraction of purpose that hatred swept his face, as though a frozen sea were whipped of a sudden into a living riot of tameless water.

[33] The fact that Barquentine's rise to power is described as the appearance of "a well-versed actor on the mouldering stage" (TG, p. 334) cannot be interpreted in a Nietzschean way, since according to the omniscient narrator there is not a single time in which the dwarf utters a lie. The quote simply means that Barquentine has finally been put into action.

Gormenghast, p. 270

> For the one thing without which [Barquentine] would indeed have been helpless was still in his power to capture. Steerpike had made a mistake at the outset.
>
> *Gormenghast*, p. 271

The third degree burns and the trauma that result from this blunder leave Steerpike with "his poise (...) so shattered that a change had come about" (G, p. 282) — a change which causes him to blunder the seduction of Fuchsia as well (G, p. 352). The madness — it is now madness — reaches its peak when Steerpike goes to check on the corpses of the Twins,[34] and feels the need to strut about them like some savage, archetypal warrior (G, p. 381-382), and this dance is repeated when, about to fight Titus to the death, Steerpike yearns to "create some gesture of supreme defiance, lewd and rare," to "cheat the castle of its jealous right and die of his own evil in the moonbeams" (G, p. 497). And just as a recently traumatized Steerpike is filled with irrational loathing and hatred (G, p. 284), the Lamb is consumed by a "deep and burning hatred of all humans" (BD, p. 59). When the Lamb hears of Titus' arrival, "in spite of his grasp upon himself," he is "unable to control the emotional pressure that fill[s] his milk-white body" (BD, p. 91). And this in two beings who, in prior occasions, had shown masterful self-control (G, p. 275 and BD, p. 94).

Much the same can be said about Mr. Pye, who failed in spreading the love of a god called the "Great Pal" to the isle of Sark. "A man of exemplary control" (P,

[34] Who had by this point been kidnapped, manipulated and starved to death by him, though this last step happened through no fault of his own.

p. 18), he initially succeeds in persuading the Sarkese to "cut out" of themselves "the foul growths of pride, jealousy, and hatred" (P, p. 63), just as a potter shapes his medium (P, p. 43).[35] But he soon discovers that his upright character is in fact *too* virtuous — so much so that he is forced to disguise a pair of seraphic wings which have sprouted from his shoulder blades. Intent on reversing the process, Pye begins purposefully pursuing evil deeds, only to discover that the wings have given way to a pair of horns growing steadily out of his forehead. With this comes a realization:

> His sensitive, and naturally noble nature had been shaken by the spate of his misdeeds and somewhere inside him some delicate structure had collapsed. A pendulum had been swung — and although he could not (...) feel or see any difference in his nature (...), yet a change nevertheless had taken place.
>
> *Mr Pye*, p. 205

Cheeta, the scientist's daughter with "ice in her features" (TA, p. 165) whom Titus meets in the third novel, is the fourth example of this type of monstrosity. Masterful at scheming, Cheeta plans an elaborate theatrical party meant to shatter Titus' psyche, as retribution for his rejection of her love. But when Titus comes out of the ordeal relatively unscathed, "the author and soul of the hive" (TA, p. 200) loses her grip on her exquisite features:

> A spasm caught hold of her face and for an instant she was no longer Cheeta, the invincible, the impeccable; the exquisite midget, but

[35] Both the Lamb and Mr. Pye also have "small, plump hands" (BD, p. 53 and P, p.8).

> something foul. (...) What had taken a split moment now spread itself so that it seemed to Titus that her face had been there forever; with that extraodinary contortion of her facial muscles which turned a gelid beauty into something fiendish.
>
> *Titus Alone*, p. 229

This passage is in fact reminiscent of Fuchsia's horror at Steerpike's features when he unwittingly snaps at her carelessness and calls her a fool: "But his face had been ugly with anger. She had never known that he could so lose that perfect, that chiselled quietness of pose and feature" (G, p. 352).

