

**THE TITUS NOVELS OF MERVYN PEAKE:
A CRITICAL AND CONTEXTUAL STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

Titus Groan, Gormenghast and Titus Alone, written between 1940 and 1959, constitute the major body of Mervyn Peake's writing. Since the publication of Titus Groan in 1946, Peake has been acclaimed as a writer of undoubted, though highly individual, genius. The maverick eclecticism of his writing, however, has conferred upon his fiction a certain cult popularity, while at the same time discouraging serious academic consideration. Though there have been notable exceptions - and, in recent years, something of an upsurge in scholarly interest in Peake - serious study has largely tended to concentrate on biographical detail.

While this study does not preclude such an approach - indeed, as the title suggests, it considers the ways in which the Titus novels articulate and respond to personal, social and cultural contexts - its organising principle is the internal structure of the literary work itself.

Peake began the novels with no clear idea of the final structure of the project. In fact, though the novels have frequently been called the "Gormenghast Trilogy", they represent a work which is essentially unfinished. However, such an approach had the effect of creating an organic and therefore fundamentally coherent fiction. This study, in following Peake's organic method of development, therefore provides an interpretation of the novels which is both consistent with the author's approach, and suggestive of an inclusive and unifying framework for Peake's vision.

Acknowledging the significance of Peake's organising criteria, the study considers in turn the three basic levels of contexture - world (Gormenghast), society (the inhabitants) and individual (Titus) - so as to establish the nature of the framework in which his fiction operates. The examination of the relationship between physical degeneration and psychological dysfunction, and the effects of this malaise on the emergence of the individual consciousness of the protagonist, reveals Titus as the representative of an intransigent world forced to accept radical change - thereby giving the novels a contemporary social and cultural relevance, as well as affirming their indebtedness to fundamental aspects of enduring Western literary traditions.

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To Lesley

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NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS USED

Please note that throughout this thesis I have adopted what is now the common practice of abbreviating the titles of texts repeatedly referred to (ie. the Titus novels). Thus, they are represented as follows:

Titus Groan - TG; Gormenghast - GG; Titus Alone - TA.

Please note also that I refer throughout to the Methuen editions of these texts (see Bibliography).

Introduction.

When, at the end of the third of the Titus novels, Titus Alone, the protagonist happens upon the realm of Gormenghast, the ancient seat of his ancestors, it is not a homecoming we witness, but an affirmation. During his self-imposed exile, Titus has achieved a level of understanding that the stilted, confining world of Gormenghast had denied him. He departed as the representative of his civilisation - the last member of a dynasty which had ruled a world for so long that its identity had become inseparable from the vast, labyrinthine castle it inhabited - and returned as an individual. No longer the centre and symbol of the world, he has discovered a more objective vision, in which both he and Gormenghast are isolated fragments of human existence in an impassive universe.

Yet within this modern vision, there is also an acknowledgement of the heroic element in man: the fact that such objectivity is only realised through the necessarily subjective struggle of the individual personality to achieve consciousness. What Titus achieves has only been made possible through loss - not only the loss of his father and sister, and of the Thing, the ephemeral creature that first made him aware of the possibility of something other than Gormenghast - but also the deep, psychological loss of identity that he suffers when, with “the battering of the hoof-beats loud in his ears, Titus rode out of his world.” (GG, 511)

His decision is Romantic in the precise literary sense: it has close affinities with central motif of English Romantic poetry: a gut response to move away from the centre, to rebel.¹ Psychologically an orphan, he seeks answers which his family, his world, cannot provide. Yet this personal need also underlies more objective concerns about the state of degeneration of his civilisation - concerns which Titus, in his emergent state, can only articulate emotionally.

The society of Gormenghast is chronically dysfunctional. Its members live, and are

presented, largely in isolation: each inhabits his or her own distinctive region within the castle, which is consequently identified as a physical embodiment of the prominent characteristics of its inhabitant. Thus, the obese chef, Swelter, is master of the vast and sweaty Great Kitchens; his rival, the arthritic and taciturn Mr Flay, lurks in the dark labyrinth of the Stone Lanes; and Sepulchrave, the melancholic Earl of Groan, spends what little private time he has in the gloomy shadows of the Library, poring over the literary and philosophical abstractions of his forefathers. When, by necessity, they are required to travel beyond their respective region, they become less certain, more awkward.

The reason for such excursions is almost always the Ritual, whose great and unfathomable complexity demands much of the time of the inhabitants of Gormenghast - so much so, in fact, that, in the case of Sepulchrave, any deviation is unthinkable. The great antiquity of the Ritual confers upon it a symbolic importance which far outweighs its apparent use. This symbolic power, and the pompousness of the Master of Ritual, Sourdust, tends to ensure an awkward deference on the part of those attending the ceremonies. Yet the gravity of these communal observances is constantly undermined. Lacking in any real meaning, they are open to abuse; and when something happens to disturb them, therefore, the effect is a complete deflation (or desecration, as Luisella Ciambezi has put it²), and a parodying of the spirit of the Ritual.

It is therefore ironic that the Ritual is almost the only mechanism within the structure of Gormenghast's society that brings its inhabitants into social contact. Apart from the gregarious Doctor Prunesquallor, whose particular nature requires an audience, there are few in the castle who are willing, or even able, to communicate with other members of their society. The awkward atmosphere that hangs over the celebrants of the Ritual, therefore, is a consequence of the conflict between the introspective - or antisocial - tendencies of those present, and the social demands of tradition.

Linguistic and stylistic habits and usages are important indicators of the extent to which individuals have become alienated from their societal origins. The majority of the characters are unable to communicate effectively - a dysfunction illustrated most extremely by Mr Flay:

Conversation was never one of Mr Flay's accomplishments and for some time he gazed mirthlessly ahead of him, and then, after what seemed an eternity to Rottcodd he raised a bony hand and scratched himself behind the ear. Then he made his second remark, 'Still here, eh?' he said, his voice forcing its way out of his head. (TG, 20)

Again, the most able communicator, the Doctor,³ is also revealed to be the sanest of individuals (despite his apparent eccentricity), whose "airy and fatuous manner" (TG, 470) acts as a protection against the psychological pressures of living in such a repressive environment. His verbal games and apparent irreverence serve to reassure him of his own mental adroitness, while allowing him a certain relief in the pleasures of defying the rules of the society whose values, in fact, he supports. He is therefore a key figure in the novels, serving as he does to provide a more sophisticated insight into the limitations of the social framework of Gormenghast.

The fractured structure of the castle's society is also emphasised by the fact that, within a generation, and after a hundred generations of stability (or stagnation), it has produced three individuals whose heretical behaviour is to lead to its fundamental destruction. The Thing, though not strictly of the castle itself (she is the illegitimate offspring of two of the Dwellers who live outside the walls), exists in opposition to the Groan Lore, and therefore as a reaction to it. Steerpike, the unruly kitchen-hand, grows apparently out of nowhere to become, in the minds of the castle's inhabitants, the most potent threat to their society. He seeks to usurp the Groans and control Gormenghast himself - to adapt the castle's intransigent laws to his own ends. Yet the real threat, ironically, is Titus himself, whose fascination with the Thing and

hatred of Steerpike culminate in his abdication from the Earldom he has inherited, and his quest for identity and enlightenment.

A fundamental question, and one which shall inform the approach of this thesis, relates to the reasons for Titus's abdication and departure from the security of Gormenghast. One may argue that such an initiative is inappropriate - that the death of the Thing and of his sister, and the killing of Steerpike, would have given him sufficient understanding of the state of things to rejuvenate his society. If, as T.S. Eliot put it, "human kind / Cannot bear very much reality", surely such rites of passage as Titus has endured within his own world are enough.⁴ While Titus remains within his closed world, however, there can be no satisfactory explanations for the pain he has had to endure. In other words, the acceptance of Gormenghast's autonomy means acknowledging such events without question, thereby precluding them from any objective meaning. Accordingly, his quest is an attempt to give meaning to Gormenghast - and therefore to his life.

Though the title of the first novel is that of the protagonist, Titus Groan, this was not always the intention of the author. Peake originally called the whole project "Goremenghast"; only when it became clear that the 'prelude' in fact constituted a complete text in itself did he change it.⁵ This is significant: it is clear that the castle, rather than the heir, occupied the imagination of the author during much of the initial period of composition; and that the education, growth and ultimate departure of Titus was a subject which grew out of its environment in an organic way.

In considering why Titus leaves, therefore, it is appropriate, I feel, to take Peake's lead. The structure of this thesis will consequently begin with an examination of the nature and functions of Gormenghast itself, just as Titus Groan opens with, and continually returns to, a detailed exploration of the castle. The first chapter will start from a position familiarly associated with

the novels, by considering the relationship between Gormenghast and the castles of Gothic fictions. An assessment of their similarities - and what will be shown to be their fundamental differences - will illustrate both the fact that Gormenghast constitutes a closed world, and the weakness inherent in such autonomy. The second chapter will extend this discussion by examining those roles which are conferred on such an independent structure. I shall assert that the inclusiveness of Gormenghast has generated a population which is psychologically dependent on the castle, which functions both as a parent and, ultimately, as a godhead - and that, in fact, this continual dependence has engendered a symbiotic relationship between castle and population, in which, in an echo of Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher', a form of sentience is conferred upon the building and, conversely, the society of the castle is imbued with the calcified quality of its ancient home.⁶ Such an interrelationship is ultimately disastrous; but in the gradual and multifaceted development that is necessary for such a complex and organic structure, there is also the fascinating richness of the metropolis. Among the many layers of this most comprehensive of societies, there are echoes of our own world. As Anthony Burgess remarks: "[Gormenghast] has absorbed our own history, culture and rituals and then stopped dead, refusing to move, self-feeding, self-motivating, self-enclosed."⁷ Thus, we are presented with a strangely familiar world, in which the doomed lord of romance is ministered to by a Doctor whose scientific rationality places him in the eighteenth century - and yet whose dressing-gown and carpet slippers suggest more readily the Edwardian village physician; we witness the quasi-religious ceremonies of the Ritual, struggling to maintain their symbolic authority in the face of the real and modern threat of an heretical assassin who has learned the science of toxicology as well as the art of strategy; and we observe the primal, Lawrentian world of the Mud Dwellers, which exists outside, and in contrast with, the urban court environment of the castle on which it depends - a contrast which is comically emphasised by the visit of Mrs

Slagg to the Dwellings, dressed in “her best hat”, adorned with “a brittle bunch of glass grapes.”
(TG, 87)

It is a montage of history and culture, bizarre and whimsical, seemingly, yet taken as a whole, presenting a remarkably rich and coherent image. In Gormenghast, when Titus accompanies the Doctor through the subterranean passages of the castle on the trail of Steerpike, Peake articulates the comparison:

Neither of them could recognize the masonry that rose about them, the twisting passageways, the shallow flights of stairs and the long treadless inclines; they were speeding through a new world. A world unfamiliar in its detail - new to *them*, although unquestionably of the very stuff of their memories and recognizable in this general and almost abstract way. They had never been there before, yet it was not alien - it was all Gormenghast. (GG, 372)

This “general and almost abstract” familiarity between the characters of Gormenghast and its fundamental identity also provides an interpretation of the relationship between the world of Peake’s fiction and the ‘real’ universe. Though not an allegory of it, Gormenghast is undoubtedly a representation of reality, however oblique. In its symbolism, particularly, it can be seen as a distillation of Western culture. The final chapter of the first section will examine the notion of Gormenghast as a social and cultural metropolis, and consider the ways in which this function can provide us with an indication of the relationship between the fictional construct and the reality from which its many cultural determinants are derived. This will have important implications later in the study, when the novels are considered in the light of both cultural and socio-historical perspectives.

If Titus is a symbol of his home, then he is also a product of his society. The inhabitants of Gormenghast, as I have indicated above, are wholly dependent on the continued existence of the

castle. Having built, sometime in the distant past, a home whose vastness and durability provide protection and security, its people have become victims of their own insularity. Isolated, antisocial and psychologically unstable, the population of Gormenghast reflects both the strength of the society - its unquestioning faith in the system - and its many weaknesses. Trapped in their own individual worlds, each character's individuality has been eroded, making him more and more reliant on the moribund Ritual for social interaction. Suffering under a variety of neuroses, the inhabitants of the castle endure a collective chronic trauma which they are helpless to resist. They constitute a civilisation which no longer has the ability or initiative to effect the change that is necessary for its survival. When change is forced upon them, therefore, many of them cannot survive; and those that do (though, through force of tradition, they deny it) are bound to admit that nothing can ever be the same as it was.

The second section of this thesis, in which each of the major characters of the first two novels are considered, analyses a society at a moment of radical change. This prefigures the consideration later in the thesis, that will be given to understanding the Titus novels as a response to the Second World War and its aftermath. It also further informs the question of Titus's departure. In such a confined environment, it will be seen that many of the characters have an effect, whether directly or otherwise, on the formation of his character. Though his abdication may be the direct result of his relationship with Steerpike, Fuchsia and the Thing, other interactions and tensions which he observes or is party to can be seen to direct his emergent rebellion. Moreover, Titus, as the symbol of his world, is also the agglomeration of his society. In considering the nature and role of each of the characters, therefore, we are more readily able to conceive of the identity of Titus himself.

In an interesting recent theoretical discussion, Miles Fielder has suggested that the fragmented presentation of the characters and their actions serves to unravel the structure of the

Titus novels, so that Gormenghast, despite its massive presence, is in fact an illusory locus. However, this deconstructive approach does not take into account the central concept of change which profoundly affects - in fact, defines - each of the individual characters. In this second section of the thesis, therefore, an examination of this discussion will emphasise the importance of Gormenghast's changing, rather than changed, state, as the basis for a consideration of the theme of progression which provides the central dynamic of the novels.⁸

As Batchelor implies, Peake is largely concerned in the first novel with the castle and its society, rather than the hero of the title: "For nearly half its length - the first twenty-eight chapters - the book lingers round the day of Titus's birth."⁹ The consideration of his personality, in fact, does not begin until the second novel - ironically called Gormenghast. Again, I shall follow Peake's organisational approach. Having considered the nature and functions of the castle and its society, I will turn, in the third part, to Titus himself - and particularly, the significance of his departure. As I have suggested, his rebellion and search for personal understanding is a Romantic motif. It also conforms to the tradition of the Bildungsroman: Titus's growth necessitates a movement from the known centre to the unknown outer regions, impelled by the the paradoxical urge to desire the unattainable. Drawing on a number of critical approaches to this paradox, an interpretation of Titus's role as a Romantic figure will be considered; this in turn will lead to a discussion of the nature and extent of Peake's Romantic sensibility.

Titus's basic struggle for identity, with its attendant estrangement from society, is as much a modern as a Romantic concern. Peake's position with respect to this disengagement is often equivocal: what can be seen as a conflict between the author's personality and his artistic awareness creates a tension between the emotional and subjective stance, and a more distanced ironic position, which he defines in the text as "equipoise". This ambivalence is illustrated in

Peake's use of parody throughout the novels, as well as in the ironic loss of identity Titus suffers in the final novel, appropriately entitled Titus Alone. In the second chapter of this section, therefore, I shall consider Titus's role as the alienated modern 'everyman', whose quest involves not only the emergence of personality, but also, in Eliot's phrase, "the extinction of personality."¹⁰

One basic dynamic, common to both Romantic and Modernist traditions, is that of the personal journey, or quest. The quest motif, signifying as it does the movement away from the centre in the search for a greater understanding of one's condition, will be seen as an elemental, and therefore unifying narrative of Western cultural traditions. In the final chapter of this part of the thesis, therefore, I shall consider the extent to which the Titus novels enact this basic narrative, thereby suggesting a more cohesive interpretative framework than has been hitherto considered.

The elemental, or mythic structure of the novels that such an interpretation suggests is supported by the organic development (castle: society: hero) alluded to above. According to Northrop Frye, literature constantly - and unconsciously - re-enacts this progression in its imitation of the natural cycle of birth, growth, decay, death and rebirth. The structures and imagery of the literary modes of romance, comedy, tragedy and irony reflect the variety of attitudes towards the human condition within the natural cycle, thereby providing a framework of meaning. In a world where an ultimate source of truth and meaning (what we might call gnosis) is no longer accessible, such a framework allows for a sense of progression which is both sufficiently inclusive and reasonably coherent. This mythic approach, when applied to the Titus novels, affirms that the theme of change, and the narrative of quest that it elicits, can be seen as an organic development central to the traditions of Western literature. The final section of this thesis will therefore examine this development according to such an interpretation. In the first

chapter, it will be seen that, in Peake's presentation of an intransigent society and the catastrophic consequences conferred upon it by violent but necessary change, Titus Groan is a dominantly tragic (or mock-tragic) fiction. In the next chapter, I shall illustrate how Gonnenghast, in progressing from an expositional to a narrative presentation, and shifting from the political to both the social and the pastoral arenas, moves towards a comic vision, in which the elements that initiate Titus's quest - and therefore, ultimately, personal reconciliation - are determined.

This shift from the tragic to the comic mode involves a heightened understanding of the human condition - and also emphasises the fact that such awareness is revealed only in glimpses. This irony is emphasised by the compulsion which drives Titus unwittingly towards such a revelation - a process which also has the effect of disengaging the reader from the text by emphasising its fictionality. The third chapter will consider this basic movement from a heroic to an ironic vision which affirms the importance of Titus Alone within the sequence.

In the final chapter, I will illustrate how the novels, thematically and structurally, can be interpreted in terms of the social climate in which they were written. We shall see that the imagery of the novels and the concerns they articulate are significantly enriched by conceiving of them as an attempt to make sense of the experience, both personal and societal, of the Second World War. The ironic control through which Peake allows us to disengage ourselves from, and thus realise the fictionality of, the world he has created, also emphasises, in the mythic, and ultimately heroic vision it proclaims, its fundamental relevance to twentieth century experience.

Notes.

1. For the purposes of this thesis, “Romantic” refers to the English Romantic ‘movement’ which flourished at end of the 18th / beginning of the 19th centuries; “romance” is a generic term referring specifically to the medieval courtly tradition, and also to the label used by Frye in his Anatomy of Criticism - one of four literary ‘mythoi’, corresponding to the seasons (romance being the mythos of summer). Occasionally, I have used the term “romantic” in the common sense - as in romantic love. See also p.247.
2. Luisella Ciambezi, ‘The Desecration of Rituals in Gormenghast’, Peake Studies vol.3, no.4 (Summer 1994) 17-20.
3. Peake is somewhat inconsistent in the use of capitalisation for names in the texts. However, his preference appears to be for capitalising the titles of people and significant objects; I have therefore adopted this style for the following: the Earl, the Countess, the Doctor, the First Servant, the Poet, the Professors, the Master of Ritual, the Grey Scrubbers, the Dwellers, the Thing; also the Line, the Ritual, the Library, the Kitchen, the Stone Lanes, the Attic, the Hall of the Bright Carvings, the Forest, the City, the Under-River, the Black House. One important exception is “the castle”, which appears more frequently in lower case.
4. T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), ‘Burnt Norton’, 42-3.
5. See John Batchelor, Mervyn Peake: A Biographical and Critical Exploration (London: Duckworth, 1974) 65-73.
6. Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’, Selected Tales (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).
7. Introduction to Penguin edition of Titus Groan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) 9.
8. See pp.113ff.
9. Batchelor, 77.
10. T.S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, Selected Prose, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953) 26.

Part One: Gormenghast, that is...?

With the opening sentence of Titus Groan, Peake implies what is to be the central figure of the novel: not, as the title suggests, that of Titus, the as-yet unborn heir, but that of the castle of Gormenghast: “Gormenghast, that is, the main massing of the original stone, taken by itself would have possessed a certain ponderous architectural quality...”. (TG, 15) This suggests both the focus of the first novel, and the difficulties inherent in any attempt to define it. Gormenghast “would have possessed a certain ponderous architectural quality” if it were possible to consider it “by itself” - to divorce its physical nature from all the other complex social, psychological and spiritual aspects of its character. However, as I shall demonstrate, Gormenghast exists on many levels, each stratum viewed only in glimpses (naturally, as its vastness and complexity precludes us, as it does its inhabitants, from apprehending the whole).

It is evident that Peake intended the castle to provide the focus of interest in the first novel. As John Batchelor notes, he originally called the first novel ‘Goremenghast’¹; and as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Titus himself is to play a minor and purely symbolic role in the novel which takes his name (he is less than two years old at the close of the book). Indeed, as we shall see, when the narrative strays outside the confines of the castle, it becomes unfocused.²

Fortunately therefore, much of the action takes place within Gormenghast. Peake’s dense style and his concentrated organisational technique manage to give an impression both of the castle’s vastness and its limiting, claustrophobic quality. Each of the characters inhabits his own realm of experience, and becomes uncertain when he is forced to move beyond it (see part two below). It is therefore perceived, by the reader as well as by inhabitants through whose eyes it is exposed (see, for example, pp.132ff) as a total world. Evidence of other civilisations is precluded. According to Countess Gertrude, ““There is nowhere else.”” (GG, 510)

Vast, ancient and remote, Gormenghast Castle appears to have the same function as the castles of Gothic fictions. The fact that its vastness, and the methods Peake uses to define it, present an image of heavy obscurity, appear to support a comparison with *Udolpho* and *Castle Dracula*. As I shall explain in the first chapter, however, such an interpretation is ultimately undermined by an essential difference between the society of Gormenghast and the inhabitants of Gothic castles. Whereas the latter are representative of a reaction against accepted values, the former represent those values: the members of the society of Gormenghast, though eccentric, are central 'insiders', not peripheral renegades or alien elements.

The perpetuation of Gormenghast as a total environment is based on its central symbolic function. Its association with the Groan dynasty has become such that, like the House of Usher³, castle and family are symbolically indistinguishable. The ancient building therefore confers a sense of permanence on the family; and conversely, Gormenghast acquires a sentient quality, augmented by Peake's use of pathetic fallacy. The psychological malaise of the inhabitants is echoed by the 'sickness' of the castle itself. As I shall describe in chapter two, this has interesting implications for the functions of the castle, revealing as it does the extent to which its inhabitants have become psychologically reliant on its continued well-being (and conversely exposing the level of degeneration of its society).

This organic function of Gormenghast has important implications for the dynamic of the novels as a whole. Peake describes a world which, in its stagnant, petrified isolation, is both static and moribund: its archaic Ritual, which has created in its inhabitants a listless introspection, has also eroded their ability to think and act for themselves. The awareness of change that is forced upon them, therefore, initiates a radical change in perception, which only the protagonist, in leaving the world which has defined him, is able to achieve. The death of Gormenghast is necessary, so that its society, represented by Titus Groan, can be rejuvenated -

as we shall see below (parts 3 and 4).

Peake's presentation of Gormenghast is such that, the more he reveals, the more it resists any definitive categorisation. Drawing on whatever cultural and historical images he feels suitable, he creates an overall impression of an endlessly complex, yet remarkably coherent whole. By the sheer accumulation of detail, he presents a world which, in its complexity, functions as a metropolis, in which layer upon layer of societal fabric, from the physical presence of the castle to the collective fog of memory, combine to preserve a civilisation whose representative individuals are chronically alienated. In the final chapter of this section, I will consider the implications that an interpretation of Gormenghast as a metropolis infers.

Notes.

1. John Batchelor, Mervyn Peake: A Biographical and Critical Exploration (London: Duckworth, 1974) 65.
2. The sub-plot which deals with the Dwellers, therefore, is weak: “When he writes about the Dwellers, Peake completely loses his wit and grasp of detail, and the language becomes unfocused and emotive” (Batchelor, 80).
3. Edgar Allan Poe’s story ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ focuses on the demise of an ancient family whose immemorial association with their home has conferred on each the symbolic qualities of the other. See Edgar Allan Poe, Selected Tales (Oxford: OUP, 1972).

1. Gothic Gormenghast.

There has been a tendency to regard Gormenghast as essentially a Gothic castle (and, by implication, the Titus novels as Gothic fictions). David Punter, indeed, describes it as “the final Gothic castle”.¹ As the nature of such castles as Otranto, Udolpho and Dracula conjure up very striking and easily-defined images, it is understandable that we accept this statement without reservation. After all, Gormenghast shares many of the features of this central Gothic symbol; and Peake’s rich, even excessive style supports such an analysis. However, as I intend to show, Gormenghast’s function is not primarily that of the Gothic castle, despite many similarities; furthermore, there are crucial differences between Peake’s intentions and those of Gothic writers which I shall also describe.

During the early development of Gothic writing in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the castle (along with its religious counterpart, the abbey) was a most consistent symbol. There are a number of reasons for this. Primarily, the castle is a defensive, and therefore defensible structure. It can keep undesirable aggressors out, as well as imprison victims. As early Gothic developed as a reaction against what were increasingly seen as the restrictive and unnatural modes of thought advanced in the Age of Reason, it was appropriate that such a structure was chosen. Though, as John Rosenberg points out, “The [Gothic] revival in England began as a kind of self-conscious jest”², only later acquiring a moral or philosophical basis, its interrogation of rationalist principles was from the outset considered as subversive, as much by its creators as its critics. Its locus, therefore, was a fortress - an edifice which could hide the nefarious, depraved and generally anti-social behaviour of those that dwelled within it.

The physical robustness of the castle was augmented by a number of other factors. It was situated in a remote location (commonly in what were, for the English reading public, the exotic

regions of southern Europe), thus distancing the antisocial tendencies of its inhabitants from civilised society. It was physically vast, which allowed any number of intrigues to be perpetuated within it; it was also invariably gloomy, again in order that secrets could remain hidden from censorious eyes. Finally - and as a result of these attributes - it would inspire fear in the innocent victims (and delighted terror in the not-so-innocent readers).

On a physical level, at least, Gormenghast conforms to this archetype. Its size appears in fact to exceed any of its Gothic predecessors. The great tree, its branches broad enough for the Twins to walk along with ease, starts from a point three-quarters of the way up the wall of the castle; and Steerpike, from his vantage point, sees the Twins from such a distance that "They appeared about the size of those stub ends of pencil that are thrown away as too awkward to hold." (TG, 137) When Rottcodd looks down from the Hall of the Bright Carvings at the end of the first novel, he can only just see the procession returning to the castle from Titus's Earling ceremony. (TG, 501-4)

The place is so vast, in fact, that despite Peake's attention to detail, Gormenghast remains for the reader largely uncharted. Indeed, his florid, extravagant style, which dwells on minutiae of detail, tends to emphasise the physical vastness of the castle. The intricate richness of language with which he highlights certain areas provides a sharp contrast with the dark bulk that surrounds them: by thus expanding the microcosm, Peake suggests an infinite macrocosm. When we leave Gormenghast after a thousand pages, much of which is given over to elaborate exposition, we feel we know only the merest outline.

It also fulfils the criterion of remoteness; in fact, it is a closed world, beyond which (as far as its inhabitants are aware) "there is nowhere else". (GG, 510) That Titus ultimately proves this statement untrue does not undermine its validity to the denizens of Gormenghast. To them, it constitutes the limits of their experience.

This, however, is one of the fundamental differences between Gormenghast and the Gothic castle. It is so completely cut off from any other world that it is, in effect, a totalitarian state. As with Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, a novel contemporary to Titus Groan, its characters inhabit a society whose control over individuals is perpetuated both through a rigorous regime of laws and regulations and through the promotion of the belief that no alternative exists. While Gormenghast does not share with Orwell's dystopia the sinister connotations of totalitarianism - that is the provenance of Titus Alone - it performs the same basic function. The Gothic castle provides sanctuary for elements whose anti-social behaviour threaten the accepted mores of 'civilised' society. Gormenghast is not marginalised in this way: it is a closed world which mirrors (somewhat obliquely) our own. There is no point of connection - and there can therefore be no knowledge of an alternative, 'better' system. Though evil, or malevolent intention, is manifested here, it exists in spite of the castle's system.