This is not the common sort of equipoise mentioned in several other points throughout the book (TG, p. 469; G, p. 58, 220 and 251). It is the hubristic equipoise of a tyrant, of someone who, controlling others, expects to remain perfectly independent and self-contained himself; who, molding others to suit his needs, expects this to result in no deformation of his own self; who believes himself capable of the vilest of atrocities but only as a sort of surgical administration of havoc, and not as a symptom of his own growing mania. In an introduction to a collection of his drawings aptly titled *Drawings by Mervyn Peake*, the author (and draughtsman) speaks of "that most magisterial of qualities, 'equipoise'," which allows artists to stand on a "razor's edge between the passion and the intellect," "the compulsive and the architectonic" (PP, p. 239). Steerpike echoes this description when he first meets the Prunesquallors: "'I endeavour to keep my mind in an equipoise between the intuitive, and rational reasoning'" (TG, p. 185). Very simply put, this is a balance between chaos and order. Fortunately, Steerpike's villainous (and artistic) career comes to a

tragic end as his equipoise is progressively undermined and eventually destroyed by his own "chaotic" hand.[36] In Peake, not even the tyrant escapes from tyranny.[37]

[36] I do not, however, believe that Peake assigns the same fate to artists (in the narrow sense of the word), though that assumption would tie in nicely with the common misconception that his premature senility was the result of having written such "darkly complex" books (Introduction to *Mervyn Peake: The Man and His Art*).

[37] If we insisted on seeing the events of *Boy in Darkness* as a dream, then we would have no choice but to call it prophetic — a sort of revelation, like the one experienced by Noah in Peake's re-imagining of the biblical story, a play called *Noah's Ark*: "'I've had a dream that is more than a dream. It is the warning that I told you of.'" (PP, p. 391). Why else should this dream have been given its own novella, instead of being summarized somewhere throughout *Gormenghast*, as many other dreams were?

III. Escape from Tyranny

Peake proposes that those who choose to remain *within* tyrannical structures become stunted versions of themselves — whether animalistic or half-stone, half-flesh; but he also warns that those who venture *outside* of tyranny will most likely end up as wandering amputees, or phantom limbs, or, worst of all, not truly knowing whether they even exist at all.

As discussed above, Titus, like his father before him, sees Gormenghast as an extension of his own body. When he chooses to abdicate his title and abandon his ancestral home once and for all, and comes face to face with people who have never heard of Gormenghast and who think him mad for insisting on its existence, his dilemma takes on existential proportions:

> 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. It is no proof of anything to anyone but 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.
>
> *Titus Alone*, p. 105

Even before his escape, Titus had, to a great degree, stopped believing in Gormenghast himself, at least in the sense that its Law seemed to him hateful (G, p. 320), its system "a rotten trick" (G, p. 306), and its symbolism obsolete (G, p. 459). Realizing, like Descartes, "how numerous were the false opinions that in [his] youth

he had taken to be true," and "how doubtful (...) all those (...) [he] had subsequently built upon them" (1998 [1637]: 59), Titus finds the impetus to leave his home. But the categorical disbelief of other people in the *existence* of the castle proves to be too much: like all of Descartes' beliefs (other than that in his own existence as a mental entity), Gormenghast has been "razed to the ground," and Titus must begin from scratch (Descartes, 1998 [1637]: 59). He has been reduced to the most fundamental question: can I "prove my actuality"? Do I experience the phenomena around me exactly the way I think I do, or am I the victim of some elaborate plot? Solving this dilemma proves to be exceptionally difficult, as the world outside of Gormenghast shows no shortage of deceivers, the prime example of which is the beautiful Cheeta. Making use of some old ruins, the scientist's daughter plans a farewell party which, through the use of giant, phantasmagorical puppet-versions of Titus' relatives and friends,[38] is meant to torture Titus to his breaking point. She attempts to convince him that he has never left Gormenghast and is sleeping on his throne; she brings out a monstrous Gertrude who asks her son what it is like to be dead. Titus feels himself falling into the "deep whirlpool" that plagued Descartes at the height of his doubts (1998 [1637/1641]: 63):

> What was there left to guide him? What did Cheeta mean when she said, 'It is almost as though you were alive'? What did she mean when she said, 'I have brought you toys to play with'? What was it that was

[38] Cheeta first met Titus when he accidentally trespassed into her father's stables, nearly catatonic. She heard all about Gormenghast and Titus' coming-of-age tragedy from his feverish shouts and mumbling.

> breaking through the walls of his mind? She had said he was melting. What of the owls? And the purring of the cats? The white cats.[39]
>
> *Titus Alone*, p. 228

> So strange and terrible was what he saw that he froze within the grip of his captors. Something began to give way in his brain. Something lost faith in itself.
>
> *Titus Alone*, p. 235

That Titus should be thrown into such disarray comes as no surprise, since the actuality of Gormenghast is not without its problems. Several of its inhabitants are systematically plagued with the gnawing suspicion that they may be dreaming: when Rottcodd, curator of the Hall of the Bright Carvings, notices upon waking that his meal has not been brought up, he wonders whether he is still asleep (TG, p. 500); and Titus wonders if he is dreaming on eight different occasions throughout *Gormenghast* (G, p. 132-133, 141, 143, 284, 292, 373, 457, and 486).[40] Mentions of "nightmarish"

[39] Strange, carnivorous owls are native to Gormenghast, and Titus' mother was rarely to be found without her entourage of white cats.

[40] This sense of unreality is characteristic of Gormenghast inasmuch as Gormenghast is a tyrannical world, but as Titus comes to know in his wanderings through the world outside Gormenghast, tyrannies may also be found elsewhere. Thus we understand why Muzzlehatch, when being thanked by Titus for having saved him from the beastly man called Veil, seems surprised at the notion and confesses he was in a dream (TA, p. 142). The city which Muzzlehatch begrudgingly inhabits and which Titus visits is tyrannical in its own way, and Muzzlehatch feels the brunt of its

experiences also run rampant in the text, though some of them can uncontroversially be attributed to intense suffering on the part of the characters (as in TG, p. 134-135 and 436; G, p. 275 and 385). But Titus is not the only one to experience moments of Cartesian doubt:

> [Fuchsia] covered her eyes with her hands for a moment and felt a surge of unreality rising in her. Perhaps the whole thing was a dream. Perhaps everyone was really kind and beautiful, and she had seen them only through the black net of a dream she was suffering.
>
> *Titus Groan*, p. 339

> Hours of solitude in the woods were apt to detach [Flay] from the reality of any other life, and he would at times find that he was running gawkily through the boles in a sudden fear that there was no Gormenghast: that he had dreamed it all: that he belonged to nowhere, to nothing: that he was the only man alive in a dream of endless branches.
>
> *Titus Groan*, p. 442-443

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inhuman force: not only is his spirit peculiarly sensitive to the State's brutal nature, but he also publicly voices his discontent, calling officials "nothing (...) but the pip-headed, trash-bellied putrid scrannel of earth" (TA, p. 26-27); his moment of unreality comes right after he discovered the slaughter of all his animals by the scientists (TA, p. 142), who are aligned with the State, and he deals his retribution swiftly and without mercy, placing a bomb at the heart of the scientists' factory (TA, p. 251). For this final crime, and for an attempt against a bystander's life, he is executed by the State (TA, p. 253).

Prunesquallor, though not seriously questioning the nature of his reality outright, hints at it in a comment shared with the Countess Gertrude: "Sometimes one wonders what kind of a world one is living in — by all things fundamental, one really does" (G, p. 41).