For the same reason, Gormenghast does not inspire fear. Of course, the dangers that lurk within it, in the form of certain individuals, make it fearful to other individuals - and later, as Steerpike begins to kill at random, to all its inhabitants. However, such actions are construed as being contrary to the natural state of Gormenghast. Undoubtedly, the gloom and mystery that pervade the castle allow Steerpike to play on the fears of its inhabitants; but they are not afraid of the shadows themselves, having always lived among them. The menace of Gothic castles stems largely from the fact that they are, to the victims that are taken there (or who, in their innocence, stray into them), unknown. The inhabitants of Gormenghast are not displaced in this way. In fact, they seem more at home in the gloomier quarters of their home than those the reader is likely to find attractive. The description of the Cool Room, where Titus is christened, illustrates this:

The room was perhaps the most homely and at the same time the most elegant in

the castle. The whole feeling was of quiet and pleasing distinction, and when the afternoon sun lit up the lawns beyond the bay windows into a green-gold carpet, the room with its cooler tints became a place to linger in. It was seldom used. (TG, 98)

This clearly contrasts with the image of the Gothic castle. Anne Radcliffe's *Udolpho*, for example, which overlooks a remote valley in the Apennines, is contrasted both with the pastoral tranquility of the heroine's home in Gascony and the metropolitan splendour and gaiety of recently-visited Venice: "The gothic greatness of its features, and its mouldering walls of dark grey stone, rendered it a gloomy and sublime object... As the twilight deepened, its features became more awful in obscurity".³

The physical similarities, then, between Gormenghast and the Gothic castle are undermined by the differences between their inhabitants. Yet, in the doomed aristocratic dynasty of the Groans, we appear to have an archetypally Gothic motif. The concept of fate is central to many Gothic fictions from *The Castle of Otranto* onwards; the idea of the doomed family particularly recalls Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. However, Poe's tale (to which I shall return) shifts the focus from the function of the Gothic castle to the decay of that function. The castle as a Gothic symbol draws its initial power - and menace - from the fact that it represents that which is contrary to, and therefore remote from, society. Count Dracula, in particular, inhabits a realm which is wholly alien to the 'civilised' world - a region which Rosemary Jackson describes as "inorganic... before cultural formation."⁴ He is antithetical to that which he opposes: the bourgeoisie, who have taken over his position of power in the world, and now control society in his place.

Gormenghast is a feudal, not a bourgeois society. Though, in the second novel, it may be argued that a new middle class emerges, we shall see (pp.100ff.) that neither the Doctor nor the Professors have any desire to change the society in which they live. Steerpike, who has been

called a “proto-capitalist”⁵, is ultimately destroyed by the aristocracy he seeks to usurp. In fact, he has many similarities with *Dracula* (a comparison which I shall address in some detail in chapter 8 below); but the social tension between Steerpike and Gormenghast is an inversion of Stoker’s framework.

Gothic fiction, though apparently exotic, developed as a response to social progression. This is evident if one considers the fact that the Gothic novel flourished in the revolutionary decade of the 1790s. In particular, it sought to promote bourgeois ideals by questioning values that were coming to be associated with a barbaric (though ordered) past. As Fred Botting puts it: “The anxieties about the past and its forms of power are projected out to malevolent and villainous aristocrats in order to consolidate the ascendancy of middle-class values.”⁶

Dracula, written a century later, in fact subverted this form of Gothic interrogation, by projecting a much more ambivalent consideration about social norms and mores. Again, we see in Stoker’s novel the Gothic interaction with its own society: the 1890s saw profound uncertainties about ‘civilised’ propriety and morality. The result, in Dracula, is that the antagonist, though possibly the most diabolical of Gothic villains, is invested with a moral authority wholly lacking in the nefarious societal outcasts of Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis.

Whether in the clearly defined moral atmosphere of earlier Gothic writings, or in the much more ambivalent works of the late nineteenth century, it is evident that there exists in the majority of Gothic texts a basic tension between two worlds of experience: the accepted, morally cohesive society, and its unacceptable, antisocial counterpart. Gormenghast, a closed and entirely self-contained world, does not have the same structure.

During the nineteenth century, Gothic writing developed alongside mainstream fiction. As the social commitment of the Victorians was reflected in the realist novels of Dickens, Gaskell and Eliot, so those writers who employed Gothic styles and structures also brought about a shift

in perspective. The exotic locations favoured by the eighteenth century novelists were no longer deemed relevant to a society whose anxieties were increasingly focused on the domestic environment; so the Gothic castle was transferred from the Mediterranean or Alpine regions to the rural (and, in Dickens, for example, urban) settings of England. By necessity, they also changed their appearance: an English manor house or farmstead was more suitable than a vast fortress to the realist sensibilities of the nineteenth century. Two central Victorian texts, Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights, combine domestic locations and Gothic elements, so that they may also be described as Gothic fictions.⁷ (See also chapter 5, pp.95-8 below)

With these developments, it was no longer possible for the associated terrors to remain abroad. Those malevolent impulses that had hitherto been cast out into the barbaric wildernesses of remote castles were now internalised. The antisocial ghosts of insurrection and depravity were coming to be seen as the effects of social alienation. As commentators voiced their concerns as to the dehumanising effects of industrialisation and urban hardship, Gothic fiction began to manifest those anxieties as inner demons. Botting remarks that, during the nineteenth century, “Gothic became part of an internalised world of guilt, anxiety, despair, a world of individual transgression interrogating the uncertain bounds of freedom and human knowledge.”⁸

Gormenghast certainly conforms to this description. The isolation of the characters, their alienation from what is a dysfunctional societal structure, and the repressive nature of the forces that control them, has engendered in them a range of neuroses that renders them psychologically unstable. Withdrawn into their own individual nightmares, each of the characters inhabits a private world which is fundamentally fractured from the society of which they are members by virtue of physical contiguity only. Peake’s style emphasises this lack of cohesion. He presents characters individually, building up, with the dense expository technique that is such a feature

of Titus Groan particularly, a series of seemingly unrelated images. The result is a pervasive sense of psychological suppression and unease that is wholly in keeping with the introverted focus of later Gothic fictions.

Among these, a central text is Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886).⁹ The theme of the double which this fiction examines is fundamental to many Gothic works: Godwin's Caleb Williams, Shelley's Frankenstein, and Poe's 'William Wilson' are other examples of texts in which the double, or alter-ego, provides the focus of interest.¹⁰ The tension between antagonist and protagonist, when presented in this introverted way (in that each 'half' is obsessed with the other, and considers little else), can be seen as a development of the subject-object polarity of society and castle that dominated Gothic fictions of the externalising type. Within Gormenghast, two such tensions are developed - between Flay and Swelter and between Titus and Steerpike. I shall examine both oppositions in the subsequent section of this thesis (see chapters 7 and 8 below); but it is clear that, in his presentation of this concept - and the psychological environment in which such tensions can develop - Peake is considering the same anxieties (that is, regarding the subject of personal identity) as those Gothic fictions described above.

The castle, as a Gothic symbol, depended on its association with those that dwelled within it. As the moral delineations between 'evil' castle and 'good' society became less defined, so Gothic fictions became more introspective and diffuse. It is significant, therefore, that out of the resurgence in interest in Gothic themes towards the end of the nineteenth century, the most enduring example is one in which we see the return of the castle in all its symbolic glory. Dracula (1897) subverts the traditional moral positions of society and castle, by focusing not only on the transgressive nature of the antagonist, but also on the fact that, among the representatives of 'good' bourgeois society, those same impulses exist in a suppressed form. I shall go on to examine the similarities between the protagonists in Dracula and the 'heroic'

characters who reveal Steerpike as the villain when I consider the nature and functions of the latter (see pp.136-8 below). In terms of the present discussion, however, I feel it will be interesting to consider why the myth of Dracula is so enduring - and what role the castle in that novel can be said to perform.

Count Dracula, as the ancient aristocrat returned to avenge his loss of supremacy, should not, perhaps, inspire the degree of awe that his enduring, mythical status in the modern world would suggest. After all, all liberal humanistic values suggest that the concept of inherited power is contrary to socially acceptable philosophies. Furthermore, Dracula exhibits his power most readily through those concepts most offensive to rational, reasonable behaviour: the subordination and objectification of women; the control of individuals through violence; and the flagrant transgression of sexual mores that both of these indicate. Yet he (and his popular modern descendents, of which Batman is perhaps the most notable of many) continues to fascinate and inspire the imaginations of twentieth century society.

This fascination, I believe, stems from a number of factors. Firstly, of course, as I have suggested, his transgression allows for a degree of self-reference that would not, under the restrictive codes of 'normal' society (whose existence is necessary for the continued coherence of that society), be possible. In objectifying what we perceive to be antisocial impulses in the form of an external, malevolent force, we are able both to acknowledge that those impulses exist, and to maintain our control over them. In this sense, Dracula, perhaps more than any other Gothic fiction, is ambivalent, in that it develops the concept of transgression beyond normally prescribed boundaries. As Fred Botting states, "Transgression is important not only as an interrogation of received rules and values, but in the identification, reconstitution or transformation of limits."¹¹ Whereas the majority of Gothic texts explore such transgression so as to confirm the necessity and propriety of those limits, Dracula refuses to draw such

comforting conclusions. Count Dracula is a mythical force; though he is destroyed, what he represents is that permanent facet of human nature connoted as 'evil'.

The most enduring myth in Western civilisation to embody notions of 'evil' (as may be termed all abstracts which are considered to be contrary to the accepted norms of society) is that of the Devil. The Christian embodiment of 'evil', antithetical to our notions of civilisation, order and life, the Devil (and the devils or demons of other cosmologies) must inhabit the outer realms, the unknown, those regions rejected by civilisation, and therefore deemed uncivilised. The Dracula myth is clearly a reworking of this tradition. The Count, in fact, embraces evil after his bride is murdered by his foes (recalling the fate of Victor Frankenstein) and, denouncing his faith, condemns himself to eternal 'un-death'. Subsequently endowed with supernatural powers, yet cursed to spend eternity in darkness, surrounded only by his minions, he recalls Milton's Satan. Moreover, the great castle he inhabits, towering up into the obscurity of night, far from civilisation, can clearly be identified with Pandaemonium, the great parodic symbol of power built by Lucifer and his cohorts after the battle in Heaven.¹²

Another important parallel can be drawn between Dracula and Milton's interpretation of the Devil myth. Dracula's dominion over death recalls Satan's journey from Hell, in which he manages to escape his confines after cheating Sin and Death, his guardians. Castle Dracula, according to this interpretation, can be conceived as a boundary between life and death. Given that Castle Dracula is an essential component of the myth, it is clear that the enduring fascination for the concept of the aristocratic vampire cannot be divorced from our contemplation of the castle itself, and what it signifies. As the home of a devil, and therefore a link between the real, transient world and an 'ideal', permanent existence, it is appropriate that such a symbolic structure should excite our imagination.

Gormenghast, as we shall see (chapter 2 below) does not function in this way. Despite the

immortality that its great antiquity suggests, it is in the advanced stages of decay, and is moving inexorably towards death. Though it might be argued that, due to the many deaths that take place within its walls, it does function as a boundary between life and death, it does not have the same aura of supernaturalism that pervades Castle Dracula. Though Peake, at the beginning of Gormenghast, does bring forth the ghosts of those who had died during the action related in Titus Groan, (GG, 8-11), it is a purely literary device, parodic rather than mystical; and when David Punter remarks that “the living already inhabit a world of the dead”¹³, we must add that this “dead” world is a natural, not a ghostly one. The barren realm of Gormenghast shares the Gothic atmosphere that Joyce Tompkins describes as “the noiseless slipping of life into oblivion”¹⁴, but it is the naturally decaying region described by Radcliffe, not the supernatural loci of Poe or Stoker.

Gormenghast Castle undoubtedly has many of the physical attributes of the Gothic castle, just as its inhabitants share the psychological pressures and neuroses of the characters of Gothic fictions. Allied to these similarities is Peake’s ornate and expansive style, which supports the impression of his work as Gothic fictions. However, as we have seen, there are a number of crucial differences between the Titus novels and Gothic fictions, emphasised by the relationship between the castle and its inhabitants. This relationship is aptly illustrated by two of the principal characters (whose functions within the novels will be examined in detail in chapters 4 and 5 below). Sepulchre, even to himself, is inseparable from his home: “How could he *love* this place? He was a part of it. He could not imagine a world outside it.” (TG, 62) Fuchsia, his daughter, conceives it in much the same way: “It was something which she understood, something which she could never do without, for it seemed as though it were her own self, her own body...” (TG, 273) They are not victims, drawn towards some alien and fearful place: Gormenghast is their home.

I alluded above to the fact that, in this sense, the basic concept - that of the identification of the castle with its inhabitants - is that of Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. However, Roderick Usher, though so identified with his home as to be symbiotically linked to it (in that his death is followed immediately by the physical destruction of the building), exhibits a neurotic fear of the House he was destined to preside over: "To an anomalous species of terror I found him a bounden slave. 'I shall perish,' said he, 'I *must* perish in this deplorable folly.'"¹⁵ There is, undoubtedly, the same sense of identification between building and family in both Poe's tale and the Titus novels. The Groan line, linked minute by minute to the traditions of their home by the rigidity of the Ritual that is ironically intended to perpetuate it, is irreparably damaged when Titus leaves the castle at the end of the second novel. Echoing his sister Fuchsia, he feels as if he has lost "half of himself" (TA, 20). In this interdependence, Gormenghast must be conceived, not as a symbolic representation of an individual (as Castle Dracula is), but, as I shall assert in the subsequent chapter, a projection, whose association with the Groan dynasty has, strangely, conferred upon it an individual nature.

The ambivalence of Gothic writing enables it to examine those areas of our identity that are taboo, enabling us to modify and understand our behaviour as a society, while at the same time distancing ourselves from the subversive impulses thus indicated. Successive developments in Gothic fiction have moved ever closer to a permanent transgression of societal and moral boundaries, and yet have always drawn back, reaffirming at least the barest rules necessary for the continued cohesion of society. Dracula examines many of these subversive impulses from a highly ambivalent, and therefore extremely enduring, perspective; but, at least in terms of the structure of its plot, it resolves the situation 'responsibly', by destroying the threat to society. What is achieved, in fact, is a form of gnosis: an awareness on the part of the protagonists that they have witnessed something which, though vanquished, is still a part of their own identities.

The Titus novels have a similar motive - but with a different, more modern, outcome. Titus, in destroying Steerpike, does not negate what he represents. In fact, in psychological terms, the hero, in killing his adversary - and indeed, his alter-ego - must also accept responsibility for Steerpike's antisocial impulses. In the Gothic tradition, the catharsis engendered by the ultimate defeat of the antagonist originally resulted in a reaffirmation of accepted norms. Later variants focused on the validity of that reaffirmation. The Titus novels, as we shall see (chapters 12 and 13 below), constantly defer resolution: Titus, in leaving his home, rejects the society and its moral framework.

Notes.

1. David Punter, The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day (London: Longman, 1980) 376.
2. John D. Rosenberg, The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961) 47.
3. Anne Radcliffe, The Mysteries of Udolpho (Oxford: World Classics Edition - Oxford University Press, 1980) 227.
4. Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion (1981. London: New Accents - Routledge, 1988) 118.
5. Punter, 377.
6. Fred Botting, Gothic (London: The New Critical Idiom - Routledge, 1996) 6.
7. See Robert Kiely, The Romantic Novel in England (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972).
8. *Ibid*, 10.
9. Robert Louis Stevenson, The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Stories (London: Penguin, 1979).
10. William Godwin, The Adventures of Caleb Williams, or Things As They Are (1794. London: 1966); Mary Shelley, Frankenstein (1818. London: Penguin Classics (2nd ed.), 1992); Edgar Allan Poe, 'William Wilson' (1839) in Selected Tales ed. Graham (London: Book Club Associates, 1972).
11. Botting, 8.
12. John Milton, Paradise Lost (London: Longman, 1971) Book I, 670-798.
13. Punter, 377.
14. Joyce M.S. Tompkins, 'The Gothic Romance', in The Popular Novels in England, 1770 - 1800 (London, 1932), cited in The Gothick Novel: A Casebook, ed. Victor Sage (London: Macmillan, 1990) 87.
15. Selected Tales, 108.

2. The “pole-axed monster.”¹

One effect, noted above, of the symbiotic relationship that exists between the family of Groan and Gormenghast, is that the ancient stronghold confers a kind of atrophied longevity on the dynastic house. The “crumbling castle” (TG, 196), the “immemorial masonry” (GG, 7) - all this vast, ruinous bulk enhances the continuing dominance of the House of Groan. The power of the Ritual lies in its very rituality - the fact that it has been performed, without deviation, for centuries gives the life of Gormenghast a sense of self-perpetuation. There is no room for innovation or enterprise in a world whose calcified structure is testimony to its durability.

The effect, however, concerns the nature and purpose of the Ritual, and of the denizens of Gormenghast, rather than the castle itself, and will therefore be further considered at a later stage. (See part two below) However, there is a reciprocal effect: the close relationship between castle and inhabitants also confers an anthropomorphic sentience upon the castle. The House of Groan, like the House of Usher, is inseparable from, and can indeed be regarded as, the ancestral home of the family as well as the family itself. Thus the physical mass of Gormenghast has taken on a sentience, an organic character, just as its inhabitants have acquired, through time, an inorganic, fossilized quality, which supports their continuity. The consideration of this natural (or possibly supernatural) character will, I believe, provide further insight into the function of Gormenghast. It is therefore my intention at this point to assess those characteristics of the castle which may be described as sentient or organic, in the hope that this will allow a more comprehensive understanding of what Gormenghast may be said to represent.

Gay Clifford, in The Transformation of Allegory, suggests that architecture, being “man-made and artificial” can

present states of mind with minute regard to texture and appearance as correlatives.... It is also a supreme setting for ‘Gothick’ consciousness in that morbidity, decay and desolation are unredeemed by any natural cyclic process.²

This appears to me to be only partly correct, both in relation to “Gothick” settings, and to Gormenghast. The abbeys and castles of early Gothic fiction, whose architectural styles gave the genre its name, are places whose interest is enhanced by their organicity: their idiosyncratic structures, as Ruskin averred, are in imitation of, rather than contrary to, the natural environment.³ Furthermore, they have been eroded by time and the elements to the point where their state is as natural as it is manufactured.

The same is true of Gormenghast. From the first, the castle is described ambivalently: while it possesses “a certain ponderous architectural quality”, (TG, 15) it also resembles a rock, covered with thick black ivy and the hovels that cling “like limpets” to its ramparts. Thus it can be considered both as a man-made edifice, and as a natural extension of its environment. Clifford’s assertion fails to take into account the fact that, though morbidity and decay may pervade a ruinous castle, this suggestion of death is in fact testimony to the natural regenerative processes that operate on even the most resilient of artificial structures. (As I shall go on to suggest (see chapter 12 and part four below), such organicity also supports a mythic approach to the cycle of the Titus novels which reveals a much more coherent level of interpretation than that of the “Gothick” given above.) On the other hand, it would be accurate, certainly in the case of Gormenghast, to claim a connection between architecture and ‘states of mind’. Just as the decayed exterior of the House of Usher conceals a moribund owner, so Gormenghast, with its

“huge, corroding bell-like heart”, (GG, 17) reflects in its slow, inexorable decay the gradual decline of its society. This relationship would therefore suggest that one of the functions of Gormenghast is as an indicator of the well-being of the dominant society which dwells within it. This idea has many precedents, both in Gothic fiction (in, for example, the supernatural manifestations that portend Manfred’s fall from power in The Castle of Otranto) and, notably, in Shakespeare.

Steerpike, in many ways the archetypal villain, recalls many comparable figures - not least, as his name would suggest, that of Steerforth, David Copperfield’s adversary and alter-ego (a comparison which is discussed on pp.150-1 below). However, in his ruthless ambition, he also reminds us of Macbeth. His motivation, skill and rise to a position of power, first through fair means, and later through foul, are similar to those of Shakespeare’s ambitious tyrant. It is also interesting that a sympathy exists in Macbeth, as it does in the first two Titus novels, between human action and natural - or supernatural - manifestation. Macbeth, contemplating the murder of his king, an action which would thus secure the fulfilment of the witches’ prophecy in making him ruler, hopes that the ground below his feet “Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear / Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts...” (II.i.57-8) There is clearly a close association in Macbeth’s mind between nature and supernature: for though, on one level, he is simply anxious not to make any sound that might cause suspicion, he is, on another level, invoking the collusion of the natural world in not betraying his intentions. Unfortunately, his act of violence, if not betrayed by prating stones, is marked by various violent and ‘unnatural’ physical occurrences. Lenox observes this fact:

“The night has been unruly...

Strange screams of death,

And prophesying with accents terrible

Of dire combustion, and confus'd events,

New hatch'd to the woful time.

The obscure bird clamour'd the livelong night:

Some say the earth was feverous, and did shake." (II.iii.56-61)

In medieval and renaissance philosophy, such manifestations were interpreted as indications that the natural order - of God, king, and man - had been disturbed. Macbeth's deed is therefore not only morally wrong (ie. on a human scale) but also contrary to the natural laws of the universe.

I would like to suggest that Steerpike's rebellion may be seen in the same way: his heterodoxy is a challenge, not only to the strict hierarchy of the Groan dynasty - the human order - but also to the 'universal' order. Gormenghast, as I maintained in the previous chapter, is an entirely independent world: thus, it can be regarded as the universe - at least, before Titus's abdication and departure. This implies that, like Macbeth, Steerpike is fighting more than just the family - he is trying to manipulate nature.

Fuchsia provides us with a useful illustration of this when, in Titus Groan, she encounters Steerpike outside the castle:

Behind him she saw something which by contrast with the alien,
incalculable figure before her, was close and real. It was something
which she understood, something which she could never do without, or
be without, for it seemed as if it were her own self, her own body, at which
she gazed and which lay so intimately upon the skyline. Gormenghast. (TG, 273)

The comparison clearly defines the position of Steerpike, not only as a usurper, but as an unnatural force. It also emphasises the fact that Gormenghast is presented as the natural, ordered universe.

I intend in the subsequent chapter to consider the extent to which Gormenghast fulfils the

functions of a 'world' or civilization; and so I shall concentrate now on the functions it may be seen to perform which indicate its definition as 'natural'. There seem to me to be three main functions of Gormenghast in this respect: as a living organism - the "pole-axed monster" of the chapter title; as a parent; and as a deity. All three of these functions, it may be argued, depend to some extent on the symbiotic relationship between the castle and its inhabitants. However, as I hope to be able to show, each function suggests a slightly different relative position between Gormenghast and its people.

Just as nature reacts to Macbeth's actions, so Gormenghast and its environment manifest the threat to its order in various physical ways. As in Macbeth, the primary manifestations are in the weather. While Swelter's murderous plans take shape, "the winds of the drear interim that lies between the last of autumn and the first of winter" (TG, 325) howl around the castle. The noise of this gale is also mixed with other, uncanny noise, as "More and more in the darkness the notes of grimmer passions could be discerned." (TG, 325) In other words, the manifestations of the weather reflect a sense of discord that is felt throughout the castle.

As the mood grows deeper, and Titus Groan approaches its violent climax, the castle bakes under a withering heat: "this slow pulp of summer, this drag of heat, with the incurious yellow eye within it, floating monotonously, day after day." (TG, 412) Then, as Flay returns to the castle to face his arch enemy, the moon shines down on his silent approach like a witness. He scowls up at it; yet "he took it as a sign that the hour was approaching. Indeed, it seemed more natural that Nature should be his enemy." (TG, 416) This echoes Macbeth, in which "death and nature do contend about them". (II.ii.7) In fact, as Flay and Swelter stalk each other in the dark corridors of the castle, clouds cover the moon, and the stifling heat is broken by a violent thunderstorm, the destructive power of which acts like a chorus to the scene. This device, so common in dramatic literature, has many functions. It is a physical disturbance, which may help

or hinder the designs of the protagonists - in fact, nature appears to help Flay, though he reasons otherwise. It provides dramatic climax and catharsis - a literal and metaphorical clearing of the air. Most significantly, perhaps, it represents a sense of change - a shift of equilibrium, in the psychological state, both of the protagonists and (particularly in the case of Gormenghast) their environment.

I shall return to a consideration of Macbeth at a later point, when I come to examine the characters - and particularly Sepulchre, whose sleepwalk and tragic soliloquy (TG, 425-7) have certain obvious allusions to that play (See pp.75 and 231 below). Within the present discussion, I shall now turn from the external perception of Gormenghast - that is, the physical manifestations of weather and nature - to the internal. The inhabitants of the castle are, in many cases, so much a part of it, that they are able to feel, or sense, its condition. Though the storms and floods are clearly portentous, the characters become aware of Gormenghast's malaise through their innate sympathy for the well-being of the castle. This is particularly clear in Gormenghast, possibly because the state of the castle is much more fundamentally threatened, as Steerpike's rise to power accelerates. Barquentine, closest to the Ritual and therefore the spirit of Gormenghast, becomes aware of it: "He was thinking of how a change had come over the workings of Gormenghast - of the workings of its heart and the temper of its brain." (GG, 265) The "change" is, to Barquentine, treachery - nothing more nor less. He understands Gormenghast in terms of a living creature, whose life is threatened by something alien - a disease. He resolves to tighten his grip on the heir, Titus, believing that therein lies the key to overcoming the illness.

Flay, the loyal servant of the family, and now in exile, also notices this change - and is prepared to put loyalty before obedience: "he had dared to flaunt the letter of the Groan law in order, in his solitary way, to find out whether or not its spirit, as he feared, was sickening." (GG,

287) Having left the environs of the castle, Flay is able to see what perhaps he could never have been aware of while he had dwelt there: only by sporadic exposure to the 'mood' of Gormenghast has he developed a sense of understanding of the nature of his home.

Even Rottcodd, slumbering in the dusty confines of the Hall of the Bright Carvings, notices the change - and as early as Titus's Earling, when the castle appears to awaken - to become more than merely organic:

And then, as he stood quite still, his hands clasped about the handle of the feather duster, the air about him quickened, and there was *another* change, *another* presence in the atmosphere. Somewhere, something had been shattered - something heavy as a great globe and brittle like glass; and it had been shattered, for the air swam freely and the tense aching weight of the emptiness with its insistent drumming had lifted. He had heard nothing but he knew he was no longer alone. The castle had drawn breath. (TG, 505)

The perception, then, of the castle as an organic structure, at first dormant, but becoming more active, more sentient, as its existence becomes threatened, is one which can be recognized both by its inhabitants and by ourselves. We, and they, can speculate about the significance of that change: in the intangible, interior (or psychological) manifestations that are evident, for example, in the passage quoted above; and in the tangible, exterior (or physical) evidence of discord in the violent extremes of weather.

I would like to suggest that the significance of this awakening is that Gormenghast can be seen as performing the functions of a creature. The definition of a creature is rather ambivalent: it is both a created entity and a living, natural being. The castle, built in the distant past by the ancestors of Titus and Sepulchrove, a structure so organic that it resembled a natural creation, has through the centuries acquired the characteristics of a kind of sentience. It has developed.

though the Ritual, both the means of perpetuating its own existence, and a mode of communicating what is necessary for the continuation of that existence. Thus, like an organism, it has evolved in a way most likely to ensure its survival. In some ways, it may be compared to Frankenstein's creature - and the Gothic motifs discussed above would support this. However, unlike Mary Shelley's monster, it has not been shunned by its creators, and has in turn become their protector. This, then, it might be argued, is central to the relationship between Gormenghast and its inhabitants: that of creators and created.