What, then, makes Gormenghast so dream-like? Part of it can certainly be attributed to the absurdity of the castle's daily life. In *Our Knowledge of the External World*, Bertrand Russell claims the following:

> It is only the failure of our dreams to form a consistent whole whether with each other or with waking life that makes us condemn them. Certain uniformities are observed in waking life, while dreams seem quite erratic.
>
> 1914: 95

What happens, then, when waking life is plagued with "many forms of weirdness" (TG, p. 347), and seems just as erratic as our dreams? Another aspect of Gormenghast which certainly intensifies its nightmarish unreality is its pretension to endlessness, both in time and in space, to which one may add the *stasis* of its internal affairs. Gormenghast's denizens, from high to low, are told that there are no other known worlds, and that the Groan line, which has presumably lasted for thousands of years,[41] will last for aeons more. The workings of its cogs are as they has always been; according to Hobbes, a good law is like a hedge that is set "not to stop Travellers, but to keep them in the way" (chap. XXX), but Gormenghast makes its laws to ensure

[41] Considering there have been 77 Earls.

that everyone moves only in a *circular* trajectory. That is why it does not require much governance at all: it does not change; its rules were set up long ago and the job of its rulers since has been one of mere maintenance. Rulers ensure that everyone toes the line, that they all move round and round again. There is something about Gormenghast and its endless ritual which feels like a nightmare from which one is desperately trying to wake up, though to no avail — and the mantra that Fuchsia improvises in order to soothe herself from distress is a good example of this predicament: "I am Fuchsia. I must always be. I am me. Don't be frightened. Wait and see" (TG, p. 147). They are the words of someone for whom reality (as she knows it) is a prison, but who deludes herself by holding on to the hope of possible change; she tells herself to "wait and see." There is also the idea, expressed by Oakeshott in *Hobbes on Civil Association*, of civilization as a collective dream: as myth, as "an imaginative interpretation of human existence," as "the perception (...) of the mystery of human life" (Oakeshott, 1975 [1937]: 160). A nomad like Titus is thus someone desperate to escape the collective dream. This might perhaps explain why, when prompted to write the blurb for *Titus Groan*'s dust-jacket, Peake said that at best he would write "The life of Titus Groan. It is, and it is not, a dream" (Winnington, 2009: 213).

Titus' mental stability is not defeated by Cheeta's theatrics because his friends rescue him once more — in the presence of people who speak to you as if you were alive, there is no believing that you are dead. But these same friends are unable to take the existence of Gormenghast at Titus' word, so it is only when the deserter, after much wandering, comes across Gormenghast Mountain once more, that he is finally relieved of his doubt: "O God! It's true! It's true! I am not mad! I am not mad!" (TA, p. 262). In that moment he is emancipated: "He had no longer any need

for home, for he carried his Gormenghast within him. All that he sought was jostling within himself" (TA, p. 262-263).[42] This triumph was the culmination of a three-step process.

Though revalidating his belief in the actuality of Gormenghast and of his past there, Titus has nonetheless managed to disbelieve Gormenghast's lie. In the novella, Titus' harrowing ordeal comes to an end when, using a mix of cunning and bravery, he tricks the Lamb and stabs him, only to discover that inside the creature there was "a complete emptiness devoid of bones and organs" (BD, p. 114). The first step Peake would have us take is, then, to recognize the sacred lie as hollow, as *devoid* of anything beneficial or profound. Throughout *Gormenghast*, as Titus begins to realize that neither his station nor his domain give him any *credible* reason to stay, he slowly begins to resemble the great disbeliever himself, Steerpike: he is "too much alive,"[43] "too much aware," and that is what forces him "to wear a mask;" (G, p. 412) he is, like the "most horrible and intent" Steerpike, "a man in motion," "the wound-up spring of his being recoiled" (G, p. 196-197 and 460). His adventures outside of Gormenghast resemble, too, those of the man he killed before leaving: like Steerpike, Titus climbs across roofs and eavesdrops on the recitation of poems (TG, p. 141 and TA, p. 41), is held captive in a kitchen (TG, p. 37 and TA, p. 63), and shows a growingly concerning lack of empathy towards others (TA, p. 30). But, as dislikeable

[42] It is in this sense that *The Gormenghast Series* may be described as a *Bildungsroman*: for Peake, maturity necessarily implies emancipation from Tyranny.