I have suggested, on the other hand, that the relationship is more reciprocal than this: Gormenghast is something that Fuchsia "could never do without". Though it may be argued that the relationship between Shelley's man and monster is also interdependent, Victor Frankenstein does not accept this, and endeavours to destroy what he has created. His animosity, which is in effect a denial of the bond between creator and created, causes a shift in the relationship, an alienation which ultimately leads to Victor's destruction. On the other hand, the bond between the Groans and their home is so closely cemented that they have come to be regarded as a single entity. One outcome of this is that Gormenghast, as the protector of its people, fulfils a parental function.

This may seem an odd contention: Gormenghast, at least as presented in Titus Groan, is a singularly barren environment. For, though the first book is concerned primarily with the death and early life of Titus, this is set against a background of dust and shadows that makes the nativity of the protagonist seem a highly incongruous event. However, I would argue that this very lack of natural growth or fertility supports the contention that the castle performs a surrogate role as parent.

Countess Gertrude is a mother to her cats and birds, rather than her son, for whom she shows little maternal feeling. Although in snatches, she clearly has a strong concern for his existence -

and this becomes increasingly important in the second book - her motives are not parental: they are a manifestation of the depth of her loyalty to, and belief in, the continuation of the noble line.

When Titus is first presented to her, she shows no parental emotion:

‘Slagg,’ said the Countess, ‘go away! I would like to see the boy when he is six.

Find a wet nurse from the outer dwellings. Make him green dresses from the velvet curtains. Take this gold ring of mine. Fix a chain to it. Let him wear it round his wry little neck. Call him Titus. Go away and leave the door six inches open.’

(TG, 61)

Her orders show a compliance for the ancient laws of the Ritual, rather than any concern for the well-being or happiness of the child. The birth has been a necessary inconvenience, which she resolves to put behind her as soon as possible. “I get up tomorrow - tomorrow at *dawn*”, she tells the bemused Doctor Prunesquallor. (TG, 60)

Sepulchrae, too, show little parental awareness of the child - though, perhaps, he is unable, rather than unwilling, to celebrate the birth. He does in fact try to engage Sourdust in conversation about the event - the consideration of which creates a brief reaction: “For a moment a light appeared in his eyes and then dulled. The line of his mouth seemed for a moment to have softened.” (TG, 67) Sourdust, however, is ruled by the ancient laws of Gormenghast. His life has no room for such whimsy. The clock strikes ten, and the Earl is whisked away from his breakfast table, his momentary contemplation stifled.

In effect, then, Titus is born an orphan: he is merely a continuation of the line. Fuchsia, to an even greater extent, is starved of any parental affection. The paternal dynasty has no place for her, especially after a male heir has been produced: and this engenders in her an inconsolable feeling of rejection. Her father, in fact, does show some feelings towards her - but poignantly, this is only when he himself has ceased to perform his function as Lord of Gormenghast. His

final madness, which is more appealing to Fuchsia than his helpless loyalty to the Ritual, allows a brief but tender relationship to develop which has, I think, a similar tone to that of Lear and Cordelia. (See pp.75 and 231ff.)

However, the tragedy of this scene comes from the fact that the relationship that persists between Fuchsia and both her parents is sadly lacking in affection. In a revealing passage in Gormenghast, on the event of her mother's birthday, Fuchsia tells Titus:

'I don't remember her having birthdays before. It's all so inhuman.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Titus.

'No,' said Fuchsia. 'You wouldn't, I suppose. It's not your fault and you're lucky in a way. But I've read quite a lot and I know that most people see a good deal of their parents - more than we do anyway.'

'Well, I don't remember father at *all*,' said Titus.

'I do,' said Fuchsia. 'But he was difficult too. I hardly ever spoke to him.

I think he wanted me to be a boy.' (GG, 314)

This feeling of rejection, which makes Fuchsia so fiercely emotional and unstable, clearly emphasises the fact that Sepulchre and Gertrude are parents in fact only. Again, this concept of the dysfunctional or fractured family is a device commonly associated with Dickens; and I shall explore the Dickensian quality of the novels in the second part of the thesis (see pp.80-1, 105; also chapter 8).

There is much evidence to suggest that the castle itself performs the role of surrogate parent, not only to Titus and Fuchsia, but perhaps to the whole of the society that inhabits it. Gormenghast's primary function is as a sanctuary, a place of safety. It protects its inhabitants from whatever lies outside its walls - so completely, in fact, that they are totally innocent (if one discounts Fuchsia's book-based knowledge, which I believe to be a rather weak point) of what

does lie beyond its confines. In this way, it can be seen as fulfilling the role of the overprotective parent. Titus, once he leaves its protection, is cruelly exposed to the realities of a world in which he is no longer the focus.

Fuchsia has a fiercer love for the castle than for her biological parents - or at least for those parts of it which she feels belong to her only: the silent rooms of the Attic. The love which Fuchsia has for this secret region, what Peake describes, in Romantic style,⁴ as “the love of a man or of a woman for their world”, (*TG*, 77) is that which a child normally feels for its parents. Fuchsia’s feelings of rejection are to some extent compensated for by this sense of unique affinity with her home. In this sense, the familiar environment functions as a surrogate parent, providing the same protection from the outside world, and representing the same authority as the parent from which the individual has been alienated - or by which that individual feels herself to have been rejected. Thus, as Fuchsia and Titus are alienated from their parents by the strict conformity of the Ritual, so the castle performs a compensatory role - as their guardian. In many ways, this function of the castle indicates Peake’s inherently Romantic sensibility - an area which will also be considered later (see chapter 10 below).

As the plot unfolds, it becomes clear that Titus and Fuchsia are exceptions - not only in their status as inheritors of the Groan blood and of all that that implies, but also (and possibly because of this) in their attitude to the Ritual. Whereas the rest of the family and its retainers are either unquestioning, or loyal, towards the system, Titus and Fuchsia come to despise it. Steerpike and the Twins loath it only because they do not have sufficient status within its hierarchy. They wish to control it, rather than to see its destruction.

The general attitude towards Gormenghast, therefore, is one of either active (as in Barquentine, Flay and Gertrude) or passive (as in Sepulchrave and the lower orders) devotion. This clearly parallels religion, an analogy which by implication also suggests a further, and I

think highly significant, idea: that of Gormenghast as the deity of its people.

Many attributes of the castle might be considered to support this notion. Primarily, of course, there is the Ritual, whose function is to preserve, in perpetuity, the dominance of the Family. Its scrupulous attention to every facet of the castle's life precludes the necessity of initiative and individual rationalization or inspiration, thus minimising the possibility of heresy. This process has been so successful that the castle's structure has existed for millenia. Such longevity, however, has rendered abstract the meaning of the thousands of rules, so that the focus of the Ritual has become Gormenghast itself - the concrete representation of the immortal dynasty of the Groans. The castle, built by the family has, through time, come to represent the family more completely than the individuals themselves. It is, therefore, both real and ideal: to those who believe in it, a god.

Furthermore, if we consider the attitudes of the more orthodox characters, it is clear that they confer upon Gormenghast more or less deific status. Barquentine, in particular, represents the high priest who, in his mortal combat with Steerpike, derives a grim satisfaction from the fact that, in his death throes, he is "burning an unbeliever." (GG, 274) That Steerpike's treachery is conceived in terms of heresy clearly implies that, in the eyes of Barquentine, Gormenghast is a deity. The purpose of the faithful is to serve its god - and to punish the faithless. Barquentine is a fundamentalist, "the fanatic for whom the world holds no gradations -only the blind extremes of black and white." (GG, 267) He lives by the maxim "Evil and doubt were one", and the root of his dogma is an unflinching belief in "the sacred stones... the godhead." (GG, 267; see below, pp.123-5)

The attitude of the Countess towards her son and husband also supports the idea that Gormenghast functions as a deity. Though she has no sentimental feelings of affection towards Sepulchre or Titus, she is powerfully protective towards them. Considering the possibility of

a heretic within the castle, she declares to the Doctor that she will “crush its life out... not only for Titus’ sake and for his dead father’s, but more - for Gormenghast.” (GG, 42-3) Like Barquentine, Gertrude’s devotion is to Gormenghast first, and to the individual representatives of the line, second (see pp.74ff.). It would perhaps be profitable to compare the reverence of the orthodox Countess and Keeper of the Ritual with the philosophy which supported the hegemony of the Plantagenet kings of medieval England - that is, that the monarch was invested with divine authority. In fact, it is clear that the authority of Sepulchre and Titus is almost wholly based on that symbolic inheritance: the Ritual controls the actions of each to such a degree that they are incapable of exerting any individuality.

Finally, there are the recurrent allusions in the first two novels to Paradise Lost. Steerpike, the upstart angel, is damned by personal ambition to fall, disfigured, to ignominious defeat, the vainglorious “monarch of darkness”. Fuchsia, the innocent Eve, is “more easily drawn to the dark than the light”, (GG, 452) and is tempted by Steerpike into a spiral of despair. Titus, who, in his struggle to understand the world, is Adam: “He was the First - a man upon a crag with the torchlight of the world upon him!” (GG, 488) Finally Gormenghast itself, which, as their creator is not, perhaps, a Miltonic God, but more appropriately, the authoritarian deity Urizen in Blake’s mythos (see also pp.181ff.)

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I have suggested that each of the three ‘living’ functions of Gormenghast implies a different relationship between the castle and its inhabitants. The idea of the castle as an organism, I have proposed, may most appropriately be considered if we apprehend its existence as that of a creature - like Frankenstein’s monster, a created, yet independently existing entity. The

relationship between creator and creature, though, is inverted if we consider that Gormenghast performs the role of parent to its dependent inhabitants. The creature has become, if not the creator, then the primary entity, the progenitor rather than the progeny. The shift in emphasis is not paradoxical - it merely denotes a change which has taken place over the centuries. The family created Gormenghast which, through time, has become the perpetual representation of that family. Finally, when we consider the notion that it also functions as a deity, then the relationship shifts once again: the creature has become, not only progenitor, but creator. The castle is not only the protector of its people: it has also become the sole reason for their existence.

We can therefore detect a progression in the function of the castle, which has necessitated an evolution in the relationship between Gormenghast and its people. Initially, the castle's function is purely physical: it is a fortress, built to provide defence against whatever lies outside. Due to its extreme isolation, its inhabitants then become more and more reliant upon that protection: that is, the dependency extends from the physical to the psychological and emotional. Finally, due to the many features described in the previous chapter, but of which we might cite physical isolation and great age as the most important, the castle comes to be perceived, not only as a physical and emotional guardian, but also as the instigator of, and reason for, all existence. Confining its inhabitants so entirely, it has expanded as their perception has diminished, until it forms the limit of perception: the embodiment of both reality and the ideal, it is the sole referent, the "godhead".

However, that is not to say that Gormenghast's 'final' function is that of a deity. Throughout the novels, it can be seen to manifest all those functions described above. It is still a physical construction; it manifests characteristics of a living organism; and it is perceived by its inhabitants as many things, including a surrogate parent and a kind of god. The relationship

between people and castle, developed as it has been throughout many centuries, is highly complex.

Such complexity, coupled with the obscurity that Peake's methods of presentation create, recalls the fog-bound London encountered at the opening of Dickens' Bleak House: dimly-discerned, a vast, dark conglomeration of physical, historical, psychological and mythical structures - in short, a metropolis. The metropolis, the limitless, limiting man-made construct, may perform all the functions considered above; but it may also incorporate many more. The extent to which Gormenghast can be described as such a metaphor of human civilisation is the basis of the discussion of the next chapter.

Notes.

1. Gormenghast, 359.
2. Gay Clifford, The Transformation of Allegory (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974) 90.
3. John D. Rosenberg's The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961) gives an interesting account of Ruskin's attempts to promote the Gothic as symbolising a return to pre-industrial, organic notions of social organisation.
4. "Romantic" here and elsewhere denotes a comparison with the style and sensibility of the English Romantic movement; "romance" on the other hand refers to the courtly medieval romance tradition.

3. The Metropolis of Gormenghast.

A closed world such as Gormenghast can clearly be interpreted symbolically. The complete isolation of the castle, the “island of maroons set in desolate water beyond all trade routes” (GG, 99), leads the critic towards the notion that all in Gormenghast, like all in Gothic (according to Elizabeth MacAndrew), is symbolic. However, As MacAndrew also points out, the Gothic world is not so completely alien as to preclude the comparative analysis of the characters and society of that universe with the ‘real’ world. She maintains that, just as Gothic fiction draws its power from its existence at the margins of ‘normal’ society, and its interaction with it, so its characters “fall between the abstract and the concrete, between the transcendental and the everyday, between the allegorical and the mimetic.”¹ They are, in other words, both drawn from the real world, and representative of it.

This is also true, I believe, of Gormenghast. It is further removed from the normal world than any Gothic domain; yet there are many common points of reference, from the mundane (sherry, hot baths, tea and toast) to the esoteric (the Doctor’s knowledge of medical science, for example, or the nihilistic philosophies of the old Professor). This, despite the ‘otherness’ of Gormenghast, provides an important distinction between this world and the alternate universes of ‘marvellous’ fiction, such as that of Tolkien. The works of Tolkien and Peake are often compared, but the contrast between them is more striking than the comparison: the world of Middle-Earth is allegorical, whereas that of Gormenghast is not - at least, not completely. The allegorical allows an interpretation of the real world, without confusing reality and fantasy. This permits the narrator to maintain an omniscient distance from the created universe, and thus adopt a clear moral stance. Gormenghast and its inhabitants, though strange, inhabit an area closer to reality.

Rosemary Jackson suggests that Peake’s novels occupy much the same area as Gothic

fiction.² Between the passive narratives of ‘marvellous’, or ‘faery’ fiction (including the works of Tolkien and Hans Andersen, for example), and the mimesis of realism (also, she claims, a passive form of fiction), is the area inhabited by fantasy. Fantasy, she claims, rejects both extremes of fiction, preferring to examine the real world from a position only partly removed from it. This shift, she maintains, allows the writer the freedom from social constraints that inhibits the realists, while retaining a close enough relationship with the real world to allow an active and critical examination of it.

While the Titus novels certainly can be said to occupy this area, I would like to suggest that a further refinement can be made regarding their position relative to Gothic fiction, as well as to those other fictions classified in the above text as ‘fantastic’. As I have suggested above, Gothic worlds inhabit a region on the periphery of the real world. The inhabitants of such worlds are rejected, dissatisfied or lost members of ‘normal’ society, whose actions are consequently judged by that society. They are, according to the rules of that society, either innocents or deviants. That they can be considered as abstracts depends on this polarized, archetypal quality. Much the same can be said of Dickens’ characters - though, as the environment they inhabit is more familiar, so the mimetic qualities of the characters (at least, those characters drawn from the strata of society with which Dickens was familiar) is perhaps more important than the archetypal. Indeed, some of Dickens’ weaker figures are thinly characterised, two dimensional representations of social ‘types’ (examples might be Stephen Blackpool and Rachel in Hard Times, or Joe Gargery in Great Expectations); as such, they bear a closer resemblance to the heroes and heroines of Gothic fiction.

Whereas Dickens’ familiar settings, and the interrelationship between Gothic worlds and ‘normal’ society, render them nearer to realist than to marvellous fiction, Gormenghast lies at a point mid-way between the two extremes. The difference is not great: both Peake and Dickens

employ parody, for example, in their fiction (see chapter 15 below); and the fact that they are able to use this technique suggests that their fantasies are mimetic to a certain degree. Yet, whereas the parodic in Dickens tends towards the burlesque, taking mimesis to the extremes of caricature, Peake's style, while still retaining its comic roots, is perhaps more imbued with cynicism. Dr. Prunesquallor, one of Peake's sharpest comic characters, is more than a dandy:

His airy and fatuous manner was deceptive. As he trilled, as he prattled, as he indulged in his spontaneous 'conceits', as he gestured, foplike and grotesque, his magnified eyes skidding to and fro behind the lenses of his glasses, like soap at the bottom of a bath, his brain was often other-where, and these days it was well occupied. (TG, 470)

This duality, this fusion of the real and the representative, allows Gormenghast to be considered both as a reflected image of society, and as an abstract of it. As this suggests, Gormenghast exists both in the realm of the marvellous (or fictional) and in that of the real. I shall now consider the nature of the novels' representation of reality, before exploring the abstract - and therefore symbolic - motifs presented within Gormenghast's metropolis.

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The Titus novels record, on a social level, an ancient civilisation at a moment of rapid and far-reaching change. Clearly, the analogy here is that of English society during the Second World War; and I shall go on to consider how the novels can be interpreted as an analogy of the war and its aftermath at the end of this thesis (see chapter 16 below). Seen in such terms, Gormenghast can be said to be an oblique representation of England before the war. However, as John Batchelor has pointed out, the castle is presented first and foremost as a medieval

society.³ It is interesting, therefore, to consider the extent to which the rigid social structures of pre-war England, which Peake experienced directly, can be seen as representing the last vestiges of the medieval feudal system. This may seem a rather tenuous suggestion; but if one considers the many seemingly anachronistic tableaux presented within *Gormenghast* - and also the fact that Peake's first years, spent within the feudal environment of pre-modernised China, followed by his coming to England and the public school ethos of Eltham College - it is understandable that the society of *Gormenghast* lives by a code whose archaic rigidity recalls that of the medieval tripartite structure. Indeed, to Peake's partly-parodic, partly-romantic sensibility, the archaisms of the class-bound English society which he found himself transported into in the early 1920s, with its modes of decorum, its monarchy and its Church, may have evinced the same sense of changelessness which for Evelyn Waugh connected the present with the past. The school-room scenes in *Gormenghast*, in particular, suggest a curriculum more akin to the classical education remembered so fondly by Charles Ryder in *Brideshead Revisited*, than the utilitarian instruction he fears has formed the background of learning for the egalitarian Hooper.⁴ The lazy summer mornings of Titus's schooldays, with their ritualized games and long hours of boredom; the excruciatingly formal 'social' occasions, such as the Christening or the Birthday Breakfast; even Titus's trancies and adventures in the forgotten passages of the castle, or outside its walls: all are the familiar vignettes of this older world. As David Punter suggests, they represent "the ruins of a civilisation, and... the persistence of rules and norms unintelligible to the post-war world."⁵

If it is admitted that *Gormenghast* can be identified with this idea of pre-war, and indeed, feudal England then, by implication, it can also be strongly argued that the great shift in consciousness, brought about through the conflicts and crises of the first half of this century, is echoed in the change that dominates the action of the novels. I intend now to examine this notion more closely, and to consider its significance.

I have compared briefly the respective uses of parody in the works of Peake and Dickens. I believe that this comparison need not be limited to characterisation, but may be extended to the depiction of the societies in which those characters exist. Whereas Dickens' characters and settings tend to be closer to caricature and mimesis (containing as they do, more elements of the stereotype than the archetype), the milieu of Gormenghast is closer to the archetypal: it is representative, not only of pre-war England (as Dickens' world was of Victorian and early nineteenth century England), but of various periods of the whole post-conquest age. Although Dickens was able, by combining both abstract and real elements of English society, to present characters and settings that were at least partly ideal, he was limited by the fact that his universe was a parody of the real. Gormenghast, on the other hand, is a parody of the ideal - a fusion of what Peake perceived to be the essential elements of a thousand years of English society.

The feudal system was a particularly resilient one. The pyramidal structure, with the nobility at the apex, the clergy below them, and the peasant population at the base, was the most enduring of systems. The nobility were dependent on the loyalty of the people; that loyalty was maintained by economic dependence, and supported by the social and psychological influence of the Church. The clergy were in turn dependent on the patronage of the nobility. This organisation survived, in its essence, from the Norman Conquest to the eighteenth century.

At its height, the focus of feudalism was the medieval castle. The castle provided protection from the outside world - a factor which was in itself important enough to secure the fealty of those that dwelt in its demesne. Clearly, the presentation of Gormenghast in Titus Groan is that of the medieval castle par excellence. It is a sanctuary from the extreme elements of the weather, as well as any other perceived threats. It is also a complete community - a living unit. As such, it needs feeding and clothing; it needs entertaining and (among the upper echelons of its society) educating; it needs instruction and guidance. The majority of its inhabitants (Irma

Prunesquallor is a notable exception) have a function within the community - whether as First Servant, Grey Scrubber, or Curator of the Bright Carvings: each individual is a tiny part of the great whole.

The Great Kitchen is a good example of this aspect of the system. It appears to be a region of chaos, in which “everything was confusion”. (TG, 29) However, it is above all else a working kitchen, and on a vast scale: it has “huge bowls capable of holding fifty portions”, and “a twelve-foot by nine-foot chopping block, cross-hatched and hollowed by decades of long wounds.” (TG, 30) To Flay, despite being the domain of the despised Swelter and his minions, it is an integral part of the castle:

He hated what he saw... and yet a thrill in his scarecrow body made him aware of how right it all was... he was so much a part and parcel of Gormenghast that he could instinctively tell when the essence of its tradition was running in the true channel, powerfully and without deviation. (TG, 30)

The kitchen also provides an insight into the finer distinctions of status among the workers. Swelter, the cook, controls the region, and demands the total loyalty of his subjects. In the Great Kitchen he acknowledges no superior - a source of acrimony for Flay. Further down the scale, the five *sauciers*, lying on the huge, twisted beam that traverses the room, can be identified by their green scarves; still lower are the Grey Scrubbers. It is clear from Peake’s description of them that the structure of Gormenghast is an archetypal cross-section:

The walls of the vast room... were the personal concern of a company of eighteen men known as the ‘Grey Scrubbers’. It had been their privilege on reaching adolescence to discover that, being the sons of their fathers, their careers had been arranged for them and that stretching ahead of them lay their identical lives consisting of an unimaginative if praiseworthy duty...

Coarse as these men appeared, they were an integral part of the Great Kitchen.

(TG, 27)

Peake, in this parodic yet somewhat condescending tone, goes on to suggest that: “Without the Grey Scrubbers something very earthy, very heavy, very real would be missing to any sociologist searching in that steaming room, for the completion of a circle of temperaments, a gamut of the lower human values.” (TG, 27) However, this group, with its “echo of the simian”, (TG, 27) is part of a vast social system; and, despite a suggestion of snobbishness, this anthropomorphic caricaturing is part of Peake’s comic-satiric sensibility, and, artistically at least, part of his strength.

Indeed, the parody isn’t limited to a single stratum of the social hierarchy of Gormenghast. From the lowest menial to the Earl and Countess themselves, every character is extreme - whether (in the more sophisticated or central characters) in terms of character, or (in the Grey Scrubbers, for example) physically.

Moving up the social scale, we come next to the professionals: the Professors and the Doctor. None of these can be said to belong to the hierarchical pyramid described above; but it is significant that the Professors only appear in the second novel; and though Doctor Prunesquallor is influential throughout the first two books, he and his sister become more prominent in Gormenghast. I shall go on to discuss the significance of this below (see chapter 6; also pp.244-6; 248-50). Furthermore, as Gormenghast represents England of the past rather than one particular period, the Professors and Prunesquallor are not wholly incongruous.

They are also conservative in outlook. Education in Gormenghast is not a source of originality or enlightenment: Bellgrove and his colleagues are as much a part of the system as the Grey Scrubbers: “It was for the Professors to (sic) suffer no change.” (GG, 119) As such, lessons are presented with the minimum of enthusiasm, and received accordingly. The teachers

are as immature as the boys they teach: Irma's party is to the former as the daring classroom games are to the latter - a source of diversion from the dull routine of stagnant orthodoxy. (See chapters 6 and 14 below)

Doctor Prunesquallor, too, is no malcontent. Despite the fact that he harbours anguished thoughts about the fairness of the system - especially in relation to the way in which he sees it as affecting the psychological stability of Fuchsia and Titus - he is essentially of the system, and believes its continuation to be fundamentally important. Although, when he finds Titus incarcerated in the Lichen Fort, he wonders "Would the child ever be free tomorrow?" (GG, 157) - he is, as described in Titus Groan, "no outsider". (470) Though he has "positively heterodox opinions regarding certain aspects of the Castle's life" (TG, 470), he is one of the most resolute and capable defenders of the faith, who pursues Steerpike with as much courage and determination as any of his superiors.

Sourdust and Barquentine are clearly, in terms of their fundamentalism and dogma, parodies of conservative Christian priests. Whether, as the reverence for relics and elaborate ceremonies might suggest, the Ritual and its ministers are a parody of Roman Catholicism (which would support, perhaps, the assertion that Titus Groan presents a medieval world) or of orthodox religion in general, it is evident that, as a 'religion', it is a very powerful force indeed. As I have suggested above, the Ritual's *raison d'être* - the perpetuation of the dominance of the House of Groan, and therefore the continued existence of Gormenghast - means that it functions as the backbone of social structure.

Even the family are subordinate to this basic tenet. Their existence depends on the continued dominance of the Ritual which gives them their power. Of course, when Titus leaves, the breaking of the line leaves the function of the Ritual without its focus; but the fact that, when Titus returns at the end of Titus Alone, he hears the cannon that continues to fire in his name.

it is clear that the Ritual has, through the centuries, accrued a momentum which enables it to continue to function, just as traces of the ancient feudal system persisted in Britain long after its focus - the aristocracy - had been disempowered.

The family, therefore, exists within the system in much the same way as everyone else: it is only when the fabric which controls the lives of all the inhabitants of Gormenghast begins to fray under the strain of rebellion, that Gertrude can begin to assert her own authority. When the system is running smoothly (or, at least, running), each member of the family has their own role to perform, and little room for personal choice.

One group that retains a degree of independence (although in many ways they are just as dependent on the system as anyone else) is that which lives outside the walls of the castle: the Bright Carvers. They have evolved apart from the denizens of the castle; they have their own laws and codes of behaviour. Yet their lives are as ritualized as any within the walls. They eat the same meal at the same time in the same place, from generation to generation. They have a strict hierarchy according to their skills and patronage by the castle. However, living beyond the confines of the castle, they are scornful of the society that exists within it.

It may be argued that the Bright Carvers parody two peripheral subgroups of society: artists or artisans. I would like to suggest that they represent something of both. The carvings that are the focus of their lives are clearly art forms - and their creators are described as having the "hotness of creative restlessness"; (TG, 92) yet, when they have to, as is the case in the flood, they can put their skills to more utilitarian uses - albeit with the same fierce rivalry and pride as ever - by building boats: "It was not carving in the creative sense in which they excelled, but it was carving." (GG, 431)

Within the milieu of Gormenghast, then, we are presented with a complete society: a parodic cross-section of the hierarchical metropolis. Whether in the ancient medieval robes of Sourdust,

or in the Edwardian dressing-gown and slippers of the Doctor, the individuals that inhabit Gormenghast are clearly representatives of a recognizable past, its shadows cast long and somewhat distorted. However, such is the nature of this distortion, it is also possible to detect the features of the symbolic as well as the parodic. I shall now endeavour to examine the notion of the metropolis of Gormenghast as a symbolic world - a mythical universe in which the abstract is made concrete.

Returning to the Great Kitchen, it is easy to consider this region of fire and steam in mythical terms: in fact, as a quasi-medieval image of hell. It is an underworld of chaos, debauchery, cacophonous noise: “a hideous croak of laughter, or a thrilled whisper, or the clearing of some coarse throat”. (TG, 29) It is, as I have already commented, larger than life. Its inhabitants, furthermore, are distorted, unidentifiable as individuals: faceless creatures, who perform their monotonous labours in perpetuity:

Through daily proximity to the great slabs of stone, the faces of the Grey Scrubbers had become like slabs themselves. There was no expression whatever upon the eighteen faces, unless the lack of expression is in itself an expression. (TG, 28)

This is the world of Breughel or Hieronymous Bosch - an image of medieval society distorted. It is an amalgam of mythologies. Swelter, its master, is both a Lord of Misrule - a devil (taunted by imps), and a representation of Gluttony - surrounded by the slothful kitchen hands and the proud, angry Steerpike.

In the first chapter of this section, I suggested that Gormenghast represented the region of Pandaemonium. The Great Kitchen bears this comparison most readily - especially if one considers that it is from this lurid environment that Steerpike, clearly a more Satanic figure than Swelter, escapes. Following his flight, then, we can perhaps perceive the regions through which

he passes in a similar vein.

Steerpike's meteoric rise begins with the smallest chance: he slips away from the drunken revelry of the Kitchen, as Swelter collapses into an inebriate stupor. Following Flay through the blackness of the Stone Lanes, he first glimpses, through the secret 'Spy-Hole', what he calls "the owner of... the whole caboodle, bricks, guns and glory." (TG, 49) Summarily incarcerated by Flay, he then escapes, climbing up to the roofs, from where he surveys and plans his conquest. From there, he sees the Twins, Cora and Clarice; and then he descends into the world, and Fuchsia's Attic.

This clearly recalls Milton's narration of Satan's flight from Hell. The Stone Lanes, those seemingly endless passages of darkness, are akin to the great void between Hell and Heaven, through which Lucifer flies.⁶ The symbolism is supported by the fact that Steerpike's flight, like Satan's, is from the depths upwards. The moment when Steerpike, peering clandestinely into the bright corridors from the depths of gloom, first sees the inheritors of Gormenghast's wealth, reminds us of Satan's arrival at the edge of the universe, from where he observes the newly-created world:

And fast by hanging in a golden chain
 This pendant world, in bigness as a star
 Of smallest magnitude close by the moon.
 Thither full fraught with mischievous revenge,
 Accursed, and in a cursed hour he hies.⁷

Lying exhausted on the roof after his climb to freedom, Steerpike watches the lightening of the sky, as the clouds are stripped away, as if it is the dawning of some primeval day. In fact, it is the moon: but the phenomenon is just as fresh and raw - it is still a beginning, a fundamental change from darkness to light:

Then came the crumbling away of a grey veil from the face of the night, and beyond the furthestmost film of the terraced clouds there burst of a sudden a swarm of burning crystals, and, afloat in their centre, a splinter of curved fire.

(TG, 134)

This new world is Steerpike's Eden. As I have maintained above, he does not want to destroy Gormenghast, but to control it, just as Satan, on beholding the glory of the world, seeks to rule it. To do this, he must disguise himself: and Steerpike, like Satan, is a master of disguise. In order to gain access to the power of the castle, it is necessary for him to appear as other than he is. Of Fuchsia, he realises that "To win her favour he must talk in her own language." (TG, 158) The Twins must be won over by appealing to their sense of injustice, and their megalomania. He inveigles himself into this world as Satan creeps into Eden.⁸ (See also pp.141-2 below)

There are other symbolic referents within Gormenghast. Each region can be said to define an area of human experience, so that the castle becomes a sort of psychological allegory. I have suggested this interpretation already, by referring to the nature of Swelter and his minions in terms of the allegorical figures of the Deadly Sins; thus the Great Kitchen, as well as being representative of Pandaemonium, can also be defined as the region of sustenance - the belly of the castle. Another distinctive region is the East Wing of the castle - an eccentric, rambling extension, which provides testimony to the ideosyncracies of succeeding Groans, in the form of architectural follies, now reduced to "a procession of forgotten and desolate relics". (TG, 203) Housed in the East Wing is the Library - Lord Sepulchre's realm. It is to the Library that he retires whenever possible: in "the world of words" he is able to escape the restrictions of the Ritual. Even when he is performing the mechanical procedures that govern his every moment, his mind is elsewhere - among the "row upon priceless row of calf-bound Thought." (TG, 296) The Library may therefore be considered as an allegory of wisdom - though given Sepulchre's

inability to act practically or with any initiative, it might be more pertinent to describe his shrine as representative of abstract knowledge. This can also be seen in contrast both to the common sense of Gertrude, and to the ignorance of the Twins, who, after all, destroy the Library and their brother with it.

Another clearly symbolic part of the East Wing is the Tower of Flints. In the opening paragraphs of Titus Groan, it is defined by way of a striking simile: “This tower, patched unevenly with black ivy, arose like a mutilated finger from among the fists of knuckled masonry and pointed blasphemously at heaven.” (TG, 15) Perhaps the most attractive notion is to consider this symbol of Gormenghast as a Tower of Babel, representative both of human ambition and of its futility. It points at heaven - yet beneath it, confusion reigns, and conflict. Its ‘voice’ - that of the owls that dwell within it - promises deliverance to the deranged Lord of Groan; but this transcendence - what Sepulchra describes as “the hour of my reincarnation” (TG, 440) - is witnessed by Flay as a sacrifice to the rapaciousness of nature, if not “red in tooth and claw”⁹, then “filled with a great weight of feathers, beaks and talons.” (TG, 441)

The subterranean regions of Gormenghast can also be interpreted symbolically. As Titus and the Doctor follow Steerpike and Flay through the labyrinthine passages beneath the castle, there is among the protagonists a sense of recognition which might be described as mythical. It is “A world unfamiliar in its detail - new to *them*, although unquestionably of the very stuff of their memories and recognizable in this general and almost abstract way.” (GG, 372) This shared, subconscious recognition presents the region as an essential part of the symbolic metropolis of human existence: the common memory. It is the world of Limbo, the mythic representation of the deepest and oldest levels of our cultural matrices - the shadowy, half-known legacy of human history. In classical mythology, this is the world beneath the world, through which flows the River Lethe, in whose currents the memories of all life flows, and the Styx, the barrier between

the temporal world and the eternal - or, it might be said, between innocence and experience. The psychological implications of this subconscious level of human culture - what Jung termed the 'collective unconscious' - will be explored later in the thesis (see chapter 12 below).

The pursuit of Steerpike - the devil of the underworld - is therefore, for Titus at least, a journey between the innocence of childhood and the harsh experience of adulthood. Witnessing Steerpike's depravity, he is irrevocably changed, stripped of innocence: "The young earl was quite frankly terrified by what he saw. An area of solid ground had given way beneath his feet and he had fallen into an underworld of which he had had no conception." (GG, 382) Watching Steerpike strutting and japing over the bodies of the Twins, Titus glimpses Hades - just as he has seen a vision of Elysium in the forest, in his encounter with the Thing (see pp.158 and 169ff.). Steerpike and the Thing are images of worlds outside his experience: the devil and the angel.

Echoes of classical symbolism are bound to appear in a world which, though to some extent resistant to allegory, nevertheless is representative of civilization - and which therefore carries with it the mythical undercurrents that have persisted throughout the development of that civilization. An example of this, and one which underlies one of the major themes of the novels - that of loss and the quest for knowledge - is the idea of the labyrinth. As I have suggested above, the pursuit of Steerpike takes place in a dark maze of passages. The mythological resonance of this motif - which is visited repeatedly by the rebellious Titus, and also by the banished Flay - clearly casts both the young lord and the loyal exile, in the role of the archetypal figure of the wanderer. Titus, despite his rejection of his preordained role, and his insistence that he is Titus alone, is, in fact, more than this. He is the first abdicator in his world: yet, as a literary figure, he recalls those wanderers and searchers of Greek myth, Orpheus and Ulysses (again, see chapter 12 below)

Also, in a different way, the symbol of the wanderer/exile is represented by Flay. Whereas

the young protagonist functions in the same way as the Romantic hero, led by an irresistible curiosity, a desire to discover what lies beyond the horizon, Flay, the loyal servant of the Line, searches methodically and rationally. Moving through the shadows of the labyrinth, he is rather an aged Theseus than an Orpheus, marking wherever he goes: “As he proceeded he made, upon the wall, following his usual custom, the rough marks with white chalk which had more than once helped him to find his way back to familiar ground.” (GG, 299)

Despite this rich vein of classical symbolism in the novels - and the clear significance they have in terms of the central themes and issues explored - the overriding mythical tone, it seems to me, is not classical, but Christian - at least in the first two novels. For, though the quest for identity, which becomes the dominant theme in Titus Alone, is more suggestive of the classical mythos, the dominant theme of Titus Groan and Gormenghast - that of cataclysmic change - becomes polarized into a confrontation between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, and focuses on the notions of innocence and experience - thus reflecting the central concerns of Christian symbolism.

As I have indicated above, Steerpike can be seen as a Satanic figure, who emerges from the ‘Pandaemonium’ of the Great Kitchen, rises up to challenge the ‘Gods’, and is damned by his ambition to a diabolic end. Yet, even if interpreted as a parody of the Miltonic cycle, Gormenghast cannot be restricted to a single symbolic function. After all, it defies any definitive or exclusive description: “The walls of Gormenghast were like the walls of paradise or the walls of an inferno. The colours were devilish or angelic according to the colour of the mind that watched them.” (GG, 263) This is significant. As I shall go on to explain, this inclusivity, which allows the reader the luxury of making any allusions he feels to be pertinent, is an essentially modern (or even postmodern) attribute. (See chapter 11 below) Gormenghast, in its resistance to any sort of categorization, becomes all things to all men.

Returning to the Christian symbolism of Gormenghast, then, it is clear that, though the

Kitchen can be seen as Hell, and Steerpike Satan, the castle as a whole can also be seen as Eden. As I have asserted above (pp.16-17), the castle's design and remoteness provides effective sanctuary for its inhabitants. The theme of change that informs the plot is therefore appropriately that of a loss of innocence - which is again strongly redolent of the Miltonic loss of paradise. The castle is a fortress which protects the innocent from the primeval outer world - and preserves their sexual and emotional naivety. Gormenghast is also the original home: there is no existence previous to this one. Furthermore, though Steerpike is a native of the castle, he is also perceived as an outsider - the rigid class system excluding him from the 'blessed' state of existence of the Family. His temptation of Fuchsia, the prelapsarian Eve, severs her from the immortality of the Line, and leads to her death.

The castle is an archaic and stagnant world; yet it is also a world where a state of blessed ignorance of the woes of the universe persists. Peake, despite the fact that he sees this ignorance as unfeasible in the modern world, nevertheless presents in the novels a secular retelling of the Fall. According to such a reading, it becomes inevitable that Titus must leave his home: he has been tempted by the Tree of Knowledge.

*

As my purpose in this first section has been to examine the nature and functions of Gormenghast, my line of analysis has necessarily excluded, thus far, a consideration of Titus Alone. Indeed, much of my argument has been based on the fact that Gormenghast is perceived as a completely isolated environment. The existence of other worlds - the regions the protagonist visits in Titus Alone - does not undermine this approach, however. As I have tried to emphasise, the perception of Gormenghast as a unique environment by its inhabitants is very

much the same as any sort of objective reality. Titus is the first to leave Gormenghast, and is therefore a pioneer, moving out towards the darkness. He seeks out new regions, hitherto unknown, with which he can compare his home. To close this examination of Gormenghast, therefore, I intend to strike out, with our protagonist, beyond its walls, and to examine how Titus's recollection of his home provides another level of interpretation of its symbolic significance.

“What do I care for the symbolism of it all?” asks Titus, as he prepares to turn his back on Gormenghast. (GG, 459) Ironically, it is just that - the very symbolism of his home, what it represents to him - which he clings to as he wanders, bewildered, in the uncharted regions. As he moves further and further away from Gormenghast, he clutches a fragment of the Tower of Flints - a symbol of the whole castle. Then, at the moment he reaches in his pocket for the flint, he sees ahead of him a city - obviously a symbolic contrast to the ancient castle: an alternative metropolis. By considering the differences between city and castle, I hope to be able to provide a further insight into the symbolic function of Gormenghast.

This contrast is emphasised, initially, by the fact that, in order to reach the City¹⁰, Titus undertakes a journey which again is mythical in both tone and structure: he becomes completely lost, and wanders through “regions thighbone-deep in sumptuous dust” or “lands as harsh as metal”. (TA, 9) He eludes strange people, racing down a river; exhausted, he slumps in his boat as the river carries him, Lethe-like, into the Limbo of amnesia; and finally, he is dragged ashore by a humpbacked fisherman, who “dragged him from his moon-bright cradle” like an infant Perdita.¹¹ (Again, see chapter 12)

Coming to the City, like Titus, from the closed existence of Gormenghast, it seems to us less real, more dream-like, than the ancient castle. Indeed, the citizens of Titus Alone, though they are perhaps closer, in terms of experience, to our own world - living in tower blocks, working

as scientists or bureaucrats - seem much stranger and less human than Dr. Prunesquallor, Nannie Slagg or Swelter. Though on one level arcane, Gormenghast represents a shared experience of the past. The City, though familiar in certain respects, is recognizable as an embodiment of our fears for the future: it is a dystopia, a negative interpretation of what might be. As such, it is undoubtedly more disturbing than any vision of what has already happened. This is why Titus, despite needing to escape his past, also finds it essential to hold onto its values in this unknown region.

Within the concepts of Christian symbolism, it becomes clear that Gormenghast is on many levels a paradise lost. The dystopic representation of the post-lapsarian world is much darker than that which Titus left - even though the prevalent tone which pervades the castle is more sombre than any Miltonic vision of Eden. One might posit instead a comparison with Blake, in whose poetry the dilemma - which can be described in the oxymoron "experienced innocence" - is similarly presented and examined. I shall consider this at a later stage (see pp.181-5 below); though I feel it useful at this point to bear in mind the effect created by contrast and comparison in The Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1794), in that the value of innocence is dependent upon the consideration of this state from the position of experience, and in the knowledge of loss.

Earlier in this chapter, when comparing the significance of the parody of Peake and Dickens, I suggested that Gormenghast and its inhabitants could be said to occupy a position closer to the ideal, though still to some extent dependent on the real: the parodying of English society depends, naturally, on the recognition of elements drawn from that society. The world of Titus Alone, however, is only recognizable in the abstract, and its characters are little more than personifications: Veil, an anagram of 'evil', is nothing more than that; Cheetah, unable to feel any human emotion, cheats both herself and others; the Scientist, a deformed creature, is

mutated by his soul-less profession; and Black Rose, (Blake's 'Sick Rose'?) more a symptom of a dying, inhumane civilization than an individual. True, human characters do inhabit Titus Alone, Muzzlehatch and Juno among them. However, in a world that can discard its undesirables into the perpetual gloom and hopelessness of the Under-River - surely a Hell infinitely more tragic than the Great Kitchens - they are endangered species. Indeed, Muzzlehatch cannot survive it; and Juno must desert it, as Titus did his own home.

So the protagonist returns to Gormenghast - or at least to its periphery. He cannot return to the past, having left its protection. As he wanders eastwards, unknowingly heading back towards his ancient home, there is a final echo of Paradise Lost - and of its Romantic reworking, Frankenstein: "Hungry, weary, he made his solitary way, eating roots and berries and drinking from the streams. Month followed month until one day, as he wandered through the lonely void, his heart jumped into his throat." (TA, 261)

He has stumbled upon his home: Gormenghast, which stands, like the Gothic castle it resembles, between the real and the ideal; the embodiment of the past, and the symbol of ancient civilization; the progenitor and protector of its race; the first and last reference point - a limiting, and yet infinite, world of innocence, which Titus has left, but to which he must always return.

Notes.

1. Elizabeth MacAndrew, The Gothic Tradition in Fiction (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 83.
2. Jackson sees Peake's "long, rambling, unfinished trilogy" as an "elaborate construction of a Gothic enclosure" (Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, 162).
3. His conversation with me, April 1994.
4. Evelyn Waugh, Brideshead Revisited (London: Penguin, 1962) 14-15.
5. Punter, 376.
6. Paradise Lost, II, 629-1055.
7. *Ibid*, II, 1051-5.
8. "through each thicket dank or dry, / Like a black mist low creeping..." (Paradise Lost, IX, 179-80).
9. "Though Nature, red in tooth and claw / With ravine" (Tennyson, In Memoriam A.H.H., ed. Robert H. Ross (Norton Critical Editions, 1974), sect.54: 15-16).
10. See my note on capitalisation (p.11 above).
11. The Winter's Tale, III.iii.

Part Two: The 'Society' of Gormenghast.

I have established that the basic relationship between Gormenghast and its inhabitants is a mutually-dependent, symbiotic one, the purpose and function of each being fundamentally linked to that of the other. David Punter has suggested that this relationship is rather more one-way: "Peake... is not at his best in the portrayal of character or action, but in the depiction of environment and the claustrophobic and stultifying effects of certain types of environment on character itself."¹ However, I believe that, though the effect of environment on character is a central theme within the novels, the characters themselves are highly distinctive individuals.

It is an interesting point that such a rich diversity of characters has been generated from a primarily medieval social system, whose rigid totalitarianism is the antithesis of individualism. There are, as I shall argue, two essential reasons for this. Peake's skill in characterisation, informed by differing degrees of irony (in his comic figures) and sympathy (in his tragic or pathetic ones), allows him to develop distinctive character types. This is augmented by Peake's expositional style, in which characters are introduced and developed in isolation.² The result is a highly effective representation of what might be described as archetypes within a dysfunctional, or fractured, society. Therefore, while the replacement of Sourdust by his son, Barquentine, highlights the resistance of the system to any change or development, it is also clear that, particularly among the upper ranks of the castle's society (ie. those characters given individual identities), each character resists the stereotype which its function within the system would suggest.

As I shall discuss later in this thesis, Titus conforms, on one level, to the archetype of the Romantic hero (see chapter 10). In fact, the novels, being an account of the "early emotional or spiritual development or education of [the sequence's] hero"³, may be described as a

Bildungsroman (see also pp.150ff.). One purpose of this section, therefore, is to examine those individuals who effect that “development or education”. In part three of the thesis, I shall then turn to a consideration of Titus himself. However, as I have affirmed above, the function of the characters is also to reflect the weaknesses, or the resilience, of the ‘society’ of Gormenghast, thereby indicating both the source of the malaise, and those aspects of the moribund world that Titus, when he departs, should hang on to.

Notes.

1. Punter, 376.
2. See Batchelor, 73-6.
3. Chambers English Dictionary (7th edition).

4. The Groans: Sepulchrave, Gertrude, the Twins.

The older generation of Groans - the Earl, his wife and his sisters - are the obvious group with which to begin this analysis of the characters. Sepulchrave and Gertrude are the heads of the dynasty of Gormenghast; Cora and Clarice, despite the fact that they live in a remote part of the castle, are nevertheless of the blood; and, though the three characters (Cora and Clarice manifestly being two parts of the same whole) are vastly different, they share an outlook on the world which is fundamentally based on the idea of hereditary perpetuation. They are of the old faith, the ones who believe, as did Charles Ryder in Waugh's Brideshead Revisited, that "we possess nothing certainly except the past."¹

The worlds and ideologies of Lord Marchmain and the seventy-sixth earl of Groan are certainly comparable. Despite the fact that Marchmain has turned away from Catholicism, the faith of his ancestors, he still belongs essentially to all that it implies: the ancient authority of his forebears, who were honoured in the old days, before the coming of the treacherous protestants:

‘We were knights then, barons since Agincourt, the larger honours came with the Georges. They came the last and they’ll go the first; the barony goes on. When all of you are dead Julia’s son will be called by the name his fathers bore before the fat days...’²

And, of course, Marchmain returns to the Catholic faith on his deathbed.

Sepulchrave, though also longing to escape from the rigid structure he has inherited, and which rules his life, would approve of this sentiment (and the medieval, and therefore pre-Reformation, presentation of the castle in Titus Groan would also, as I have asserted above (see pp.52-3), affirm the sense of tradition embodied in the ethos of the Catholic Church). Yet so

completely has the Ritual controlled his every movement, it has alienated him from his individual personality: it has been reduced to a wandering, abstract intellect, which, when wrenched suddenly out of the melancholy shadows it has inhabited for so long, is unable to support itself, and collapses into a final, fatal derangement.

In this way, Sepulchrave epitomises the symbiotic inhabitant of Gormenghast. His name is instructive in this sense, meaning as it does both funereal and gloomy: his character is entombed in the fabric of Gormenghast, buried in its ancient stones, part of the same whole: "How could he love this place? He was a part of it.... To have asked him of his feelings for his hereditary home would be like asking a man what his feelings were towards his own hand or his own throat." (TG, 62) His fortunes, therefore, are inextricably tied to those of Gormenghast. What remains of his personality yearns for a release from the fetters of public life - yet this release can only be brought about by the destruction of his home, and therefore himself. In this way, he is the archetypal doomed lord. Alex Marchmain is possibly also of this type; he dies believing that his family has died with him: "Soon the fountain will be dry till the rain fills it, setting the fallen leaves afloat in the basin; and over the lakes the leaves will spread and close..."³

Yet he had abdicated long before: like Titus, he had lost the faith that supported his home, and left. Sepulchrave, on the other hand, goes to die within the very core of Gormenghast - the Tower of Flints; and though, before his descent into madness, he has become aware that the weight of his title has, with the birth of Titus, been passed on, his sense of relief proves deeply ironic: "Now that he knew he had a son he realized how great had been the unspoken nightmare which had lurked in his mind. The terror that with him the line of Groan should perish." (TG, 296) Titus inherits the title of his father: but developments are afoot in Sepulchrave's own lifetime which, coupled with the emergence of his son's own personality, lead to abdication and the end of the dynasty.

In another of Evelyn Waugh's works of the period, the Sword of Honour Trilogy (1952 - 61), the death of Mr Crouchback, the protagonist's father, has much of the same sense of finality about it. He is an heroic symbol of the past, who "had like many another been born in full sunlight and lived to see night fall"⁴ - an ageing knight, incongruous in the brashness of the modern age, who "acknowledged no monarch since James II."⁵ Guy, the hero of the trilogy, is smaller, less heroic, just as his own age is cast as a pale, tarnished reflection of the past. Though he inherits the name of Crouchback, it is a name which is "threatened with extinction", and whose significance has been much diminished. When the old man dies, the values of the old world die with him. Miss Vavasour, Mr Crouchback's companion in his last years, remarks of Guy that he represents the "*fin de ligne*" - that, having none of the ancient greatness of his father, he has only his name.

In comparing Guy and his father in such terms, Waugh is clearly presenting a nostalgic view of England, as was typical of the fiction in the years of the war and its aftermath (see also p.278 below). As he states in the preface to Brideshead Revisited, "It was a bleak period of present privation and threatening disaster"⁶ which naturally brought forth fond memories and reminiscences, real or imagined, of the days before the dark conflicts of the twentieth century. It may be argued also that Peake's vision is a nostalgic one. However, as I have pointed out above, Gormenghast is a dark world, rotten and decayed, ripe for destruction. Whereas Waugh is much more unequivocal about the glorious past, Peake's world is rather a testimony to its failure. Sepulchre is not heroic. As I intend to argue, he is a tragic figure: but he is only tragic because of the inevitability of his ultimate failure (see also pp.229ff.) Mr Crouchback makes a conscious decision not to acknowledge an age which he finds unpalatable; but Sepulchre is incapable of such an act of defiance. Even, it might be said, he embraces capitulation (though in Peake's world as well as Waugh's, there is a sense of a loss of honour).

It must be stressed that Sepulchrave himself is not responsible for his own downfall. The position he inherited at birth has eroded his individual character to such an extent that it cannot survive independently. The duties he has had to perform throughout his life are “a relief and a relative escape from himself” (TG, 205) - they provide a structure which supports him, while at the same time wearing away his personality. Seeking solace in the abstraction of his beloved books, he is further linking his identity with the physical structure of the castle. Thus, when the library is set on fire, Sepulchrave is both entirely vulnerable, and completely unable to do anything about it:

His home of books was on fire. His life was threatened, and he stood quite still.

His sensitive mind had ceased to function, for it had played so long in a world of abstract philosophies that this other world of practical and sudden action had deranged its structure. The ritual which his body had had to perform for fifty years had been no preparation for the unexpected. (TG, 318)

Another important aspect of Sepulchrave's character - and one which obviously contributes to his derangement - is his melancholy. As I suggested above, the word from which his name is derived - sepulchral - denotes 'gloomy' as well as 'funereal'. Such an extreme mental state - for it is clear that his suffering is both chronic and acute - emphasises the terminal state of decline to which the society of Gormenghast has fallen. If the representative of the House of Groan is constantly described as “dejected”, “weary” and “sad”, and the library, his domain, an extension of that dark mood - its “shadowing galleries” brooding “with slow anguish”, its books “a monumental fugue of volumes” - then it is not surprising that the rest of the castle is, as David Punter suggests, a neurotic world in which “the minutest tremor would precipitate a landslide.”⁷

Sepulchrave is doomed by fate to be the last lord of the ancient regime - though it may be argued that he makes certain errors that help to seal his fate. However, throughout Titus Groan,

there is a pervading sense of determinism, a feeling that no one individual is capable of altering or retarding the process which has been gathering momentum with each succeeding generation. Though certain characters - particularly Gertrude and Steerpike - may feel that they have it in their power to affect the destiny of Gormenghast, it becomes clear that they are just two more components in a vast and irresistible process of change. (The dramatic effects of this fact shall be examined more closely in chapter 13.) This is, I feel, the source of Sepulchrave's melancholy. He is a refined and sensitive aristocrat, who is painfully conscious of the critical state of decline to which his ancient civilisation has descended. To him, the sense of continuity is all. Despite the fact that he is chained, as it were, to the laws of his forefathers, he recognizes their importance. He is tragically possessed both of an erudite intellect, which gives him an awareness of the full weight and significance of his inheritance, and of a keen sensibility, with which he feels acutely the pain of losing it.

In this sense, Sepulchrave may be compared with Roderick Usher. In Poe's tale, which has already provided many points of comparison, the protagonist has many characteristics in common with the seventy-sixth Earl of Groan. Primarily, he suffers from a deep melancholy: what Poe's narrator describes as "a morbid acuteness of the senses"⁸. He also has an indomitable fear of being the last of the line - the death of his sister, Madeline, leaving him the sole living member of the "ancient race" of the House of Usher.

However, whereas Roderick Usher's agonies are derived in part from a pervasive presentiment of his own demise, Sepulchrave does not appear to fear his own death. The erosion of his individuality by the pressures of his symbolic role have reduced the significance of this event, being as he is merely a part of a great line, stretching beyond the limitations of mortality. Yet at the last, he is reduced, in the quiet lucidity of his farewell to Flay, to the stature of a man who is about to die. It must be stressed that Sepulchrave is not solely a tragic figure (again, I

shall explore this further in chapter 13 below). Particularly, it is possible to conceive of his death, not in tragic terms, but as an instance of macabre or grotesque comedy. However, I would argue that, on balance, his character operates according to a tragic sensibility.