[43] Just like the Steerpike who is, according to a starry-eyed Fuchsia, "oh, so alive! and adventurous" (TG, p. 476).

as Titus can be,[44] and as captivating as Steerpike may seem, the former is still the hero and the latter still the villain: Peake would have his readers practise disbelief as a knee-jerk virtue, but he would not have them take advantage of believers. We should become Tituses, not Steerpikes.

The second step of Titus' emancipation was the disassociation of body from stone. If the castle is real, then so are his memories: but he is not only "the 77th Earl of Gormenghast," but "Titus Groan in his own right" (G, p. 100). Titus goes from thinking that he is a part of something bigger than himself to realizing that he himself is something big enough.[45] Similarly, Tintagieu, the only Sarkese never to be swayed by Mr Pye's manipulations, facing him at all times as an equal, achieved that quite possibly because although "born in Sark [and] bred in Sark, she was nevertheless more *on* than *of* the island. Something rebellious moved her to do the opposite: to always do the opposite" (P, p. 108).

The last step to Titus' emancipation is achieved along his errant way: he realizes that tyranny comes in many forms, though they are soon enough spotted. Relationships, as previously discussed, are another sort of trap, which could perhaps explain why the peculiar Tintagieu once forgetfully failed to turn up at her own wedding (P, p. 110). The cities of *Titus Alone*, though sporting no mouldering castle, are tyrannies of Foucauldian discipline. "Secure in [their] cohesion," they are "great moon-bathed creatures that [throb] in [their] sleep as from a single pulse" (TA, p. 12), whose elites resemble beetles, moths, crocodiles, parrots and tigers (TA, p. 38). Foucault categorizes discipline as "a modest, suspicious power, which functions as a

[44] Prone as he is, in *Titus Alone*, to insult beggars (TA, p. 30), harrass women (TA, p. 166), and show a great deal of entitlement (TA, p. 61).

[45] Once again, referring to the Groan line, and not Gormenghast.

calculated, but permanent economy" (1975, 170). He compares its treatment of the individual to the one exercised by *Ancien Régime* societies in the following manner:

> In certain societies, of which the feudal régime is only one example, it may be said that individualization is greatest where sovereignty is exercised and in the higher echelons of power. The more one possesses power or privilege, the more one is marked as an individual, by rituals, written accounts or visual reproductions. The 'name' and the genealogy (...) situate one within a kinship group (...). In a disciplinary régime, (...) as power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized; it is exercised by surveillance rather than ceremonies, by observation rather than commemorative accounts, by comparative measures that have the 'norm as reference rather than genealogies giving ancestors as points of reference; by 'gaps' rather than by deeds.
>
> 1975: 192-193

Unlike Gormenghast, where the royal Groans are awarded the highest degrees of individuality, the cities of the Outer World will admit no citizen that is without his or her papers (TA, p. 48). From the moment Titus stumbles inside them, he is pursued both by the sinister Helmeteers (a pair of robots) and by Inspector Acreblade, who has "a warrant for his arrest as a vagrant; an alien; an undesirable" (TA, p. 53). Titus is eventually arrested, and only released on the condition that he remain under Juno's guardianship; once he leaves her for greener pastures, he realizes he is being followed by a "little glittering globe with its coloured entrails of exquisite wire," which

resembles “an eyeball watching [his] every move” (TA, p. 103). Destroying this spy-globe sends the powers that be after him, forcing him into hiding. Titus becomes the “bum” described by the Fourierist group *La Phalange*: “well aware that he would no longer enjoy (...) a life of ordinary order,” he prefers liberty and does not care if others see it as disorder; a child who “freed himself voluntarily” from his parents, he sees in liberty “the most spontaneous development of his individuality;” he rejects civilization as a whole and lets wildness emerge in its stead (Foucault, 1975: 292).[46] But unlike the Foucauldian cities of discipline, which progressively “humanize” capital punishment, the urban world created by Peake still retains some of the *Ancien Régime’s* barbarity: after admitting to an act of terrorism, Muzzlehatch is summarily executed by the Helmeteers, who stab him with long-bladed knives; similarly to how Steerpike was stabbed to death by Titus. In Gormenghast, as in the city, each destroyed body is a stone for the State (Foucault, 1975: 73).