From the first moments of his derangement in the thickening smoke of the fire, Sepulchrave ceases to function in the role destined for him. His individual self proving unequal to the task of survival, he appears to prove that he is, after all, nothing more than a symbol: that, like Marlowe's Edward, he gives up his life with his crown⁹ (see also pp.228ff. below). Yet the intelligence and sensibility that have precipitated Sepulchrave's madness still remain. He is incapable of functioning as the Lord of Gormenghast; but that function was part of the castle itself: it was created for, not by, the Earl. Now that this has been lifted from him, his sensitive intellect reveals to him the truth of his inheritance: that it denied him the love and affection that was necessary for him to sustain himself. In his madness, he is able to show fondness for his daughter: "He had never spoken to her in that way - she had never before heard that tone of love in his voice. Chilled by the horror of his growing madness, she had yet been filled with a compassion she had never known..." (TG, 346) He is also able to express regret for the fact that he and Gertrude were entirely incompatible: "They had never found in each other's company a sympathy of mind or body, and their marriage, necessary as it was from the lineal standpoint, had never been happy." (TG, 204)

The climax of the first book, in terms of action, is the battle between Flay and Swelter. More significant, however, is the interruption of this fight by Sepulchrave, their lord, who, in a somnambulant soliloquy, announces his departure from the world. This soliloquy acts as an elegy for the old regime - the passing of an age:

It was so gentle that it seemed as though a voice were evolving from the
half-light - a voice of unutterable mournfulness. The lamp in the shadowy

hand was failing for lack of oil. The eyes stared on through Mr Flay and through the dark wall beyond and on and on through a world of endless rain. 'Good-bye,' said the voice. 'It is all one. Why break the heart that never beat from love? We do not know, sweet girl; the arras hangs: it is so far; so far away, dark daughter... But they will take me in. Their home is cold; but they will take me in. And it may be their tower is lined with love... 'Blood, blood, and blood and blood, for you, the muffled, all, all of you and I am on my way, with broken branches. She was not mine, with hair as red as ferns. She was not mine.... 'Good-bye... Good-bye. It is all one, for ever, ice and fever... Great wings shall come, great silent, silent wings... Good-bye. All's one. All's one. All's one.' (TG, 427)

Grandiloquent as it is, this speech nevertheless casts Sepulchrove in the traditional tragic role. In fact, the richness of the language, which may seem to be an apt example of Peake's over-romantic narrative style, is given a certain resonance if we recall that Edward, denied his crown, can use only his powers of rhetoric to maintain his personal dignity. Furthermore, there are clear, though highly parodic, echoes of other tragic figures: Macbeth, both King and Lady, ring through the lines "Blood, blood..." and "All's one"; and, in his belated realisation of his own identity, and reconciliation of his daughter, there is something of Lear in him. His role is not tragic in the same dimensions: but it is tragic nonetheless (see also my discussion on pp.231-2 below).

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If Sepulchrove is the ancient knight, then he is seemingly mismatched with the Countess. She is introduced in heroic terms - but the effect of the passage, which recalls Enobarbus'

recollection of Cleopatra, is one of pastiche:

She was propped against several pillows and a black shawl was draped around her shoulders. Her hair, a very dark red colour of great lustre, appeared to have been left suddenly while being woven into a knotted structure on the top of her head. Thick coils still fell about her shoulders, or clustered upon the pillows like burning snakes. Her eyes were of the pale green that is common among cats. They were large eyes, yet seemed, in proportion to the pale area of her face, to be small. The nose was big enough to appear so in spite of the expanse that surrounded it. The effect which she produced was one of bulk... (TG, 54)

In fact, Gertrude is both comic and heroic. What we may call Peake's affectionate involvement with the figures he creates works to offset the sharpness of his parody; and again, the rhetorical style presents in Gertrude both the grotesque absurdity of her physical stature, and the grandeur of her presence. As the plot develops, her physical bulk in fact adds to our appreciation of her remarkable determination which, allied to an intuitively keen intellect, create a most majestic individual.

She is introduced initially as a much weaker figure than that which is later to emerge: "Her pale eyes would either concentrate upon an object in a remorseless way or would appear to be without sight, vacant, with the merest suggestion of something childish." (TG, 57) Her obsession for the birds and cats that depend on her, and the lack of affection she appears to have for her family, including her new-born son, give an impression of emotional and intellectual lassitude. When Nannie Slagg brings Titus to her room, for example, she is brusquely dismissive - even uncomprehending (as we have seen, p.37 above). Having produced an heir for Gormenghast, her duty is done, and she can continue her normal lifestyle, while the system gets on with rearing Titus. So the door is left open to admit her cats; and she announces to the astonished Doctor that

she is to get up the following day. Our response to this must be that Gertrude has complete faith in the system; and at this point, therefore, despite our misgivings about Steerpike, so must we.

Despite her apparent indifference to the well-being of her son, the countess is devoted to the continuation of the Groan line. Her Reverie at the Dark Breakfast (which takes the form of a sequence of interior monologues, much in the style of Joyce) underlines this vehement devotion: “it is good that Titus is born for the line of the Groans must never be broken through me and there must be no ending at all...” (TG, 399) It is clear, therefore, that, while she has no maternal feeling towards Titus the individual, what he represents is sacrosanct.

This is not to say, however, that Gertrude is without feeling. She has a passionate affection for her animals, to the point that, when one is harmed, the perpetrator of this act - Flay - is banished from Gormenghast. However, this displaced love is more than mere eccentricity. As is evident from the reverie in Titus Groan, it is clear that the Countess has an inner fortitude which, over the years, has been protected by her ability to separate her individual personality from her outer, ceremonial life. She realises that Sepulchrove, in succumbing to the pressures of his title and responsibilities, has not been able to do this to the same degree; and she is determined that Titus shall not make the same mistake:

[W]hen he is older I will teach him how he can take care of himself and how to live his own life as far as it is possible for one who will find the grey stones across his heart from day to day and the secret is to be able to freeze the outside off completely and then he will be able to live within himself which Sepulchrove does in the wrong way for what use are books to anyone whose days are like a rook's nest with every twig a duty... (TG, 398)

She has managed to “freeze the outside off completely” by devoting her energies to the cats and birds; and she sees that her husband's error has been to spend his private moments poring over

the written wisdom of his ancestors - in other words, ingesting more of the Gormenghast ethos.

Countess Gertrude, then, is revealed as a resilient individual who has developed her own strategy for survival within the limits of her position. She is also capable of great and unwavering affection, and a steadfast devotion to the line. However, such a strong personality is bound to conflict with a system which is as intransigent as that which rules the life of Gormenghast. This is manifested in her impatience with the Ritual, which she finds tedious and rather irritating. For instance, at Titus's christening, she upsets Sourdust by disturbing his time-honoured procedure, first by her question "How much more is there?", and secondly, after the ceremony breaks down, by taking matters into her own hands and leading the group out for a walk while Titus, and Sourdust, regain their composure. (TG, 115-25)

This last initiative is an important indication of Gertrude's power and common-sense. Her ability to take control of a situation is to take on much greater significance in Gormenghast, when Steerpike's heresy provokes her to action. However, throughout much of the first book, she is perfectly willing to leave the running of the castle to others, confident that what has worked well enough for centuries can continue to do so during her lifetime.

Remaining dormant for so long, Gertrude is all the more impressive when she begins to rise out of her inertia and act. With the burning of the library and the subsequent madness of her husband, we see a change in the Countess. It emerges that she has a powerful intellect and a keen intuitive sense: a combination which, once it is brought to bear on the developing crisis, proves to be irresistible. It is the intuition that alerts her to the threat; and, appropriately, she voices her concerns first to her animals: "Listen," she said. "We're alone. Things are bad. Things are going wrong. There's evil afoot. I know it." (TG, 477) This is followed by a dark, vehement prophecy, which combines her personal determination with her unassailable belief in the perpetuation of Gormenghast and all that it stands for: "In Titus it's all centred. Stone and

mountain - the Blood and the Observance. Let them touch him. For every hair that's hurt I'll stop a heart. If grace I have when turbulence is over - so be it; if not - what then?" (TG, 478)

Gormenghast opens with the Countess mid-way between dormancy and action. She is far from impulsive: seven years have passed since the events of Titus Groan. Yet she has remained vigilant throughout, looking for a way to ascertain the identity of the heretic. She turns to Prunesquallor for help. This confirms both her determination and her common sense; for, although she finds the Doctor immensely irritating, she knows also that he is the most intelligent and resourceful of her allies. As she admits, "I have a kind of faith in you, man." (GG, 43)

Slowly but surely, she forms her suspicions. Convinced intuitively that Steerpike is the enemy, yet she has enough self-control to wait until he declares himself: "Give him rope. We have no proof. But by the black tap-root of the very castle, if my fear is founded, the towers themselves will sicken at his death: the oldest stones will spew." (GG, 347) She is deeply perceptive: for, not only does Steerpike reveal himself, but his demise also marks the end of Gormenghast.

Gertrude's power is such that even Steerpike, who scorns everyone, finds her "the only character for whom he held a puzzled and grudging respect". (GG, 349) It is a power against which he must pit himself in order to gain control of the castle. In effect, she becomes the castle. Our first image of her after she hears of Steerpike's heresy is of a figurehead, silhouhettted against the castle: "She was a monument against a broken window and beyond the broken window her realm, tremulous and impalpable in the white mist." (GG, 388) Even so, the crisis that reveals her strength also brings out her weakness: in fact, they are part of the same whole. Her single-minded pursuit of Steerpike is based on an intransigent belief in the system, which blinds her intuition to the fact that her own son is, according to her logic, a traitor. Therefore, when Titus comes to her to report his sighting of Steerpike, she mistakenly believes

that her son is, after all, loyal to the line. When he admits his heresy, she is stunned: she cannot believe that her own offspring would rebel against the Law - would be able to rebel. Although she accepts the possibility of rebellion in a kitchen boy - though she cannot understand it - she does not see how Titus could possibly reject the doctrine, even to the end. For, when he announces his abdication at the end of Gormenghast, she retorts that "There is nowhere else." Despite her acute intuitiveness, Gertrude's perceptions are limited to Gormenghast. Her maxim, "everything comes to Gormenghast", does not admit of rebellion. Even after his departure, she will live secure in the knowledge that her son will eventually come home.

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Who else is there of the direct bloodline? Only the vacant Aunts, Cora and Clarice, the identical twins and sisters of Sepulchrae. So limp of brain that for them to conceive an idea is to risk a haemorrhage. So limp of body that their purple dresses appear no more indicative of housing nerves and sinews than when they hang suspended from their hooks. (GG, 12)

Thus Peake, at the beginning of Gormenghast. The Twins, like Gertrude, are grotesques (though perhaps, unlike the Countess, their imbecility renders them pathetic rather than heroic). In fact, their strangeness is such that they are ostracised even by the other denizens of the castle - even though, in many ways, they are the most typical of residents.

They have a history of physical and mental illness. They refer, with some degree of pride, to the fact that they are partially crippled: "The epileptic fits... have left us practically starved all down the right side. Practically starved. We had these fits you see." (TG, 117) Yet these attacks (they also, it is revealed later, have suffered strokes), as well as underlining their

grotesquerie - especially in the enjoyment they admit to having derived from them - have also generated a complete symbiotic relationship between the identical twins that mirrors that of Gormenghast with its inhabitants. Each one is an imperfect part of the same whole. It is therefore significant that they are damaged psychologically as well as physically - that, in fact, their mental disorders have developed in tandem with their bodily dysfunction. Their very grotesquerie stems from this coupling of derangement with disfigurement, for, as with many such comic figures in fiction, the Twins' physiognomy is a reflection of their mentality.

This is not the case with all Peake's grotesques. Dr Prunesquallor, despite his odd appearance, is a man of great intelligence and compassion. However, the grotesque often depends on the notion that outward appearance and inner nature are interdependent. Almost all of Dickens' grotesque characters follow this form - a method, according to John Carey, with which the "inner life" of his characters could be defined externally:

[T]he rich proliferation of physical peculiarities is one of the effects on which his art depends. It takes the place of the conventional novelistic 'inner life', much in the same way as the invention of odd speech habits atones for the rarity of dialogue.¹⁰

Peake is clearly influenced by Dickens in his characterisation (and his friend Gordon Smith suggests that this was indeed the case¹¹); in the Twins we witness, in their almost-exclusive colloquy, the coupling of eccentricities of speech with physical strangeness that recalls, perhaps, Dora's Aunts, Lavinia and Clarissa, in David Copperfield:

'We had not,' said Miss Clarissa, 'been in the habit of frequent association with our brother Francis: but there was no decided division or disunion between us. Francis took his road; we took ours. We considered it conducive to the happiness of all parties that it should be so. And it was so.'

Each of the sisters leaned a little forward to speak, shook her head after speaking, and became upright again when silent. Miss Clarissa never moved her arms. She sometimes played tunes upon them with her fingers - minuets and marches I should think - but never moved them.¹²

The form of dialogue practised by the Twins - it might almost be called a monologue - emphasises, I think, not only their isolation, but also that of the family generally. Sepulchre only says what he is expected to say: when his private voice speaks, as in the scene at breakfast with Sourdust early in the first novel when he mentions his son, he is not heard; and in his final madness, those around him are saddened, or simply uncomprehending, at his attempts to communicate. The fact that the Twins have largely been ignored for so long has a clear purpose within the structure of the plot of Titus Groan - for it makes them more vulnerable to the machinations of Steerpike; but it also hints at the fundamental isolation of the family from its society.

The mental state of Cora and Clarice also mirrors that of their brother. Whereas he is acutely melancholic, the Twins suffer from what we would describe as paranoid monomania: their limited mentalities work solely around their grievance - that, as Groans, they have not been accorded the power and prestige they deserve. Associated with this mania is their conviction that Gertrude has devoted her energies in ensuring that they remain in their present lowly social position. Resulting from this is an extreme loathing towards their sister-in-law.

They are therefore clearly symptomatic of a social organisation which is on the brink of collapse. In fact, they are perhaps the clearest indicators of the degenerated state to which Gormenghast has descended - for their mania has taken such a complete hold on their personalities that it overrides any sense of loyalty to the Groan Line. Of course, they would never rebel openly against the system: for one thing, they of all the characters lack the capacity

of initiative for insurrection. However, at public appearances, they lack all propriety. When, at Titus's christening, they start airing their grievance to Fuchsia, Cora, who has been standing at a distance from her sister, moves instinctively from her allotted position: "Cora had disobeyed all the rules and unable to be so far from the conversation had moved like a sleep-walker round the back of the group, keeping an eye on the black velvet mass of the Countess." (TG, 118) This, of course, must be seen in context. The efficiency of the Ritual is in inverse proportion to its pomposity; and the Twins are not the only ones to act improperly during the ceremonies. The difference is that they are only dimly aware of the significance of their actions - and are therefore responding on a subconscious and more fundamental level than those, such as Doctor Prunesquallor (see pp.105-8 below), who act improperly for the sake of conceit or intellectual distraction.

As with Sepuchrave, Clarice and Cora have names which appear significant. It may be argued that Clarice is derived from the Latin *clarus*, meaning 'clear', while Cora may be a corruption of 'chorus'. While both names may allude to their comic roles (one being empty, the other echoing that emptiness), it may also be possible to suggest that the Twins have a precise dramatic function - as a chorus to the events occurring around them (and yet from which, by and large, they remain isolated). In other words, their actions might be said to clarify or echo events that are taking place in Gormenghast as a whole. If we accept this interpretation, then their isolated and ultimately futile existence can be seen to parody that of the rest of the castle. The room of roots, for example, which is obviously a rather crude symbol of the Twins' infertile lives, can also be seen, on a larger scale, to represent the barrenness of the House of Groan, and the idea that, beneath the grandness of it all, the foundation is rotten: "Yet the roots were dead. Once the room must have been filled with earth, but now, suspended for the most part in the higher reaches of the chamber, the thread-like extremities clawed impotently in the air." (TG.

252) In fact, it might be said that the way in which Cora and Clarice are ostracised by the rest of the family is a commentary, not only on their perceived grotesqueness, but on the grotesque and rather unpalatable nature of the society that has isolated them. Ironically, the Twins' chief 'crime' - stemming from the fact that, in their imbecilic mania, they are unable to contain themselves when in company - is that they are embarrassing and therefore unsociable. Thus the most typical of eccentrics are segregated from a society whose fractured nature renders all its members eccentric.

As I have said, the Twins have an important function within the central plot of Titus Groan. They provide Steerpike with the means of destroying the status quo; and, ironically, they also help to bring about his downfall when, on discovering their skeletons in Gormenghast, he is witnessed indulging in an inhuman show of triumphalism, thus revealing him as the heretic (see pp.149ff.). In this final encounter with the Twins, they lose their grotesque quality as Steerpike becomes grotesque. As I have suggested above, the grotesque in fiction tends to combine physical oddity with mental eccentricity. Steerpike, though certainly of unorthodox physiognomy, appears to be perfectly sane - in fact, until he succumbs to his psychosis, excessively so. However, it is at this point, cavorting narcissistically over the skeletons of the Twins, that his sanity - indeed his humanity - is lost: the act is so heinous that, in the eyes of those who observe it (ourselves included), Steerpike is rendered diabolical - the ultimate grotesque.

In death, therefore, Cora and Clarice are reunited with the other members of the castle. As Steerpike is demonised, they become more human. Darkly comic throughout, the Twins emerge as victims of Steerpike's essential misanthropy. Grotesque though they are, they are revealed, finally, as true representatives of a society which, in its decadent absurdity, has itself become grotesque.

Notes.

1. Evelyn Waugh, Brideshead Revisited (London: Chapman and Hall, 1945. Penguin revised edition, 1962) 215.
2. *Ibid*, 317.
3. *Ibid*, 317.
4. Evelyn Waugh, Men At Arms: The Sword of Honour Trilogy (London: Penguin 1984) 28.
5. *Ibid*, 28.
6. Brideshead Revisited, 7.
7. Punter, 378.
8. 'The Fall of the House of Usher', 107.
9. "Where is my crown? / Gone, gone; and do I remain alive?" (Edward II, V.v. 89-90) For Edward, like Sepulchre, the role is everything: once the symbol of his power is taken from him, he loses his sense of identity.
10. John Carey, The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination (London: Faber and Faber, 1973) 87.
11. See Batchelor, 73-4.
12. David Copperfield, 660.

5. Fuchsia: Titus's "dark sister".

When, as the climax of Gormenghast approaches, Fuchsia falls from her window to drown in the flood waters, we see her still as the gauche, adolescent girl that Steerpike had first seen through the Spy Hole on the day of Titus's birth. It is with some surprise, therefore, that we realise in fact how old she is: Titus has grown to the age of seventeen; Fuchsia is therefore at least thirty-one. Yet she is, undoubtedly, an adult: and this fact, which has finally torn away the last vestiges of the childishness that sheltered her from the cruelty of the world, has brought home to her "the failure of her life, the frustration of her womanhood". (GG, 452) She has been forced, tragically, to face the world, and recognize "the cruel winds of circumstances which appear to have singled her out for particular punishment." (GG, 452)

It is a reality for which she has no defence. From the beginning, it is clear that she is an extremely vulnerable individual. Though she is, at the onset, "a girl of about fifteen", she still relies, emotionally, on her nanny. She is prone to wild mood swings, and feels most deeply both the need for love, and the lack of it. As she grows, she begins to realise that adults no longer have all the answers; yet she is not mature enough to find out those answers for herself. She is both the archetypal adolescent and the orphan: confused, unstable, and in need of love and attention. One might posit a comparison with the character of Sebastian Flyte in Waugh's Brideshead Revisited, especially in the continued emotional bond both have with their ancient nannies.

The real world appears to Fuchsia unbearably cruel: it offers no solutions, and is impassive in the face of her despair. So she looks to the realms of fantasy - the world of her imagination, in which she is loved and protected. This withdrawal from reality, in which Fuchsia can preserve the innocence of her childhood, is vital: it is the only way she can sustain herself.

However, from the beginning of Titus Groan, it is threatened: and, with each defilement, each intrusion upon Fuchsia's fantasy, the savagery of reality tears away another layer of protection. Ultimately, unable to face what her very instability and vulnerability have made possible, Fuchsia is destroyed.

This is, briefly, an account of Fuchsia's 'destiny'. I use the word deliberately, as it seems clear that her character is inextricably linked to her fortune - an indication that Fuchsia, perhaps more than any, is a tragic figure (I shall consider the significance of this function for the dramatic structure of the novels on pp.236-9 below). I intend now to examine more closely those facets of her character indicated above, and the actions and developments that accelerate her demise.

From her first entrance, Fuchsia fascinates us - as she does Steerpike. She is as moody and strange as Gormenghast; yet she is also awkward, uncontrollable, and burning with hate for the place and the people within it. Her room reveals a mind deeply disturbed, the walls covered "with impetuous drawings in charcoal." (TG, 68) She is highly unstable - and, in her instability, she relies on Mrs Slagg, her ancient and feeble-minded nanny, as would an infant: "She approached Mrs Slagg with five strides, and putting her arms quickly around the old woman's neck, kissed her savagely". (TG, 70) Yet Slagg is no match for Fuchsia: in fact, though the great age of the nurse serves to emphasise Fuchsia's youth, it is clear that Nannie Slagg cannot provide Fuchsia with all she needs:

Fuchsia realized that Mrs Slagg knew virtually nothing, but the long custom of asking her questions was a hard one to break down. The realization that grown-ups did not necessarily know any more than children was something against which she had fought. (TG, 270)

She fights against it because she is becoming increasingly aware that, in the loneliness of her

adolescence, she cannot face life on her own.

Where does this instability, this lack of self-worth that is so threatening, come from? It is clear that, as I have suggested above (chapters 2 and 4), her mother and father do not perform the parental function satisfactorily. Yet this is as true for Titus as it is for Fuchsia - and Titus, despite his problems, survives; indeed, Titus's personality always seems likely to survive, whereas Fuchsia's does not.

The reason for this, in many ways, is her sex, and her awareness of the significance of this. She is the daughter of the Line - and at times, this does have important implications for the way she acts. However, she is a daughter; and under the dictates of Groan Law, as for many traditional hierarchies, a daughter is not conceived as having the same degree of importance as a son. As the years have gone by, Fuchsia has become increasingly aware of the fact that she is the only progeny of the Earl and Countess of Groan, and yet is not the heir to the Line. Of her father, she confides to Titus that "I think he wanted me to be a boy." (GG, 315)

Fuchsia is therefore keenly aware of the fact that, as a girl, she is second-best. Yet, at the same time, her sexuality is beginning to assert itself. Doctor Prunesquallor, who, after Mrs Slagg, is her closest ally and friend, notices this change in her:

Fuchsia turned her face up to his and parted her lips in a smile of such dark, sweet loveliness, so subtly blended with her brooding strangeness, that the Doctor's hand clutched the handle of the door. He had never seen her look like this before. He had always thought of her as an ugly girl of whom he was strangely fond. (TG, 180)

Fuchsia's character is a most astute study of adolescence, due, I think, to the fact that Peake has, in effect, caught her right at the centre of this painful moment of change. She is fighting desperately to keep her childhood, while wanting also to respond to the need to feel adult. This

dilemma is extended throughout the seventeen years of the first two novels, the tension constantly increasing, so that, hours before the black despair that leads her, ultimately, to her death, Fuchsia “was happier than she had ever been in her life.” (GG, 344)

In her confusion, she struggles to hang on to the simplicity of childhood. Sensitive as Sepulchre, her father, Fuchsia is painfully aware of the difficulties of life. Therefore, like her father, and indeed her mother, she has withdrawn into her own world. Just as Sepulchre’s thoughts wander through the written world, and as Gertrude focuses her attention on her animals, so Fuchsia’s mind is filled with compensatory fantasies. The world she surrounds herself with is a bright and romantic one, in which she is safe, forever young. The centre of this world is the Attic.

The Attic, as physically remote from the rest of the Castle as Rottcodd’s Hall, is reached by a single, winding staircase which connects it with her bedroom. This isolation and secrecy suggest clearly that the Fuchsia’s Attic is a metaphor of her inner self. When she approaches it, it is with incomparable excitement: “As Fuchsia climbed into the winding darkness her body was impregnated and made faint by a qualm as of green April. Her heart beat painfully.” (TG, 77) The area is separated into three distinct sections, each one more private and personal than the last. The first is an ancient lumber room, crammed full of broken and disused objects, from “the head of a broken toy lion” to an “enormous crumbling organ”. (TG, 79) It is so choked with stuff that only a narrow, winding way can be found through it: it is a protective labyrinth. The second region, in contrast, is a wide, empty expanse: a huge, bare stage, where Fuchsia has brought forth monsters and players from her imagination to perform according to her whim. It is a realm over which she has complete control. The final section of the Attic, though, is the one she prefers above the others, for in it, she feels completely safe:

This was the loft which was for Fuchsia a very secret place, a kind of pagan

chapel, an eyrie, a citadel, a kingdom never mentioned, for that would have been a breach of faith - a kind of blasphemy.” (TG, 69)

Here is the key to Fuchsia’s personality, the inviolable core. Yet, from the first, it is under threat.

On the day of her brother’s birth, Fuchsia goes up to the Attic to think. From the window, she notices, with a strange sense of unease, that a crowd has gathered far below. She struggles with a growing concern, and immediately tries to hide in fantasy, in the form of a nonsense poem, ‘The Frivolous Cake’. However, she cannot concentrate on the poem: she hurries through it, “taking in nothing at all of its meaning.” (TG, 85) Overcome with foreboding and suspicion, she leaves the Attic, and rushes back down into the world to discover the cause of this unprecedented behaviour.

This event, of course, is to have greater implications later; but, though the birth of an heir throws Fuchsia into a panic, it is a crisis based on indignation. Therefore, after the initial shock, she is able to accept Titus as a brother - particularly as he shows early signs of rebellion against the laws which rule both their lives. However, this intrusion into her private world is followed by another much more serious invasion. From the moment Steerpike descends into her domain after his climb across the roofs of Gormenghast, her fate is sealed. The birth of Titus, however alarming, was always a possibility (albeit a remote one), given the necessity of a male heir to continue the Line. Steerpike, however, represents something entirely different: he is not an aspect of Fuchsia’s unhappy real world, but a figure of fantasy - as I shall explain below.

In her vulnerable immature state, Fuchsia has developed a fantasy to compensate for her sense of orphanism. She dreams of being rescued by a romantic hero:

‘Someone from another kind of world - a new world - not from this world, but someone who is *different*, and he will fall in love with me at once because I

live alone and aren't like the other beastly things in this world, and he'll enjoy having me because of my pride.' (TG, 146)

As she muses thus (and ironically, given her subsequent seducer's adult motives - he determines, in fact, to "have" her), Steerpike is lying, exhausted from his climb, in the loft, Fuchsia's innermost sanctum. When, still confused and shocked by the news of Titus's birth, she discovers him, she is profoundly affected:

Then, indeed, was her mind split into differing passions, the paramount being agony that her secret had been discovered - her casket of wonder rifled - her soul, it seemed, thrown naked to a world that could never understand. (TG, 154)

This scene, with its overtly sexual symbolism, underlines the significance of Steerpike to Fuchsia: he is a warped (because adult) version of her hero, who has come to liberate her from the confining - but at this moment, also protective - environment which has so far been her only experience. Aware of such naivety, Steerpike immediately adopts a strategy to win Fuchsia over. Seeing her need for a hero, he creates one of himself. Mixing concern with clownishness, flattery with ingenuity, he gradually encourages her to become emotionally dependent on him.

This process develops over many years. Meanwhile, there are other influences on Fuchsia's character which provide the opportunity, at several stages, to resist Steerpike's charms. The first is her father who, after the fire in the Library, comes to depend on her. It is a brief period, little more than a pause between Sepulchre's life and death; and as if aware of this fact, Fuchsia struggles desperately to maintain what is to her a precious bond. Despite the madness that disfigures her father's face, she bites back her panic:

[T]he sudden breaking of the barriers that had remained between them for so long as she could remember overpowered her fear. For the first time in her life she felt that she was a daughter - that she had a father - [sic] of her own. What

did she care if he was going mad - saving for his own dear sake? He was hers.

(TG, 347)

Unfortunately, her emotions aren't as robust as she would like to believe; when Sepulchrave disappears, she is deeply wounded. Having had, for so little a time, what she had patently always craved, the sudden retraction of it is a painful betrayal. The searching and the sorrow of loss also changes her: "She had grown older during the last few weeks - older in that her heart had been taxed by greater strains of passion than it had ever felt before". (TG, 457) This growth has, apparently, given her more inner strength and confidence - she no longer seems quite as dependent on Mrs Slagg, and has come to realise that Dr Prunesquallor is more likely to be able to solve her problems. Yet, when her old nurse dies, Fuchsia's bond with her is reaffirmed. She is, after all "the nearest thing to a mother that Fuchsia had ever known". (GG, 185) Her death, therefore, presents another blow: Fuchsia is left without both her father and her surrogate mother. As Steerpike's malign influence spreads over the castle, the Doctor's attention is drawn away from Fuchsia - another adult, in her estimation, to have failed her. Her only hope, therefore, lies in the relationship she has developed with her brother, Titus.

In the last period of her life, it is with Titus that she most closely recalls the innocent adolescent of the first novel. Yet by this stage, she has in fact lost her youth - and without the compensatory understanding of maturity. She clings to this last relationship; yet she is aware that it is not enough: "I love you, Titus, but I can't feel anything. Even you are dead in me. I know I love you. You're the only one I love, but I can't feel anything and I don't want to. I've felt too much, I'm sick of feelings... I'm frightened of them." (GG, 397)

Even Titus, however, is to let her down. When she follows him to the cave on Gormenghast Mountain, and witnesses the death of the Thing, Fuchsia realises that it has been this strange, alien creature, and not herself, that her brother loved most deeply. This Thing, with a knowledge

and an innocence that Fuchsia knows she can never have, breaks the last bond she has with the world.

Fuchsia's destiny, then, is one which leads inexorably to complete despair. When at the end, she conceives fully the murderous nature of Steerpike, her fantasy crumbles. Leaving nothing. It is as if she is aware from the first of the essential treachery of the world; yet, in the desperate need for affection which the fractured society of Gormenghast has engendered in her, she has withdrawn those barriers with which she sought to protect herself. Steerpike is her fantasy made real - and the reality is horrible. In a final, ironic echo of what might, in normative terms, be described as a schizophrenic existence, a knock at her door, as she stands day-dreaming on her window-ledge, breaks into her fantastic world and destroys it - and her - completely.

*

Necessarily undefined and therefore difficult to define, insofar as Fuchsia is an immature, 'unfinished' character, she is a crucial figure in our interpretation of the themes of the Titus novels. Gormenghast is suffering great and painful change; and Fuchsia, as vulnerable and unsure as she is, both suffers and represents the agony of that transformation. Deprived of a stable background, she approaches adulthood unprepared for its strains; in the accelerating change that is rocking the castle, those strains increase. She is searching for personal identity in an environment in which all emotional and philosophical signifiers - the most fundamental and vital structures of her world - are being stripped away.

Fuchsia is therefore truly alienated: both orphaned and disoriented, she knows neither where she is going nor from whence she has come. In this sense her character might be compared to that of Carroll's Alice who, according to Rosemary Jackson, is most concerned by "a loss of

identity: all she can hang onto is her name, yet she doesn't know what it means."¹ Alice, of course, does have a secure past; and in a sense, it is Titus who passes through the looking-glass when he embarks on his quest in Titus Alone (see chapter 12 below). Yet, in Wonderland, Alice's past appears to count for nothing. As a result, she becomes distressed when questions arise concerning her identity. "I can't explain *myself*", she says to the Caterpillar, "because I'm not myself."² Even more upsetting is the encounter with Tweedledee and Tweedledum in Through the Looking Glass. "You know very well you're not real", Tweedledum tells her (as insensitively as Peake's Twins, in fact). "I *am* real!" said Alice, and began to cry."³ This is more than just a question of her personality: it is a matter of her basic existence.

Fuchsia illustrates both of these basic concerns. On the wall of her bedroom, she writes impulsively: "*I am Fuchsia. I must always be. I am me. Don't be frightened. Wait and see.*" [author's italics] (TG, 147) This statement is an attempt to affirm her personality; yet its assertion is belied by the fact that Fuchsia only feels confident of her own existence within the fantasy world she creates for herself. In fact, this imaginary world is, to her, more real than Gormenghast: the stories and songs she reads in the Attic are no stranger than the castle, after all. When Steerpike wakes to find himself in Fuchsia's loft, his response to a picture is instructive in this sense: "It was to Steerpike in his unusual physical state as though that picture were the world, and that he, in some shadowy adjacent province, were glimpsing the reality." (TG, 149) This momentary insight, with its implication that reality and fantasy are confused, has added significance for the reader, who observes Gormenghast as both a fantastic, created world and an oblique reflection of reality (I shall consider the importance of this inversion in chapter 15 below). Fuchsia is therefore trapped, like Alice, in a world that is both real and unreal. She yearns to escape from disorder into order - from what is to her a meaningless, adult world, into a sensible and meaningful environment: a world that she, as a child, can rely on.

In 1946, the year Titus Groan was published, Mervyn Peake was commissioned to illustrate the Alice books by a Swedish publisher. When the editions were finally published in 1954 (in Sweden and also by an English publisher, Alan Wingate)⁴, Peake sent a copy of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland to Graham Greene. In his letter of thanks, Greene asserts that he had considered Peake's Alice to be "a little bit too much of a *gamin*."⁵ Indeed, though in certain senses one can see Fuchsia as a "gamin" (in, for example, Doctor Prunesquallor's suppressed sexual attraction towards her in the passage quoted above, p.87), I would rather tend to attribute such a definition to the Thing. For, though Fuchsia is darker and more vulnerable than Alice, her innocence is stripped from her by all she is forced to witness.

Another fictional world which, like Gormenghast, breaks down barriers between fantasy and reality is that of Wuthering Heights. Emily Brontë, of course, also created (with her sisters and brother) compensatory fantasies to counteract the isolating influence of the environment in which she lived⁶; and she addresses these concerns in her novel. Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights represent profoundly different states of existence; yet due to the complex structure of the novel, the reader is never sure which is the more real and which the more fantastic. Catherine Earnshaw can, in her childhood, be considered as a "gamin": her feral nature and her affinity with the wild, natural world of the moor; her hatred for authority - particularly for its arbiter, Joseph; and her fey, capricious moodiness - all are characteristics of such a type. As she grows to adulthood - influenced by Heathcliff, the outsider who is nevertheless an essential part of her identity - conflicting emotions increase the tensions between her and the human environment she has been born into. Ultimately, she rejects the pretensions of society which she at one point seeks to acquire; and thus she exiles herself to the savage, elemental world of her demonic lover. Yet the erosion of moral or eschatological certainties that the structure of the novel has engendered forces the reader to reconsider his interpretation of

Cathy's 'exile' - and encourages a more relativistic, objective stance towards notions of society, good and evil, and ultimately, reality and fantasy.

When Steerpike climbs into Fuchsia's room, animating her fantasies - he adopts in turn the guises of romantic hero and clown - he is, in the same way as Heathcliff, blurring accepted definitions of reality and unreality, at least as far as Fuchsia is concerned. He is making her believe in make-believe; and his success is based on the fact that Fuchsia is susceptible to such suggestion. All her life, she has longed for her fantasies to become real - has believed, at times, that they have done so. Like Cathy, she has turned away from the hated, restrictive reality of the world, with its terrible Ritual (and its servants, whose strict orthodoxy is reminiscent of Joseph's) and confining shadows. Like Cathy, too, she can be perceived, in her wildness, as a metaphor of nature: "As, with every day that passed, the weather became increasingly menacing, so she seemed to protract the long walks that had now become her chief pleasure." (TG, 196)

Fuchsia, having found the 'real' world unsatisfactory and distressing, rejects it, preferring instead the realms of fantasy that the adult world has itself rejected. As with Wuthering Heights, the accepted norms are questioned (and ultimately, when Titus abdicates, rejected). Fuchsia, however, cannot escape: in her confusion, she clings to the hope that Steerpike will rescue her. However abhorrent his designs may seem to us, he offers - at least to Fuchsia - an alternative; and it is that chance that she is prepared to risk everything for. Like Catherine Earnshaw's rejection of the world, Fuchsia's only means of deliverance, it transpires, is death. Steerpike's treachery having exiled him forever from society, he has also denied her the possibility of life within it.

Steerpike has brought her to the verge of suicide; but still she survives, teetering on the brink between the worlds of fantasy and reality, as she does between life and death. The ultimate cause of her death is not her tormenting hero, but as I have asserted above, an ironic and yet

most appropriate device: the solicitous hand of the castle, knocking at the door (the knocker being anonymous, we may conclude that it represents the castle's society generally). Steerpike's descent into 'damnation', like Heathcliff's, soon follows; and the question of whether the 'hero' or the dysfunctional society is ultimately responsible for destroying Fuchsia is as unclear as it is in the case of Cathy.

There are clearly many similarities between the characters of Fuchsia and Catherine Earnshaw. However, it seems to me that there is also one clear difference: that of self-knowledge. While Cathy is confused as to her interpretation of the world around her, just as Fuchsia is, she is more of a willing 'victim'. This is due to her inner faith - she has an unshakeable belief that she will be at last content:

'I'm tired, tired of being enclosed here. I'm wearying to escape into that glorious world, and to be always there; not seeing it dimly through tears, and yearning for it through the walls of an aching heart; but really with it, and in it. Nelly, you think you are better and more fortunate than I; in full health and strength - you are sorry for me - very soon that will be altered. I shall be sorry for *you*. I shall be incomparably beyond and above you all.'⁷

Fuchsia does not share this strength of conviction: she feels - and her world has taught her to feel - that her dreams and fantasies are nothing more than that. Reading this on a psychological level, we might say that Cathy's strength comes out of a sense that she is loved; Fuchsia, however much she desires it, is not. Her romance lives only in her imagination; and the reality, when she can no longer avoid it, is crushing. Cathy dies triumphant, whereas Fuchsia's last moments are filled with despair.

In this sense, I would suggest that Fuchsia's plight - that of unrequited love - conforms to the pattern of more traditional romances than that of Wuthering Heights. An example of this motif

is the Arthurian legend of the Lady of Shalott, in which the romantic dreamer sits weaving her tapestries in the safe isolation of her tower. In Tennyson's rendering of the legend, the 'real' world, about which she dreams, and which is manifested in her tapestries, remains an abstract, a world of which she has no experience. Even the view from the window is glimpsed only in the reflection of a mirror. So protected is she, however, that when reality does intrude - in the form of Lancelot - she is doomed. Steerpike, though he seems an unlikely champion, awakens in Fuchsia the same fatal emotions that destroy the Lady of Shalott. In an instant, the worlds of fantasy and reality collide: "Out flew the web and floated wide; / The mirror cracked from side to side; / 'The curse is come upon me,' cried / The Lady of Shalott."⁸ The web of fantasy, once unravelled, reveals a reality that is unsustainable.

In 1943, Peake was commissioned by the Ministry of Information to produce a collection of drawings for propaganda purposes. The collection, entitled 'An Exhibition of the Artist, Adolf Hitler - "The New Order"', includes a small picture of a drowning girl.⁹ Its haunting, drowsy face recalls something of the expression of John William Waterhouse's well-known Pre-Raphaelite painting, 'The Lady of Shalott'¹⁰, while in the bleak subject of the drawing, Fuchsia's lonely end is recalled:

[I]n trying to turn without sufficient thought or care, she slipped and clutching at the wall at her side found nothing to grasp, so that she fell, striking her head on the sill as she passed, and was already unconscious before the water received her, and drowned her at its ease. (GG, 452)

Notes.

1. Jackson, 142.
2. Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (London: Penguin Popular Classics edition, 1994) 54.
3. Through the Looking Glass (London: Penguin Popular Classics edition, 1994) 71.
4. For a bibliography of books illustrated by Peake, see Maeve Gilmore and Shelagh Johnson, Mervyn Peake: Writings and Drawings (London: Academy Editions, 1974) 123. The book also has several examples of the Alice illustrations on 68-70.
5. *Op. Cit.* In Gilmore and Johnson, 68.
6. See Fannie E. Ratchford, The Brontes' Web of Childhood (New York: 1941).
7. Emily Bronte, Wuthering Heights, 1847. (London: Penguin 1965) 196-7.
8. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, The Lady of Shalott 1832. Cited in The Norton Anthology of English Literature (5th edition) volume II, ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986) ll.114-7.
9. Reproduced in Gilmore and Johnson, 46.
10. 'The Lady of Shalott' (1888), Tate Gallery, London. Reproduced in Christopher Wood, The Pre-Raphaelites (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1981) 141.

6. “This intimate world”¹: Gormenghast’s ‘Middle Class’.

In the pseudo-medieval social hierarchy of Gormenghast, it is perhaps arguable that there exists a recognisable middle class. Those whose professional position may qualify them for such status - Doctor Prunesquallor, the Professors and the Poet - lack the autonomy that would be associated with such professions in the ‘real’ world, dependent as they are, apparently, on the whim of the family which they serve. The Doctor, for example, is described as “the outsider - the commoner - who through his service to the family was honoured by a certain artificial equality of status, liable at any moment to be undermined”. (TG, 107) The Professors, much more so than the Doctor, appear dispensable - a suggestion that is emphasised, perhaps, by the fact that they don’t ‘exist’ until the second book. Their headmaster, Deadyawn, is described as “pure symbol” - evidence that he need only exist in the abstract: “If ever there was a primogenital figure-head or cipher, that archetype had been resurrected in the shape of Deadyawn.” (GG, 57) However, both Doctor and Professors are secure in the continued tenancy of their positions - as is the Poet - due to the intransigent nature of their society. They are necessary components of the ancient machinery of Gormenghast, and so will occupy their posts in perpetuity. It is therefore not surprising to discover that, despite the fact that they are men whose erudition confers upon them a greater degree of rationality, and clearer opinions about the world in which they live, they are among the foremost advocates of tradition. In this chapter, I propose to consider the reasons behind this ‘intellectual conservatism’, concentrating particularly on the characters of Bellgrove, the Doctor and Irma.

It is clear why “It was for the professors to suffer no change.” (GG, 119)² They are an indolent and unimaginative group of academics, for whom change would be exceedingly unwelcome: they would, no doubt, suffer greatly under any rational, efficiency-based initiative.

Most of them have given up any pretence of teaching: the boys under their tutelage spend their time devising ingeniously complex games, and appear to exist very much under their own autonomy. They attend school simply because the boys of Gormenghast have always done so. Furthermore, the academic existence, despite its social privations (emphasised by the adolescent excitement with which the prospect of a party is greeted), is a cosy one, ennui apparently being the only occupational drawback. They are all bachelors; but this is not seen as a disadvantage - far from it: "Never care for hens" is Fluke's misogynistic remark on the subject. Indeed, the subject is rarely considered: "The idea that any one of them should get married seemed to them ludicrously funny. It was not that they felt themselves unworthy, far from it. It was that such a thing belonged to another world." (GG, 128) This again emphasises Gormenghast's sterile atmosphere. The 'other' world is not merely that which is beyond the Professors' quarters - it is virtually beyond the experience of the castle itself.

In short, then, the academic demesne of the Professors is a cosy, world-within-a-world: the "intimate world" of the title. The phrase is taken from The Masters, a novel contemporary with Gormenghast, whose setting is a fictional college within pre-war Cambridge. The novel, focusing as it does on the upheavals and tensions created by the death of the Master of the college, and the election of his successor by the Fellows, offers an interesting comparison with the world of Gormenghast's Professors. Not only is the college bound heavily by tradition; certain of its characters bear comparison with the inhabitants of Gormenghast.

The narrator, Lewis Eliot, occupies the same cold and ancient quarters within the college as his predecessors would have done. There is an air of tradition as tangible as that which pervades Gormenghast: "a sixteenth-century member of the college, dropped in the first court now, would be instantaneously at home. And we felt it."³

Among Gormenghast's academics, Deadyawn, the Headmaster, occupies a position which

appears more symbolic than concrete. However, this position is certainly a privileged one, as is evident from Bellgrove's satisfaction in contemplation of his promotion to the Headmaster's post after Deadyawn's demise: "At that moment he knew himself to be of finer marl. He had known what ambition was." (GG, 117) Bellgrove's ambition is based purely on egotism and vanity: the position, within Gormenghast's crumbling society, carries only that degree of authority that the recipient confers upon it; and Bellgrove, though he "longed for respect", also "loved indolence". (GG, 120) As Headmaster, therefore, his authority is something of a charade - or, as Peake puts it, a rôle: "His noble, leonine head was weak with sympathy for the child, but he was doing his best to play the rôle of headmaster. He had to inspire confidence." (GG, 149) This rather naive, yet perfectly understandable, desire to project a responsible, adult persona (when he plays marbles with Titus in the Lichen Fort, he is revealed as an innocent, "ill at ease with the Adult Mind" (GG, 150)) recalls something of the cloistered, adolescent world of 1930s Cambridge depicted in The Masters: "The college was the place where men lived the least anxious, the most comforting, the freest lives."⁴ It is a world where boys can grow into men without the responsibilities and difficulties of the outside world being thrust upon them.

This has two effects. On the one hand, its members crave acknowledgement and approval for what they know, deep down, to be a luxurious and privileged existence: they need to be told by the 'real' world that what they are doing is worthy and meaningful. In the social climate of the late thirties, the time in which The Masters is set, this was certainly true, and in fact is a central theme in the novel. Paul Jago's monomaniacal ambition to be the new Master must be seen in this context, just as Bellgrove's dreams of adulation must be. The Mastership and the Headship both offer a status set slightly apart from the rest - an 'adult' existence: "The Masters down to 1880 lived a normal prosperous adult life in the midst of celibates, young and old: and they inclined in fact to form a separate aristocratic class in Cambridge society."⁵ This is

retrospective; but the aura of distinctness which surrounds the Mastership of the college lingers on (quite naturally, in such an enclosed atmosphere). The Master's house is separate from the rest of the college; and, throughout much of the novel, a single light burns from the dying master's bedroom when the rest of the college is in darkness - as if to emphasize the difference. The title of Master carries little else with it (Jago, as Master, would have to accept a drop in salary). However, the prestige of such an ancient and honorary position is clearly reward enough.

The Headmaster of Gormenghast carries with it the same kind of prestige. Despite the fact that the other Professors hold Bellgrove himself in little esteem, it is clear that, in succeeding Deadyawn, he has gained the vicarious respect associated with his position. He has different quarters, away from the Professor's quadrangle; and on the night of Irma's party, he wears the "ceremonial robe of leadership". (GG, 211) Being Headmaster, just as being Master, carries an artificial, inherited status: being artificial, it is impossible to question. Of course, Peake's depiction of scholarly life is wholly parodic, Snow's only slightly so: the Masters of Cambridge colleges do have real influence among their peers. Yet within Peake's parody, there is still a hierarchy.

The second effect of such a cosy existence is that, naturally, the Professors are loath to give any of it away. As I have pointed out above, they have no desire to see a change which would, to them, mean a compromise in their position. They are therefore as traditional in their outlook as any other group in the castle, and are described as such: "Those hoary and impossible bands with whom, by ancient tradition, there was no interference. There had once been talk of progress by a young member of a bygone staff, but he had been instantly banished." (GG, 119)

The prospect of change likewise causes great and instinctive alarm among the fellows of the college in The Masters:

Despard-Smith and Francis, just like Chrystal and I myself, suddenly panicked at the idea of an outsider for Master. It was as though our privacy were threatened: magic was being taken from us: this intimate world would not be so much in our power.⁶

For this reason, traditions are held sacrosanct in both the pre-war Cambridge of The Masters and the ancient quadrangle of the Professors of Gormenghast.

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I shall return to a further consideration of Bellgrove's role later, when I come to look at the character of Irma Prunesquallor. However, I shall now turn to her brother, the Doctor, one of the principal players throughout the first two books. A richly developed character, his position within the society of Gormenghast, and his attitude towards it, makes him a vitally important character, both for our deeper understanding of the nature of the castle and its society, and for his influence on the growth of Titus Groan.

Doctor Prunesquallor, though a commoner, is, as a result of his learning and his position as physician to the family, a privileged member of the society of Gormenghast. His status is based on a real and vital role; and though deferential towards the Earl (whom he respects) and Countess (whom he finds rather frightening), he is somewhat irreverent towards others of higher status - in particular, the Twins. He is respected by Fuchsia, and later by Titus - and also by Gertrude, though she finds him extremely irritating.

His self-assurance is due to three factors. Firstly, he is confident of his position within the castle. He is fully aware of the fact that, as Doctor to the Groans, he is indispensable. As he remarks to the Twins: "it... is... positively the organic life of the castle that I foster, and control,

ha, ha..." (TG, 110) Furthermore, he is entirely satisfied with his position. "There is not the minutest molecule of ambition in my anatomy", he declares to Steerpike. (TG, 179) Unlike the Professors, he plays a central role in the castle's life - which contributes to his sense of superiority, even snobbishness, when he compares himself with them: "As for their being 'gentlemen' - perhaps they were. But only just. If their blood was bluish, so for the most part were their jaws and finger-nails. If their backgrounds bore scrutiny, the same could hardly be said of their foregrounds." (GG, 92)

Secondly, he has the security of insight: as possibly the most intelligent and perceptive member of the household, he realises fully that the security of his position is based on certain immutable factors. The ancient traditions of Gormenghast are based on the continuation of the Groan line; and the Doctor is responsible for "the whole anatomical caboodle" - an essential part of his function is to "deliver the new generations to the old". (TG, 110) He therefore controls, to a great extent, the perpetuation of the society to which he belongs. John Batchelor has suggested a comparison in this sense with Dickens' Tulkinghorn, the lawyer in Bleak House, who controls clandestinely those whom he represents.⁷ From the first, he reveals the true nature of his status, when he remarks to the Countess: "'I advise, but never order', he said, in a voice which implied that he could have done any amount of ordering had he thought it necessary." (TG, 60) Finally, and crucially, he is among the sanest of individuals. At the beginning of Gormenghast, it is emphasised his manner and his mind are at variance: "His main defects? The unsufferable pitch of his voice; his maddening laughter and his affected gestures. His cardinal virtue? An undamaged brain." (GG, 12)

In the restrictive, cloistered atmosphere of Gormenghast, those who remain relatively untouched are those best able to protect their inner selves. The Countess, as I have suggested above, achieves this by focusing on her cats and birds, and allowing the natural world to obscure

the social. Sepulchre's melancholia, though acute and ultimately dangerous, is controlled by the ritualised life that allows him to perform his daily functions mechanically, allowing his mind to wander among the fictions of the literary past. The Doctor manages to retain his sanity by a mixture of affectation, buffoonery and verbal play, which allows his mind relief from the grim repression of his environment. This is highly significant: Doctor Prunesquallor's knowledge of psychology alerts him to the dangers of stifling his emotions; and so he releases them in a controlled, scientific way. Though he is considered as eccentric - or "wrong", as Nannie Slagg describes him - his very eccentricity is rational and sane.

An example of this occurs at the beginning of Gormenghast when, in considering the problem of his sister's desire for a suitor, his imagination allows him relief from his anxieties:

Prunesquallor had smiled. For he had found relief in the notion that there were several worse things imaginable than being saddled with his sister metaphorically, and one of them was that he should have been saddled with her in all its literal horror. (GG, 29)

This is an example of Prunesquallor's ability to expand from the mundane into the absurd, and is an important aspect of his character. Time and again, he is drawn out of life into a solipsistic flight of linguistic word-play, in which he inverts literal and metaphorical meanings, creates and breaks logical premises, and undermines the truisms of his world. Looking from the window of the Cool Room, awaiting the start of the Christening ceremony, he is prompted to consider, with questionable yet undoubtedly entertaining logic, the nature of cedar trees, relative to himself:

‘I positively enjoy cedars, but do cedars positively enjoy me? Ha, ha - do they, my dear Mr Flay, do they? - or is this rather above you, my man, is my philosophy a trifle above you? For if I enjoy a cedar but a cedar does not, ha, ha, enjoy me, then surely I am at once in a position of compromise, being, as it were, ignored by

the vegetative world, which would think twice, mark you, my dear fellow, would think twice about ignoring a cartload of mulch, ha, ha, or to put it in another way...'

(TG, 108-9)

Were he not interrupted at this point, Dr Prunesquallor would undoubtedly be capable of pursuing this train of thought endlessly. It is clearly a pointless exercise from an objective point of view; and indeed, these verbalizations of his thought processes are of little interest to any other of the characters. However, to the Doctor, they are necessary diversions. As Morton Gurewitch suggests in his investigation into the irrational nature of comedy, this kind of verbal play "provides a gratifying realisation that one's mind is functioning brightly."⁸

This is important for two reasons. Firstly, the Doctor has a keen intellect. This is apparent, not only in his insightful behaviour towards Fuchsia and later towards Steerpike, but also in the fact that he needs intellectual stimulus - which, ironically, attracts him to the notion of employing Steerpike in his household (coupled, possibly, with homosexual attraction). In such a stilted psychological environment as Gormenghast, mental functions are all too easily eroded.

Secondly, and implicitly connected to this factor, is the fact that the Doctor, possibly more than any other character, is a gregarious animal: his cultured sophistication requires acknowledgement and approbation. Thus he adopts an extravagant, affected persona, which ranges between urbanity (as when entertaining guests in his house) and the mannered campness he adopts when in public. A good example of this is once again in the Cool Room:

[H]e skipped to the window, a performance grotesquely incongruous in one of his years, and leaning in an over-elegant posture against the window frame, he made that peculiarly effeminate gesture of the left hand that he was so fond of, the placing of the tips of thumb and index finger together, and thus forming an O, while the remaining three fingers were strained back and curled into letter Cs

of dwindling sizes. His left elbow, bent acutely, brought his hand about a foot away from him and on a level with the flower in his buttonhole. His narrow chest, like a black tube, for he was dressed in a cloth of death's colour, gave forth a series of those irritating laughs that can only be symbolised by 'ha, ha, ha,' but whose pitch scraped at the inner wall of the skull. (TG, 108)

This is similarly reflected in his verbal wit - and each are equally challenging to the sobriety of much of his society. As Gurewitch observes: "insofar that innocent wit is a social performance, it provides an exhibitionistic satisfaction - that of bolstering one's vanity and prestige."⁹

This 'showing off' is largely for Prunesquallor's own benefit: he needs to feel clever, witty, impressive; but it depends on the reaction (or non-reaction) of those around him for its effect. Thus he revels in attention. His laugh, too, emphasises the effect; and even his house is appropriately idiosyncratic: "it stood out strangely from the ubiquitous grey stone of Gormenghast". (TG, 168)

All these factors suggest that the Doctor, like many of the other inhabitants of Gormenghast, is a grotesque. If incongruity is a central criterion by which one can measure grotesquery, as seems probable, then Doctor Prunesquallor certainly can be described as such. In addition, his scientific, rational intellect are not part of the pseudo-medieval world that he inhabits: he is a figure from the eighteenth century, not the fourteenth (see also pp.244-5 below) However, such a definition somewhat over-simplifies his position. As I have suggested above, Gormenghast is a world of incongruities: the fact that each character is grotesque confirms this. The principal difference in the Doctor's case, I would argue, lies in his awareness of the absurdity of the world in which he lives - and perhaps even more importantly, his acceptance of it. In this sense, I would suggest that he performs the functions of the fool.