[46] *La Phalange*, 15 August 1840.

IV. **Escape Whereto?**

Where then lies the relevance of Gormenghast and its characters? I would argue that Peake's "special sort of lucidity" allows him to diagnose the central dilemma which a certain type of individual faces all throughout his life, whether at home, within the State or within the Church: the type of individual insightful enough, in Peake's eyes, to know that a game is being played and that the game is rigged, and who then has to make a choice: stay as he/she is (as Fuchsia does), fight against the game (as Muzzlehatch does), rig the game in his/her favour (as Steerpike does), or leave the game altogether (as Titus does).

By exploring the dilemma through literary prose, Peake explains himself both more eloquently and more clearly than any psychologist or sociologist ever could. A life's dilemma is best understood by living it, and by having his readers vicariously live through the trials and tribulations of these characters, Peake provides them with the best possible understanding of the issue — an understanding that, though incomplete, is as complete as humanly possible. The human experience is as creative, as contradictory, and as ridden with symbolism as Peake's strange fictional world is, and so the quirks of Gormenghast serve as clues and hints that allow Peake's readers to begin wondering how exactly the dilemma would feel like. It is the ability not only to understand but also to effectively communicate to others an extremely complex and personal experience which makes Peake a particularly "lucid" writer.

Though he never put it into practice himself (having had a family and a job of sorts), the best answer to Peake's conundrum is, according to him, to leave — to free oneself of all the molding and pruning of "society" and stand as Titus does: "He was all here — there was nothing missing, brains, heart and sentience — an individual in

his own right — a thing of legs and arms, of loins, head, eyes and teeth" (G, p. 488). This new being, autonomous and whole, follows its own, mysterious direction, perhaps in search of the unknown land promised by Muzzlehatch: a land unexplored, ill-equipped, where there is freedom *to* and freedom *from*, and "where no one can remember who is in power" (TA, p. 144). It comes then as no surprise that Peake's widow, Maeve Gilmore, having decided to turn the fragmentary manuscripts her husband left into a fourth Gormenghast novel, initially planned on titling it *Search Without End*. The equally adequate definitive title was *Titus Awakes*.

It is often insisted upon, by critics and loved ones alike, that Peake was apolitical. Maeve Gilmore claimed that her late husband "had no political axes to grind, no messianic notions, no manifestoes to justify or rationalize his particular view of the world;" that he was, instead, "concerned with the business of living" (Preface to *A World Away)*. To counter this, we could argue that Peake's "refusal to rationalize [or] explain his work," as described by Gilmore, is not necessarily evidence of *incapability*, but merely of refusal. We could also argue that Peake had his own discreet way of explaining himself. The dilemmas of Titus, Fuchsia, Muzzlehatch and Steerpike, though personal at face value, are at their core political dilemmas, because their personal existential anguish results from the cards they were dealt by a certain political system. The more personal aspect of this issue is crystallized by Peake in the short story "Same Time, Same Place," where a restless young man decides to run away from home, to "forgo his birthtright" and "shake off the dark mortality of the place" (PP, p. 143), only to run back home once he discovers that the world is full of deceiving monstrosity. In this story, a contrast is established between an "inside" that means only domesticity and childhood, and an "outside" that means only adventure and sexual maturity; but in *The Titus Books*, the characters are,

as we are continuously told, part of something far bigger than themselves. The home is not just the home, but also the Church, the State, and "the known," and the outside world is not only the world outside, but also atheism, lawlessness and "the great unknown."