From the outset, Prunesquallor is described as an outsider. This peripheral position, coupled

with the fact that, as I have already said, his role within Gormenghast's society is a central one, gives him the privilege of separateness that is characteristic of the fool or jester. As T.G.A. Nelson remarks, "fools are, and know themselves to be, set apart from the everyday world."¹⁰ This suggests that it is necessary for the fool to be fully conscious of the nature of the society in which he lives. This allows him the freedom from censure which we associate with the medieval court jester, who enjoys a sort of diplomatic immunity from the punishments his censorious behaviour would normally deserve. Leszek Kolakowski maintains that the existence of the fool is a symptom of a "good society":

Although an habitué of good society, [the jester] does not belong to it and makes it the object of his inquisitive impertinence; he... questions what appears to be self-evident. The jester could not do this if he himself were part of the good society... A jester must remain an outsider.¹¹

It is possibly stretching a point to describe the repressive society of Gormenghast as "good"; but, despite Peake's ambivalence, it is clear that there are certain values which we would recognise as vital parts of a civilised culture - and those are the values we hope will prevail.

Doctor Prunesquallor recognises those values, and is imbued with a deep humanity. If he is irreverent, it is through the conscious exercising of an innocent wit - a rejuvenating rather than a destructive impulse. As I shall argue below (see pp.243ff.), his character is central to an interpretation of Gormenghast as a comic novel. Though he is able to see much that is imperfect about Gormenghast, he also perceives what essential qualities lie within its shadows. He is therefore able to accept in his own mind what others might regard as heresy:

Although the Doctor, with a mind of his own, had positively heterodox opinions regarding certain aspects of the Castle's life... yet he was of the place and was a freak only in that his mind worked... in a wide way, relating and

correlating his thoughts so that his conclusions were clear and accurate and nothing short of heresy. But this did not mean that he considered himself to be superior. Oh no. He was not. The blind faith was the pure faith, however muddy the brain. His gem-like consciousness may have been of the first water, but his essence and his spirit were warped in proportion to his disbelief in the value of even the most fooling observance. He was no outsider - and the tragedies that had occurred touched him upon the raw. (TG, 470)

He is, in his own mind, and contrary to the beliefs of many of those around him, “no outsider”. The Countess, equally perceptive in her own way, recognises this, when she visits him to discuss the troubles that are stirring in the castle: “I have a kind of faith in you, man. A kind of faith in you. I don't know why.” (GG, 43-4) Her faith comes from the understanding that the Doctor has the insight which she lacks: her intuition, as it were, recognises traits in him that her conscious mind, shackled and confined as it is by her position, is unable to grasp.

As I have stated above, however, Gormenghast is a closed world: there is, according to those who dwell within its walls, “nowhere else”. This would suggest that the Doctor's knowledge stems from the non-existent ‘outer world’. In other words, we return to the paradox of heterodoxy within a total state. Like Titus, the Doctor seems to have some inkling that there is more to the world than just Gormenghast. On closer analysis, though, this position is also consistent with that of the fool. The medieval idea of the universe, based on Platonic theory, was that of the earthly world being an imperfect and transitional state, as compared with the ideal and permanent outer world of grace to which one aspired. The fool, who, by questioning meanings and truisms in the earthly world, was believed to have an otherworldly, an uncanny sensibility, and was therefore associated, though somewhat precariously, with holiness. Nelson suggests that “[the fool's] folly (often thought of as bordering on madness) carries with it a

wisdom that is not the wisdom of the world.”¹²

Thus the link between foolishness - even madness - and a higher wisdom, clearly of central importance when considering the character of Doctor Prunesquallor, is maintained. One might even say that the relationship between the fictional world of Gormenghast and the ‘real’ world is sustained by an ironic inversion of Platonic theory: fiction asks questions of the world; yet the world is impermanent, imperfect. The Doctor, in casting doubts on the sanity of the world he inhabits, while at the same time maintaining an eccentric persona to distance himself from it, is in effect looking back up the telescope at us, a look of ironic enquiry on his face.

The wise fool therefore maintains his sanity amidst the madneses and dangers around him. Yet even he is not exempted from his share of sorrow and pain. A humanising, comedic figure, he survives (as all fools should); yet he is deeply human himself, and feels intensely. His love for Fuchsia is private - repressed, even (see p.87 above); and this affection is both the source of his courage and resilience, and, ultimately, his greatest anguish. The comic mask he wears throughout, significantly, is his thick-lensed glasses. Behind them, his eyes swim grotesquely, leaving his deeper thoughts unseen: his myopic appearance is a keenly observed irony. But when he discovers that Fuchsia is dead, he removes them, revealing the sadness of mourning, naked and honest. It is a display of humanity (and recalls Golding’s *Piggy*¹³) which, fittingly, is witnessed only by Titus:

His cheeks were wet, and his glasses had become so blurred that he stumbled when he reached the door and could not find the handle. Titus opened the door for him and for a moment caught a glimpse of his friend in the corridor outside as he removed his glasses and began to wipe them with his silk handkerchief, his head bowed, his weak eyes peering at the spectacles in his hand with that kind of concentration that is grief. (GG, 462)

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The Doctor's sister, Irma, is also myopic. However, she is painfully aware that this deficiency affects her standing in society, and so wears dark glasses, or even dispenses with aid of any sort. Thus, she sees the world only dimly - an ironic comment on the romantic near-sightedness with which she interprets the world. Her acute status-consciousness stems from the fact that, unlike the Doctor, she is uncertain of her position within Gormenghast's society. As I have suggested above, the doctor is assured of his position partly through the fact that he plays a vital role in the continued well-being and perpetuation of the Groan line. Irma, however, has no position at all; and as role and status are of great importance in such a society, she is constantly trying to project herself into what she romantically imagines to be most appropriate: the persona of a lady. At the beginning of Gormenghast, her comic aspirations are summarised: "She misses her footing on the social ladder at least three times a week, only to start climbing again". (GG, 12-13) In this sense, she belongs, like her brother, firmly in the fiction of the eighteenth century. Irma's rather grotesque social pretensions, however, are rooted in a much deeper problem: acutely self-conscious and lacking in any degree of self-esteem, she is all too aware of the fact that she appears to be rather ridiculous to others; and yet she yearns for a companion, longs to be revered and adored. Thus she confuses the question of her status with that of her attractiveness.

This factor is introduced by the attentions of Steerpike. Seeking to gain favour and advantage as ever, his solicitous and flattering manner awakens in her a romantic susceptibility. In this way, her social aspirations become fused with her need for personal fulfilment: "It made her feel he realized she was not only a lady, but a woman." (TG, 186) Unfortunately, Steerpike's overtures are purely cynical machinations - something which causes Irma a great deal of distress.

Combined with the constant battering her social self-esteem receives, it is not surprising that she is so highly neurotic.

Yet in a sense, this neurosis makes her more human, less grotesque. Her dramatic release in the Library, and at the picnic by Gormenghast Lake, though they cause her great embarrassment, merely indicate the extreme repression which the rigid atmosphere of Gormenghast has subjected her to. Furthermore, the fact that, despite such setbacks, she remains true to her romantic vision, underlines her courage and resilience - something which the Doctor notices as they prepare for the Party: "Her brother was beginning to admire her. Had she all this long while been hiding beneath her neuroticism, her vanity, her childishness, an iron will?" (GG, 90) It is therefore fitting that she finds, at last, her knight in shining armour - even though it is in the unlikely figure of Bellgrove, the ageing Headmaster. Their romantic pastiche helps confer a comic tone on the first half of Gormenghast. Significantly, in the very moment of rapture, when Bellgrove stoops to kiss Irma's hand, the couple are in the spotlight of a very formal gathering (or *soirée*, as Irma chooses to call it). In a comedic inversion of the ancient rituals of courtship, Bellgrove and Irma defy, or rejuvenate, the dusty barrenness which pervades the castle, while nevertheless affirming those traditional values which have sustained it (see also pp.247-50 below).

Significantly, romance provides for both Irma and Bellgrove an escape from the grim realities of life. In Irma's case (and in what is once again a comic inversion, this time of Fuchsia's plight), it serves to blur the distinction between reality and dream: "She had, in her transport, no clue as to what was real and what was fantasy." (GG, 276) For the first time in her life, she has achieved a release from the neuroses that have repressed her character; and in doing so, she has acquired a higher consciousness, which is to sustain her, even beyond the inevitable return to mundanity. For she has found a role which unites her self-consciousness with her status:

“Marriage had given her vanity both drive and direction.” (GG, 276) As for Bellgrove, it has provided him with the respect he craves, both from his dotting spouse and from his staff; and it has saved him from that most pervasive and damaging of Gormenghast’s influences on the individual: the deep and distressing solitude that, as a bachelor in a bachelor’s profession, he had been forced to contemplate: “Bellgrove, eminently lovable, because of his individual weakness, his incompetence, his failure as a man, a scholar, a leader or even as a companion, was nevertheless utterly alone.” (GG, 152)

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The Poet of Gormenghast is a peripheral figure, and at times seems to perform little more than a purely symbolic function. However, as a symbol at least, he deserves some consideration. He first appears, much to Steerpike’s alarm, looking out of a window in the wall below. This image of him is typical: he appears almost always in isolation, an adornment of the castle rather than an inhabitant. However, as he opens his mouth to intone a poem, his voice is so alien to Steerpike that he cannot at first understand him. With a subtle irony, he recites a mournful lyric about loneliness - a common enough subject, certainly; but in the silent vastnesses of Gormenghast, almost too common, too mundane a subject. If the Romantic artist’s effectiveness derives from his opposition to what is commonly perceived - as was the case with Wordsworth - then the value of such an artist in a community of isolated individuals is questionable. It may be argued, therefore, that this arch-Romantic is in fact of an ironic, Modernist sensibility.¹⁴

This irony, though, is largely the author’s, who, despite a Romantic sensibility is, as I shall assert later in this thesis (see chapters 11 and 15 below), also imbued with a modern awareness. The poet himself would no doubt consider himself a Romantic - and as such is seen as rather

naive by the Earl, apparently the only other person with whom he has any sort of relationship:

On occasion [Sepulchrave] would visit that long, wedge-headed man and find in the abstract language with which they communicated their dizzy stratas of conjecture a temporary stir of interest. But in the poet there was an element of the idealist, a certain enthusiasm which was a source of irritation to Lord Sepulchrave, so that they met only at long intervals. (TG, 205)

He is, therefore, largely left to his own dreams - until he is called upon, late in the second book, to take over as the Keeper of the Ritual. In this brief spell in the limelight, his nature is revealed as being perfectly suited to such a task:

His high order of intelligence which had up till now been concentrated upon the creation of dazzling, if incomprehensible, structures of verbiage, was now able to deploy itself in a way which, if almost as incomprehensible, was at the same time of more value to the castle. The Poetry of Ritual had gripped him and his long wedge-shaped face was never without a speculative twist of the muscles - as though he were forever turning over some fresh and absorbing variant of the problem of Ceremony and the human element. (GG, 505)

The poet Peake is clearly being ironic in mocking the position of the artist within society. Yet, in the rise of the Poet to the position that Steerpike sought as the key to power within the castle, he is also offering a comment on the survival and regeneration of that society. Like the fool, the bard lives on, so that the essential values and truths of a civilisation can survive. This was of particular concern during the Second World War, as I shall explain below (see pp.275ff.). In the subsequent paragraph, our thoughts are turned towards Titus's abdication; but when he finally returns from his quest, it is the gun of Ritual that tells him that Gormenghast endures. Though he follows an individualistic vocation, the Poet's true purpose is as the voice of his people.

Notes.

1. C.P. Snow, The Masters (1951. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956) 184.
2. Peake tends increasingly to use “professors” in preference to the original choice of “Professors”. I have retained the upper case usage in the thesis, though obviously reproducing Peake’s form in quotations.
3. Snow, 300.
4. *Ibid*, 312.
5. *Ibid*, 302.
6. *Ibid*, 184.
7. My conversation with John Batchelor, January 1995.
8. Morton Gurewitch, Comedy: The Irrational Vision (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975) 54.
9. *Ibid*, 54.
10. T.G.A. Nelson, Comedy: The Theory of Comedy in Literature, Drama and Cinema (Oxford: O.U.P., 1990), 112.
11. Leszek Kolakowski, ‘The Priest and the Jester’, Dissent 9 (1962) 214-35.
12. Nelson, 112.
13. William Golding, Lord of the Flies (London: Faber and Faber, 1954). Piggy’s role in the novel is also that of the scientist - and arguably, as the wise fool as well.
14. As with “Romantic”, the label “Modernist” refers to a specific literary ‘movement’. The use of “modern” throughout the text signifies a wider cultural attitude which does not necessarily reflect Modernist attitudes (though in many cases it will).

7. The subordinate characters.

In a recent article, Miles Fielder argues that the Titus Novels are “ex-centred” - that, having no central plot or focusing locality, and being composed largely of fragmentary episodes and scenarios, they offer an ontology that is distinctly chimaeric - with a necessarily displaced, or fictive, ‘centre’. Oscillating between stasis and movement (or fragmentation), vastness and constriction, past, present and future, the very structure of the novels, he maintains, is cast into a self-deconstructive “kaleidoscope”, which is both the root of their resistance to generic categorisation, and the basis of their appeal.¹

While I find this argument extremely interesting, I feel that it fails to take into account any thematic approach to the novels - particularly with regard to the concept of change. For, though it is possible to see in the ontology of Gormenghast an essentially postmodern, poststructuralist universe (or universes), it is not possible to conceive of such a state without recourse to an original focus. Alienation, after all, is a state removed from a more cohesive existence. What I think the Titus novels express is not an alienated, but an alienating, representation of the world. The appeal, and importance, of the novels is not that they present an “ex-centred state”, but that they describe a degeneration - a fragmentation - of what was once a cohesive, or centred, society. The “bell-like heart” of Gormenghast is “corroding” - not corroded.

As I affirmed in part one, the power of the Groans is based on the apparent immortality of their Line. The longer they go on, the more secure they are in their control of the society their dynasty has created. Furthermore, the antiquity, extension and mystery of the castle over which they (symbolically) preside, confers on them still greater power.

However, as Fielder suggests, the polarities operating within the novels create a sense of fragmentation and dissolution. The characters inhabit a stagnant world of ghosts and shadows,

and are members of a society that only cohere through the structures of precedence. Luisella Ciambezi offers an anthropological analysis of this degeneration. The structures of precedence - which she identifies as the many and complex rituals that govern the day-to-day lives of the inhabitants of Gormenghast - form a cohesive backbone fundamental to societal existence. These rituals, according to the definition she uses (from an anthropologist, D.I. Kertzer), are those functions which represent “symbolic, repetitive and socially standardized behaviour”². Following Durkheim, Ciambezi suggests that such behaviour provides cohesion in society by encouraging “emotive participation” among its members³. She then provides examples in the text which illustrate that this social bond is being undermined (see below). The essential point is that Gormenghast’s society is held together by an atrophied system of codes, whose disintegration accelerates throughout the first two novels.

This again emphasises the process, rather than the results, of change. The ritualised modes of behaviour, though increasingly undermined (and in fact revealed as absurd - both by the attitude of many of the characters towards them, and by Peake’s parodic presentation of them), still control the lives and behaviour of the inhabitants of the castle. This is true to such an extent that many characters cannot survive without it.

Lacking any central plot, then, Titus Groan presents a fragmented world whose elements are nevertheless seen to cohere, however tenuously, through the comprehensiveness of the ancient laws. This has two contrasting yet interdependent effects. Firstly, it performs a social function: however dry or meaningless the countless ceremonies may be, they are almost the only situations in which individuals are forced out of their isolation and into the company of others. Secondly, as is seen on these occasions, its degeneration also isolates individuals, so that they perform as members of a society only in their function. The absurd combination of physical contiguity and emotional isolation that is most in evidence on such ceremonial occasions therefore clearly

indicates that such a total system leads inevitably to a loss of identity.

This fragmenting of the social fabric is illustrated by all: Sepulchrave's inability to act on his own initiative (or the fatal results of him doing so) and indeed the neuroses of many of the privileged individuals is testimony to this. However, the system was created to perpetuate the Groan line: they are its object, and therefore to some extent removed from it. This is not true of the subordinate characters, however. They are its subjects, and are identified solely as parts of the system. Created solely to perform certain functions, they can be conceived as the mechanical components of the system of Gormenghast. It thus becomes reasonable to suppose that by examining the subordinate characters, it will be possible to determine the extent and nature of the deterioration of the system. For, unlike the Groans (and, to a certain extent, the Prunesquallors), the servants, though isolated, can be defined in terms of their function, and are therefore part of the structural fabric of the world they inhabit.

The infirmity of the aged Sourdust, ironically described as the Master of Ritual, gives an early indication of the dilapidated state of the structure. His lifelong involvement with the intricacies of the Ritual has both strengthened his position within the system, and greatly weakened him as an individual. In fact, it is impossible to conceive of him without his function: his character, like that of many of the subordinates, is not developed beyond it.

Just as the great age of the castle confers upon it the sense of inviolable security, so Sourdust's antiquity gives the impression - at least among the other inhabitants - of permanence. However, this stability is illusory: it is the Ritual that is permanent. Sourdust is painfully mortal. He dodders from one ceremony to the next, wheezing and frail, aware of both the importance of his function, and of his individual limitations. In this struggle he is a tragicomic figure, imbued with a sort of noble pedantry. This is illustrated in our first encounter with him, when he joins Lord Sepulchrave at breakfast to inform him of his duties for the day. He intones "in

a weak and shaking voice and yet with a certain dignity as though it were not simply a case of having to get through the ritual, but that it was now, as always, well worth getting through.” (TG, 64) Such speeches, though, are invariably followed by a rasping cough - a reminder that Sourdust’s days are numbered. As if aware of this, he greets impatience (usually emanating from the Countess) or flippancy (the Doctor’s reaction) with sadness, or even irritability. Prunesquallor is reminded of this when, while waiting for the christening of Titus to begin in the Cool Room, he reaches for a cake:

[B]efore he had got it to his mouth, a hissing note stopped him short. It came from Sourdust, and it caused the doctor to replace the green cake on the top of the pile even more swiftly than he had removed it. He had forgotten for the moment, or had pretended to forget, what a stickler for etiquette old Sourdust was.

(TG, 107)

The marked contrast between Sourdust’s frailty and his intransigent regard for the solemnity of the ceremonies over which he presides offers an indication of the precarious state of the Ritual. However, there is another factor to take into consideration: that of Peake’s parodying of the formal. Sourdust’s combination of gravity and ineptitude would be conceived as pathetic, if it weren’t for the fact that his rigorous regard for the spirit of the occasion is constantly undermined by comic events - often instigated either by his own physical infirmity (as when he drops Titus from the sacred tome during his christening ceremony) or by the absurdities of the Ritual itself:

“Without a word of warning Sourdust rapped his knuckles on the table and cried out with his own voice: ‘All are gathered, save only him for whom this gathering is gathered.’” (TG, 111)

This ludicrous statement, of course, is given - and received - in all seriousness: it is an indication of the tenuousness of the Ritual that the inhabitants of Gormenghast, brought up on

such grandiose nonsense, cannot recognise its ridiculousness as we can. A further indication of such absurdity occurs when Sourdust, having overseen, with great satisfaction, a minor ceremony, traps his beard in the door of an iron cupboard:

It was in vain for him to pull, for not only was he held fast, but the pain to his chin brought tears to his eyes. To bring the key out and the hairs of his beard with it would ruin the ceremony, for it was laid down that the key must remain in the lock for twenty-three hours, a retainer in yellow being posted to guard the cupboard for that period. (TG, 295)

Sourdust is forced to cut himself free with a knife. Such comedy, as Ciambezi suggests, removes the sense of the sacred and inviolable through which rituals retain their cohesive power. Furthermore, though he is to some extent aware of the fact that his status as Master of Ritual - and, by implication, the system that he stands for - is being undermined in this way, he is unable to act differently, for, only by striving to preserve the spirit of the Ritual can he hope to maintain a belief in its importance. Thus, the more ludicrous the ceremonies are seen to be, the harder he must strive to keep the sense of occasion in them. He functions thus as the pedant, who attempts to compensate for his (and the Ritual's) failings with an increased diligence and attention to the minutest detail.

Sourdust is of course a casualty of the fire in the Library. This is significant for two reasons. Firstly, the meeting in the Library was the result of an impromptu action on the part of Sepulchrave. In attempting to impose his own initiative on the ritualised processes that govern the life of the castle, Sepulchrave ironically condemns the Keeper of Ritual to death. With the burning of the tinder-dry body of Sourdust, it is as if the Ritual itself is being destroyed. Of course, his son Barquentine is able to take his place; but in this barren world, the demise of such vital links with the past cannot be sustained by Gormenghast.

Sourdust's burial is further testimony to the undermining of the system he had stood for. On his way to the burial ground, Flay, carrying the old servant's bones, is ambushed by Steerpike, who steals Sourdust's skull for his own use. The Master of Ritual is therefore buried with a surrogate calf's skull - a final, appropriate deviation from the norm. Furthermore, in a posthumously ironic statement, the skull reappears as part of Steerpike's 'ghost'. Thus the head which, in life, was the keeper of the complex system which served to protect its society from degeneration serves, in death, to further this process, by reinforcing the isolation of Cora and Clarice from that society.

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Officiating at Sourdust's funeral is his son, Barquentine. He has been discovered in his louse-infested hovel in the depths of the castle; and the nature of his unearthing supports the idea that each of the subordinate characters can be regarded solely in terms of his function. It is as if Barquentine has been hibernating - waiting in a state of dormancy until the time when his services are required. It also appears that the title of Master of Ritual has been passed on with hardly any change: Sourdust's offspring resembles him so closely that: "At first sight the servants were appalled at a similarity between the son and the dead father". (TG, 330) However, there is an important physical difference between Barquentine and Sourdust: whereas the father was frail with age, the son is not. Instead, he is crippled. If we are to consider the physical state of the servants as indicative of the state of the system, we may infer from this development that, whereas that castle was ageing in Sourdust's time, it has, with the succession of the crippled Barquentine, become in some way deformed.

From the moment of his promotion, Barquentine takes a despotic hold on the life of the

castle. All fear the sound of his crutch. It is indeed significant that Fuchsia and Titus are the ones who fear - or hate - him most. Barquentine, in whose hands the future of the castle lies, is in fact alienating the inheritors of what he stands for. If the future seemed uncertain in the days of Sourdust and Sepulchre then, under the hostile tyranny of Barquentine, it is horrific. Furthermore, Barquentine constitutes a tenacious opponent for Steerpike who, in killing his father, has unwittingly placed an obstinate barrier between himself and power. As I have suggested above, (chapter 2) Steerpike's aim is not to destroy, but to rule Gormenghast. His problem is not the system, but who runs it.

This underlines the difference between Titus and Steerpike. To Steerpike, Barquentine's power and knowledge of the system is highly desirable; to Titus, all that the abusive dwarf stands for is despicable. Of course, to the young boy, Barquentine is repulsive; but perhaps more significant is the fact that he, above all others, dehumanizes the Groans. He worships the Line in the abstract only: the individuals through which the line is continued is of no interest to him: "The Countess, Fuchsia and Titus were mere links to him in the blood-red, the imperial chain - nothing more." (GG, 159) This abstract loyalty may have been enough in the past. The older members of the family accept this: Gertrude in particular believes that the chain is more important than the links. However, to Titus and Fuchsia, alienated and unloved, the contrary is true: what they crave is love for their own sake, not reverence for what they represent. It may therefore be argued that Steerpike's destruction of Barquentine, though important in terms of the further deterioration of the castle's society, is not as important as the impression the despotic nature of the Keeper of Ritual has on the young heir.

Interestingly, though Steerpike despises Barquentine, they are in fact similar in one important respect. The inhuman ambition of the kitchen-hand and the tyranny of the Master of Ritual may both be seen as the psychological consequences of early life. Steerpike's origins are obscure;

but it is certain that he comes from the lower orders, and would have suffered as such - particularly given his strange physical appearance and antisocial manner. Barquentine, the deformed and crippled dwarf, has dim memories of a childhood of abuse and ridicule. It is unsurprising, therefore, that both of them grow up to be misanthropes, rejecting the society that has treated them so inhumanly; and fitting, perhaps, that both, unwittingly, are responsible for the demise of the system into which they were born.

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If Titus Groan lacks a central plot then, in the feud of Mr Flay and Swelter, it has a stimulating and significant sub-plot, in which much of the action of the novel is concentrated. The implications of such a device for the dramatic structure of Titus Groan shall be examined further below (see pp.232ff.). However, the development of these two significant characters - in terms of both their functions and their increasingly individualised personas - shall be the focus of the present discussion.

The First Servant and the Chef of Gormenghast are opposites in every way. Flay is painfully thin, Swelter grossly obese. Flay is introverted, his natural habitat the shadowy realm of the Stone Lanes; Swelter craves an audience, and rules the cacophonous expanse of the Great Kitchen. They are the bones and belly of Gormenghast: two diametrically opposed parts of the same organism, at war with each other. As I have already commented, one central purpose of the Ritual is to bring the 'components' (that is, the individual characters) of the castle together. In the case of Flay and Swelter, however, this unavoidable meeting merely fuels their antipathy.

Flay first encounters Swelter in the latter's domain, when he is forced by the circumstance of Titus's birth to visit the Great Kitchen. Immediately, the extent of Flay's antipathy towards

the chef is made apparent:

He remembered, when he had first come across Swelter, how he and the chef had instantaneously entertained a natural dislike, and how this antipathy festered. To Swelter it was irksome to see the bony straggly figure of Lord Sepulchrave's first servant in his kitchen, the only palliative to this annoyance being the opportunity it afforded him for the display of his superior wit at Mr Flay's expense. (TG, 32)

Swelter is, initially, at a clear advantage. Firstly, he is in his own realm: though technically his superior, Mr Flay is out of his normal habitat, and therefore vulnerable; whereas Swelter, surrounded by those who acknowledge only him as their master, is keen to show Flay who, in this situation, is in control. Furthermore, the chef thrives on the adulation of his minions: he is an assured performer, showing off his linguistic eloquence to his audience. Mr Flay, on the other hand, is taciturn to the extreme. Even when in full command of a situation, he is unable to form more than simple, elided statements. Swelter is fully aware of this, and revels in Flay's discomfort. Inevitably, Flay is forced to withdraw to the safety of the Stone Lanes, leaving Swelter victorious.

As the feud deepens and develops, each one is forced into a closer scrutiny of the psychological motivations of the other; and, particularly in the case of Mr Flay, this increasing intensity also leads to a degree of self-examination. This, perhaps, is another indication of the extent to which the system has eroded. Flay is an important cog in the machinery of Gormenghast; but he is a cog nevertheless: it is not part of his function, in a system whose success depends on passive, unquestioning acceptance, to try to comprehend his individual situation.

The next confrontation is on the occasion of Titus's christening: and here, Mr Flay regains

the advantage. Swelter, seizing yet another opportunity to humiliate his rival in front of his acolytes, is given a sudden insight into the depth of Flay's scorn for him. The First Servant slashes Swelter's face with a chain, bringing his enjoyment of the situation to an abrupt halt. This is the chef's weak spot: being the performer, he is dependent on his public domination of a situation. Humiliation, though intensely wounding to Flay, is at least a familiar pain to one who lacks the ability to communicate; to Swelter, however, it is lethal. Whereas the chef has formerly been contented with demeaning Mr Flay - with the assurance that he has the wit and intelligence to do so - he has now been out-bluffed, and must extract revenge. From this moment on, the battle for supremacy is joined in earnest.