From a political point of view, Peake's solution to the conundrum is, at best, anarchical, following a sort of quiet, individual revolution: he proposes escape to a place "where no one can remember who is in power" (TA, p. 144).[47] However, we must also consider why Peake chose to write novels, instead of political pamphlets; why he chose to be an artist, instead of a political agitator. Unlike Titus, who tired of escapist fantasies and decided to finally put them into practice, Peake never truly took his own advice, but remained inside "his Gormenghast," married, had three children, and profited off his artistic talents as best he could. He created a world with characters who find myriad ways to disassociate themselves from their grim reality, but who are all outshone by a hero who finds the courage to leave. It is therefore plausible to assume that in writing (as well as painting, drawing and illustrating), Peake found his own temporary escape, his own therapeutic disassociation, which he then "shared" with his readers. This artistic creation should not be confused with the one perpetrated by tyrants. Tyrants create because they manipulate people and the world around them,

[47] Peake did not seem to have looked too fondly on collective revolutions. The only direct mention of them comes in *Titus Alone*, to explain the backstory of The Black Rose: "She stood there, upright but broken. Three revolutions had rocked over her. (...) One night they took her naked from her bed. They shot her lover. They left him in a pool of blood. They took her to a prison camp, and then her beauty began to thicken and to leave her" (TA, p. 125). For Peake, the alternative to tyranny must be seen through a radically individualistic lens.

and whereas Peake creates the means of escape, tyrants produce the means of bondage. The Lamb is compared to a pianist because he shapes his subjects into whatever animal he sees fit, as a pianist may shape a melody; Mr Pye is compared to a potter because he manipulates people into "cutting out [their] foul growths;" Steerpike thinks of his homicidal activities as artistic because by killing off this person or the other he is re-shaping the collective body of Gormenghast — the same can be said for Mr Slaughterboard and his ship crew. The artistic creation of these characters results in the fear and dependence which ties people down to a tyrannical system. Peake, on the other hand, by creating new worlds, gives those who see themselves as tyrannized a chance to live freely inside their heads, even if for a few hours. In a letter to Peake, the English painter Matthew Smith, having just read *Titus Groan*, thanks Peake for "a Gargantuan Feast and at the same time an escape" (Gilmore, 1999 [1970]: 62). In this sense, E.W. Maslen is both right and wrong when he claims that

> Gormenghast constitutes a haven for those who seek shelter from the remorseless logic of the world outside: a logic that led to war, genocide, book-burning, and the brutal monotony of army life during the years when Peake was writing the first of the Titus novels, *Titus Groan*, between 1941 and 1946.
>
> Introduction to *Complete Nonsense*, p. 12

Peake's fiction provides an escape insofar as it introduces us to a world sufficiently detailed, original, and compelling to prompt its readers to ask for a renewal of their visa, but it also frustrates the reader's escapist needs by revealing at its core a grim

reminder of all they are trying to escape. It both provides an escape from tyranny and is *about* tyranny.

A perusal through Peake's many works of fiction will leave the reader with the impression that the same story is being told, time and time again. *Boy in Darkness* and *Mr Pye* deal with tyrants and what they do to those around them, just as *The Titus Books* do; *Noah's Ark* speaks of a plot by anthropomorphic animals to install a tyranny, just as *Boy in Darkness* features anthropomorphic animals and *The Titus Books* feature a plot to install a(nother) tyranny; *The Wit To Woo* explores the decadence and incompetence of the upper classes and the anger this creates in the competent, ambitious lower classes, just as the plot of *The Titus Books* is crucially shaped by the competent, ambitious and lowly Steerpike; *Mr Slaughterboard* tells the story of a violent man who tyrannizes his underlings in a claustrophobic environment, as do *The Titus Books*, *Boy in Darkness*, and, to some extent, *Mr Pye*; *Letters from a Lost Uncle* narrates the adventures of a strange man who escaped from bourgeois life, in a way similar to the one intended by Peake for Titus (Gilmore, 1999 [1970]: 106-107); and, as mentioned above, *Same Time, Same Place* tells the story of an emancipatory escape from home. As hostile as he was to religion, Peake the writer resembles a sort of priest, who from his pulpit-of-fiction delivers the same sermon time and time again. As a "literary priest," Peake both thanks his readers for "coming to church" and reminds them that the point of it all is to finally "leave on a mission" — even if the final destination is not known. It would seem that Mervyn Peake wrote fiction as if to say: "Fiction is not enough! But until more can be done, it will have to do."

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