What this means, in fact, is an individualization of motive. Swelter, from being chef of Gormenghast, now gains an individual character, focused by personal rather than societal interests. This is illustrated too by his unexpected reaction to the above incident. His kitchen hands, used to being the victims of their master's temper, expect the worst. Swelter, however, is rendered immobile by his emotions: "The chef, with his hatred so riveted upon the person of Flay, had forgotten them and did not vent his spleen upon them." (TG, 105) This, then, is a narrative which, in its examination of the emergence of the individual ego, anticipates that of Titus in Gormenghast.

Flay, the most loyal of subordinates, suffers a conflict of interests. Steerpike's disappearance from the room where he had incarcerated him causes Mr Flay great concern - for such an event may have dire repercussions for the castle; but, lurking also in his dreams and thoughts is the gross figure of the chef:

At night as he lay before his master's door he would twitch and awake and then sit bolt upright on the cold floor-boards. At first the face of Swelter would appear before his eyes, huge and indistinct, with those beady eyes in their folds of flesh,

cold and remorseless. He would shoot his hard, cropped head forward, and wipe the sweat from his palm upon his clothes. Then, as the foul phantom dissolved in the darkness, his mind would lure him into the empty room where he had last seen Steerpike and in his imagination he would make a circuit of the walls, feeling the panels with his hands and come at last to the window, where he would stare down the hundreds of feet of sheer wall to the yard below. (TG, 126)

Swelter is wholly preoccupied with Flay. In a sequence of increasingly eerie scenes, we - and Flay - witness the chef's preparations for revenge. He sits at night, sharpening his cleaver and "practising tip-toeing with absolute silence"; (TG, 211) to Flay's horror, he appears to know exactly where, and in what position, he sleeps.

Clearly, Swelter has once more gained the initiative. While he makes his gruesome preparations for retribution, Flay can only wait, his anxiety growing. The machinations of Steerpike and the resulting conflagration divert his attention for a time; but inexorably his thoughts return to that ghastly image of Swelter rehearsing his murder in the green light of his quarters. Thus, the momentum of Titus Groan is constantly switched between the subordinates' feud and the continued degeneration of the system that supports the Groan dynasty. It is clear therefore that the psychological wearing-down of Flay's sense of authority echoes the erosion of authority throughout the castle. In the fire, Sepulchrave's authority is stripped from him; Irma's self-possession deserts her; and Sourdust, symbol and device of authority, is consumed by the flames.

The two plots are further linked by the pervasive atmosphere that descends upon the castle. As I have suggested above (see pp.31-5), the climatic conditions around Gormenghast can be seen as an extension of the psychological state of its inhabitants: the castle takes on a nightmarish quality, as oppressive clouds darken the skies and deepen the shadows within it.

The chapter 'Swelter leaves his card' makes explicit the connection between these external conditions and the rising internal tension:

The whine was yet in the wind; the November whine. But as night followed night its long trailing note became less and less a part of the mounting music which among the battlements was an almost nightly background to those who slept or tried to sleep in the castle of the Groans. More and more in the darkness the notes of grimmer passions could be discerned. Hatred and anger and pain and the hounding voices of vengeance. (TG, 325)

Among "the notes of grimmer passions" is the sound of Swelter's cleaver being sharpened. Flay, lying awake on the ground outside his master's door, hears it and shudders. He, like the castle, is changing - has changed. He tries to pass it off as a symptom of age: "'Getting old,' he muttered grittily to himself again between his long discoloured teeth; but he knew that he lied..." (TG, 326) It is at the end of this dreadful night that Flay discovers the cake Swelter has left as his calling card.

Once more, the action shifts back to Steerpike and Sepulchrave: the Earl's madness is of central concern. Yet here again, the two plots are linked: Flay, ordered to fetch twigs for the building of Sepulchrave's 'nest', and oppressed by his now almost neurotic contemplation of Swelter's plans, is "utterly distraught". His position is under threat; so is his life. As such, he is unable to function properly: "He had gathered the twigs and he had flung them away in disgust only to regather them, for the very thought of disobeying his master is almost as dreadful to him as the memory of the creature he has seen on the mantelpiece." (TG, 369) Suddenly, however, there is a dramatic change in circumstances. Steerpike, whose rise through the echelons of Gormenghast's society began when he followed Flay out of the Great Kitchen, brings about the First Servant's dismissal. His japing at Sepulchrave's illness provokes Flay into throwing one

of Gertrude's cats at him; and what is, in fact, an act of instinctive loyalty to the family, results in his banishment from the castle. The fact that Flay goes and Steerpike stays - effectively to replace him - is another indication of the extent to which the system has been eroded.

As it happens, it is an action which has a profound effect on the relationship between Flay and Swelter. For many months, the chef had held a clear psychological advantage over Flay: he had managed to control events by letting Flay know that he was several steps ahead of him - and particularly, that he was able to find him. Now, though, Flay no longer sleeps within the castle: in fact, he has disappeared altogether.

Furthermore, Flay has become an individual: the function which he has performed within the system has been taken away from him. He is therefore forced to rely on his own initiative - something which is to prove the undoing of his enemy. This is to be expected: if we accept that the system is crumbling, as by this time we must, then Flay's liberation necessarily increases his power as an individual. Formerly no match for Swelter, he is now able to confront him on his own terms.

An indication of Flay's emergent personality is in the development of his thoughts. They still revolve around the society he has belonged to all his life - naturally so. However, a degree of perspective is now introduced. He begins to think of his childhood:

[A] brightly coloured vignette at the back of his dark skull recurred from time to time, a vignette of crimson, gold and grey. He had had no recollection of who it was who led him by the hand, but he recalled how, between two of the southerly arches, he and his guardian were stopped - how the air had been filled with sunshine - how a giant, for so he must then have appeared to the child, a giant in gold had given him an apple - the globe of crimson which he had never released from his mind's empyric [sic] grasp... (TG, 415)

As Miles Fielder points out, Gormenghast is trapped in time: events are often presented synchronically. Once freed from the restrictive timelessness of the castle however, Flay is able to remember - to consider his own past. The symbolic significance of the apple is obvious: like Winston Smith in Nineteen Eighty-Four, Flay has (though he has rejected it) a “golden country” - a subjective nostalgia for a brighter, more innocent age, which, despite his functional role, he has never quite released. (The “golden country” is the term given to a region remembered nostalgically by the protagonist, Winston Smith. It represents the uncorrupted world that he believes to have existed before the totalitarian dystopia that prevails in the present of the book. ↗) Though Peake is not primarily nostalgic - he is too ironic - his half-parodic style allows that certain of the characters may be. (See also chapters 10, 15 and 16 below)

This is not to say that Flay prefers his exile - far from it. So conditioned is he that to exist anywhere other than Gormenghast is inconceivable. Outside the castle, therefore, he thinks of nothing - can think of nothing - but what is going on within it. Later, as he becomes accustomed to living in the wild, he is able to contemplate more generally the sense of change that is spreading through Gormenghast (more of which below). For now, though, he has unfinished business to attend to. In the oppressive atmosphere of a gathering storm - though, like a spotlight, the moon shines down on his actions - Flay seeks out his enemy. Symbolically, he has muffled his cracking knee-joints: the dry, clockwork sound of his movements when he had operated within the system have been silenced.

As Flay stalks the chef, the storm breaks over the castle, binding its inhabitants, for a time, in common experience: “A closer degree of intimacy had been established in the castle between whatever stood, lay, knelt, was propped, shelved, hidden or exposed, or left ready for use, animate or inanimate, within the castle walls.” (TG, 422) This shared experience - what Peake describes as “a weird hyper-reality of *closeness*” (TG, 422) - serves to bring each of the

alienated, isolated inhabitants of the castle together. Just as the storm transcends all barriers, moreover, so Flay and Swelter, acting out their terrible, silent sequence, can be seen, in their intensity, to represent all of Gormenghast. Their feud, having developed through increasingly private and personal concentration, now takes on a communal significance. Their conflict is indicative of the increasing division in the society, and structure, of the castle; and, following Flay's banishment, it is also a comment on the emergence of the individual that again anticipates Titus's development and ultimate rejection of the system.

The highly melodramatic presentation of the fight between Flay and Swelter, carried out as it is in mime, illuminated starkly at intervals by flashes of lightning, and surrounded by the violent noise of thunder and torrential rain, clearly lends itself to symbolic interpretation. I would suggest, in fact, that they are enacting a grand parody of the Ritual itself. One purpose of ritualised behaviour in a static universe such as Gormenghast is to provide the illusion of progression (illusory because rituals only become such by repetition). It indicates a passing of time, just as clocks and calendars do: in a world where such instruments of measurement seem to have little meaning (for there is no real progression), the expectation, performance and aftermath of a ritual or ceremony would suggest movement.

Flay and Swelter are engaged in the most elaborate of rituals - and one in which real progression does take place. The Earl witnesses the 'ceremony' - as would be appropriate for such an important event: but again, that fact that he is sleepwalking - and later, though (possibly) awake, insane - underlines the parodic element. Within this "hyper-reality of closeness", then, there is a reality masquerading as a ceremonial, theatrical event: Flay and Swelter, fighting to the death, so that there can be progression.

Throughout the first two novels there are echoes of Jacobean drama. Madness, treachery and mysterious deaths abound; Fuchsia and Steerpike fall, in an embrace, on to Nannie Slagg's grave

mound; the Twins bemoan their disinheritance, and crave power - and Steerpike schemes and plans and tricks his way towards his goal. Yet in the feud between Swelter and Flay, we observe many of the most fundamental traits of such drama: Swelter's thirst for revenge; Flay's banishment and secret return; the sleepwalking Earl; the silent 'theatre', in which fiction becomes reality, and reality (that which it parodies) fiction; and the fact that the truth about this inversion - in other words, the deaths of Swelter and Sepulchrave - is witnessed only by an individual exiled by society.

This 'performance' is the climax of Titus Groan: for in it, we observe a fundamental change. Mr Flay, the witness and bearer of the truth, is cast out of the castle; at the same time, Lord Sepulchrave drags both Swelter and himself into the Tower of Flints, where they are devoured by the owls. Their bodies are therefore destroyed; and the one person who could explain the mystery has disappeared - in fact, officially, he no longer exists.

I shall consider whether this sequence of events can be regarded as conforming to the structures of melodrama or of tragedy later in this thesis (see pp.232ff.); but there is another important consideration: that of its effect on the main plot that is to develop in the second novel. Steerpike, who thrives on such confusion as is created by this action, is at a much more advantageous position than hitherto, and is able to rise much more precipitately through the hierarchy of the castle. Significantly, it is not until Flay returns to Gormenghast that he is uncovered. I shall return to this shortly; but I intend first to examine Flay's role in his years of exile - a role which has important implications for our consideration of the continued erosion of the society and system of Gormenghast.

As I have said, Flay witnesses the deaths of Sepulchrave and Swelter; shortly afterwards, he witnesses Keda's suicide. By this time, he has become alienated from Gormenghast to the point where he begins to wonder at its reality:

Hours of solitude in the woods were apt to detach him 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. (TG, 443)

This sense of isolation, which anticipates that of Titus in the third novel, is therefore implicitly linked, through his subsequent witnessing of Keda's death, to the idea that to leave Gormenghast is to gain access to 'forbidden' knowledge. This connection between knowledge and loss, and the biblical and Miltonic language used, further develops the imagery with which Peake presents the central theme of change: "Upon his knees he knew that he was witness. About her and below lay the world. All things were ebbing." (TG, 446)

During the first half of Gormenghast, while Steerpike continues his rise to power, the narrative returns, intermittently, to Mr Flay. It is apt that, though not the prime mover in Titus's decision to leave Gormenghast - he is, after all, the most loyal of servants - Flay does play an important role in Titus's development. For, though his inherent loyalty to the castle is unshaken - is strengthened, in fact, through his long years of exile - he is living proof that it is possible to exist outside Gormenghast. He still needs to feel that the place exists - as Titus does, once he leaves; and in this, perhaps, Flay is not liberated in the same way as the Thing, or even Keda (both of whom were born outside the walls anyway). He has shown, however, that even the most loyal and dependent of individuals can learn to live outside: and, in fact, Flay seems to have benefited from his exile, if not emotionally, then at least spiritually. He has learned to endure, to adapt: he has become somewhat philosophical - able to cogitate more clearly on events within Gormenghast; he has gained perspective. He has also changed physically - he is more agile, suppler: "He was by now a part of the woods, his eyesight sharp as a bird's, and his hearing as

quick. His footsteps had become noiseless. The cracking of his knee-joints had disappeared.” (GG, 286) Importantly, he has become more sensitive to change: removed from the world of Gormenghast, he is able to observe from outside - to gauge what was formerly beyond his power: “[A]lthough as yet he had made no concrete discoveries, he had become aware almost at once of a change. Something had happened, or something was happening which was evil or subversive.” (GG, 287) It is this increased intuition which leads him to witness the death of the Twins. Though he is unable to discover what has happened, he has once more been party to ‘forbidden’ knowledge through the fact that he exists outside society.

The return of Mr Flay to Gormenghast’s inner life is as important as his departure. As powerful as the minds of Gertrude and Doctor Prunesquallor are, they have been unable to formulate a plan to trap the suspected felon. It is Flay who uncovers Steerpike. Banished from the castle, he has disappeared: thus, ironically, he is able to move about Gormenghast with more freedom than when he was First Servant. He has observed Steerpike’s tryst with Fuchsia, and fears the worst. In response to her whispered warning, she lights a candle - an action for which she is admonished by Steerpike. This shuts off the romantic approach he has been fostering, and pushes him into deciding to seduce her. That night, as he prepares, Flay watches and waits. When he moves, Flay follows; ultimately, Steerpike’s treachery is discovered.

In the isolated room, among the remains of Cora and Clarice, a second mime takes place, as Steerpike, now the Master of Ritual, cavorts about in triumph. If we need any more evidence of the “desecration of rituals” that has taken place in Gormenghast, then this is surely it.⁵ It is here, moreover, that Flay is finally returned to the fold as, in unmasking Steerpike’s villainy, he is killed:

Mr Flay was buried... in the graveyard of the Elect Retainers, a small space of nettle-covered ground. At evening the long shadow of the Tower of Flints lay

across this simple boneyard with its conical heaps of stones to show where not more than a dozen servants of exceptional loyalty lay silently under the tall weeds.

(GG, 387)

The knowledge which, during his exile, left Gormenghast, is now hidden forever; but in Flay's return, a new, more terrible knowledge - that of Steerpike's heresy - is revealed. Mr Flay is the one who, of all the characters, and despite his unerring loyalty to the old regime, has seen, and understood the significance of, the most change. Or perhaps this is testimony to that loyalty.

Among the subordinate characters, only Flay achieves an existence beyond his function. His exile allows him to gain an insight into developments within the castle that he had formerly been denied. Gormenghast is undoubtedly a world in which individuals are increasingly isolated by the very system created to preserve their coherence. However, in Flay's case, isolation brings a profounder understanding of the system as a whole: if Gormenghast is presented as a fragmented montage, then such withdrawal is enlightening rather than alienating. If the Titus novels represent a de-centring milieu, then it is, I believe, appropriate that one of the key components of what was its original centre - the ritually-maintained structure - should be drawn out into the open, to observe and respond to that essential change. This is Flay's true role; and in performing it, he gains perspective at the price of certainty.

Notes.

1. Miles Fielder, "From a Problematics to a Poetics of Peake", Peake Studies vol.3, no.4 (Summer 1994): 21-38.
2. D.I. Kertzer, Ritual, Politics and Power (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).
3. Luisella Ciambezi, "The Desecration of Rituals in Gormenghast", Peake Studies vol.3, no.4 (Summer 1994): 17-20.
4. George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954).
5. See 3 above.

8. The “alien, incalculable figure”:¹ Steerpike.

In the previous chapter, I alluded to a brief episode in Titus Groan when Steerpike, fearing that the Twins are about to reveal the truth about the fire in the Library, pays them a nocturnal visit, disguised as a ghost. (TG, 478-84) Peake’s presentation of this scene, as so often, is parodic: though to the imbecilic Twins, the apparition is conceived as “Death walking like an element”, it is to the reader a “nine-foot length of sheet”. In fact, Peake goes to great lengths to emphasise that, to the rational observer, this is pure pantomime, while it remains, to Cora and Clarice, an object of terror.

Beyond the comedic effect this parody generates, the scene also underlines Steerpike’s essential formlessness. This crude yet effective display, in other words, is an allegorical representation of Steerpike’s role: he is, in the consciousness of the inhabitants of Gormenghast, a phantom. He is also a shape-changer: a chameleon figure, able to alter his appearance or character as each situation demands. As such, he may be considered as conforming to a number of literary archetypes - Gothic villain, vampire, clown, even Romantic hero - or conforming to none.

This essential amorphism is stressed from the beginning. As Lawrence Bristow-Smith has pointed out, it is through the character of Steerpike that the castle is largely exposed and explored.² Bristow-Smith rightly describes him as a “vehicle”: he is both motive and passive, in that we can see through him, observing what he observes, rather than into him. He is an enigma, a puzzle; he has no history, save a short spell as a kitchen-hand. To the other characters, too, he is an unknown quantity. He uses them without revealing himself to them. To Mr Flay, with whose unwitting assistance he is able to make good his escape from the Great Kitchens, “The boy Steerpike was something of an apparition”. (TG, 334) The doctor, the most perceptive

of the characters, is nevertheless “non-plussed at the youth’s self-assurance.” (TG, 174) Fuchsia “could not make him out”. (TG, 335) He is the pale youth, the phantom: and as such, Gormenghast provides an appropriate background for him. Though his rapid movement and self-assurance make him seem incongruous, he is also entirely at home in its darkness: “He passed into deep shadows beneath the arch, and then as though he were a portion of that inky darkness that had awakened and disengaged itself from the main body, he reappeared beyond the archway in the half light.” (TG, 223)

As an apparition, he is able to move around the castle at will. Each step he takes along his ambitious course is accompanied by an increased mobility and access. He travels rapidly from place to place, along passageways and through doors known only to him. Once he gains employment with the Prunesquallors, he adopts the black apparel that is to become synonymous with him. Later, when under the tutelage of Barquentine, he confounds the Master of Ritual each morning: “What d’you do to yourself, eh? Every poxy sunrise of the year, eh, that you burst out of the decent darkness in that plucked way?” (GG, 165)

Yet this formlessness, which allows him the privacy he needs and the advantage of unrestricted access, is only one facet of Steerpike. In public, he is far from anonymous. As I have suggested, he is a chameleon: he is different things to different individuals. Whatever appearance he reasons will be most likely to impress, he adopts. He secures his escape from Swelter by playing on Flay’s hatred of the chef; he appeals to the Doctor’s intellect, and to his sister’s vanity and insecurity; and for Fuchsia, that most distrusting of individuals, he dons a whole series of disguises.

In fact, it is Fuchsia herself who first ‘masks’ him, when she throws the “ullage of sunflower” over him, and through which “Only his dark-red concentrated eyes stared out from the filthy green mask unpolluted.” (TG, 157) Throughout this scene, he adopts and discards, consciously

and subconsciously, a number of masks. His outlandish appearance - the first, savage disguise - is such a shock that Fuchsia's instinctual horror at the idea of an alien intruding into her domain is almost superceded by an appalled fascination. With his face smeared with green ooze, his hands bruised and cut, his clothes in rags and his hair full of dust and ivy, he appears as an elemental nature spirit, both horrible and fascinating - an image which again recalls Golding's Lord of the Flies. Indeed, Jack's face-painting 'rite of passage', clearly symbolising a shift from 'civilised' to 'savage', is strongly redolent of Steerpike's more drastic change of appearance - by fire - in the fight with Barquentine (more of which below):

Jack planned his new face. He made one cheek and one eye-socket white, then rubbed red over the other half of his face and slashed a black bar of charcoal across from right ear to left jaw... the mask was a thing on its own, behind which Jack hid, liberated from shame and self consciousness.³

Steerpike's impromptu disguise, startling as it is, cannot last long. As I have already suggested (see pp.88ff.), Steerpike's entry into Fuchsia's attic, with its obvious sexual connotations, is so traumatic for her that his appearance is soon but a part of the fact of his unwarranted existence. Realising this, he seeks to impress her romantic imagination, by appealing to her as a renegade adventurer: "Lady Fuchsia," he said, and clenched his hand at his forehead, 'I come for sanctuary. I am a rebel. I am at your service as a dreamer and a man of action.'" (IG, 159)

Later in the scene, he adopts another disguise: the miming clown. This is immediately successful: Fuchsia is enraptured. What is interesting, however, about the clown - as about all the other disguises Steerpike dons and discards - is that it is an act, a performance:

"All the time he was thinking, 'What a fool I am, but it will work.' He could not sink himself. He was not the artist. He was the exact imitation of one." (IG, 164)

This is important. Steerpike, Peake stresses repeatedly, is not creative, but adaptive. He uses

his initiative to appear creative; but he is an imitator. It is therefore highly appropriate that, in the two scenarios in which his character is presented symbolically - as a ghost and as a clown - he mimes. Though his words are highly persuasive, his silence is still more eloquent. In the world of Gormenghast, where all is symbol, Steerpike succeeds most readily through the use of highly symbolic actions.

Indeed, as he progresses, Steerpike becomes increasingly symbolic. Interestingly, while Titus is appalled to realise that he is little more than a cipher, Steerpike's ambition is centred on achieving such status. As Master of Ritual, where he is at his most potent, he draws his power from the symbolic significance of his title. The opposition between Titus and Steerpike is obviously of central importance, and I shall be returning to this issue later in this chapter. However, of the many tensions that are developed between protagonist and antagonist, I would suggest that their differing reactions to the concept of the symbolic - the heir rejecting that which he has inherited, the usurper seeking symbolic status - offers an interesting comparison.

By the time Titus kills him, Steerpike has achieved the symbolic status he desired. Through his actions (aided by the facial disfigurement he suffered as a result of the fire), he has become, in the minds of the other characters, a demon. To the reader, too, Steerpike's character becomes increasingly symbolic as his function and personality recall archetypal literary figures. I have described briefly the similarities between Steerpike and Milton's Satan already (see pp.54-60). I feel that this comparison can now be profitably extended, in the light of the analysis I have suggested above. Once aware of his situation, Steerpike adopts a series of disguises in order to further his ambitions; his chief victim is the virginal Fuchsia (with the virginal Irma as a comic foil to Fuchsia's tragic character): so Satan, the master of disguise, concentrates his efforts on the innocent Eve.

This interpretation is confirmed, as I have described, by the rather heavy-handed image of

Steerpike's biting into Fuchsia's pear in her Attic; and the nature-spirit disguise already discussed may be seen as an alternative, pagan 'Satan'. Whether Christian or pagan, however, it is clear that Steerpike becomes a diabolic figure - and principally in the fact that he represents a sexual threat to the infertile, sexless world of Gormenghast.

As I have remarked above, he is an incongruous character. Bristow-Smith points out that the progression in Titus Groan is based on the development of a series of oppositions⁴, and Steerpike is clearly at the heart of many of these. As the "vehicle", the kinetic force, he is in contrast with the potential, yet dormant, force of the castle. Amid the barren, infertile environment, he performs the role of the fertile youth. As his conquest of Fuchsia develops, his physicality becomes more apparent to her. When she falls in the rain, he picks her up and carries her. To the naive sensibility of Fuchsia, he is conceived in the best romantic tradition:

[A]s she felt his arms around her and the proximity of his body, something deep within her tried to hide itself. Through the thick, twisted strands of her drenched hair, she could see his sharp, pale, crafty face, his powerful dark-red eyes focused upon the rocks below them, his high protruding forehead, his cheekbones glistening, his mouth an emotionless line.

This was Steerpike. He was holding her; she was in his arms; in his power.

(TG, 276)

This power, this control over others, is what Steerpike craves - what, in his initial "pathetic" role, he lacks.⁵ He opposes the rulers of his milieu because he despises their power. He is no iconoclast - he is truly an antagonist, reacting against the world, rather than attempting to create a new one in its place.

In chapter 1 above (pp.19ff.), I suggested that one of Steerpike's roles can be compared with that of the vampire. Considering the above assertions - that he reacts against, yet requires the

homage of, the world (a world which he both inhabits and does not inhabit, being both phantom and physical, sexual potency); that he is a shape-changer and a master of disguise; and that, among these disguises, he presents himself as an isolated individual, with access to hidden knowledge - he does appear to conform to the concept of the vampire as conceived by Polidori and Stoker. Indeed, the demonification of Steerpike that occurs throughout Gormenghast is also vampiric, foregrounding as it does his 'uncanny' qualities. Consider, for example, his hatred of daylight and the sun: "His dark red eyes stared back into the heart of the level ray. He cursed the sun and slid out of the beam." (GG, 369) Those "dark red eyes", Steerpike's most fundamental physical feature, also recalls Stoker's Dracula in his most diabolic aspect: it is deeply ironic, therefore, that they are the only feature "unpolluted" by the sunflower slime in the scene described above.

Steerpike is also repeatedly compared to a shadow. As he approaches Barquentine's quarters, preparing to kill him, he clearly takes on a vampiric aspect: "It was as though a shadow had a heart - a heart whose blood was drawn from the margins of a world of less substance than air. A world of darkness whose very existence depended upon its enemy, the light." (GG, 261) This emphasises the inter-relationship between Steerpike and Gormenghast, "on whose body he fed." (GG, 261) As he nears his destination, his amorphous quality is emphasised by Peake, who presents Steerpike's shadow as an elaborate grotesque:

His shadow moved upon his right hand. It was climbing a staircase. It crossed a landing. It descended three steps. It followed for a short while at its maker's heels and then overtook him. It was at his elbow when it suddenly deepened its tone and grew up the side of the wall until the shadow-head twelve feet above the ground pursued its lofty way, the profile undulating from time to time, when it was forced to float across the murky webs that choked the junction of wall and

ceiling. And then the giant shade began to shrivel, and as it descended it moved a little forward of its caster, until finally it was a thick and stunted thing - a malformation, intangible, terrible, that led the way towards those rooms where its immediate journey could, for a while, be ended. (GG, 264)

Steerpike's phantomlike qualities are emphasised here; but it also suggests another aspect of his character - one which the vampire also shares: that of the *doppelgänger*. As he approaches Barquentine's rooms, Steerpike (or his shadow, which is an extension of him), changes shape, until he assumes the dwarfish form of his prey. The concept of the *doppelgänger*, or double, is an interesting interpretation of Steerpike's relationship with Titus, and one which I shall return to shortly.

As I have mentioned above, Steerpike is the common pole of antagonism in many of the oppositions developed throughout the novels. More than any other character apart from Titus, he develops. At the beginning, he is presented quite sympathetically: as Bristow-Smith suggests, we find his attitude towards authority appealing.⁶ However, as he grows more powerful, his courage and initiative are increasingly revealed as attributes of his cold-blooded ambition. By contrast, the other characters, even the oppressive system which rules the life of the castle, become more inviting. An outcome of the opposition between Steerpike and Gormenghast is that, as the former becomes more unattractive, the latter is made more appealing.

This process creates an heroic/tragic framework, as Steerpike, through his personal ambitions, incurs, as it were, the wrath of nature. As I have already established, the harmony of the natural world, of which Gormenghast is a part, can be conceived in medieval terms as the preferred state of order in the universe. In upsetting it, therefore, Steerpike is destabilising the fundamental world-structure, and will be punished for it, just as Macbeth and Faustus were punished. I shall consider further the coherence of what might be called the cosmic, or mythic, framework of the

worlds of the Titus books in the final part of this thesis. However, Steerpike's transgression - his 'heresy' against societal order - again supports the assertion that he performs the same function as the vampire.

David Punter sees transgression as an essential attribute of the vampire, who acts "as a catalyst for repressed tendencies to emerge into the light of day."⁷ This can certainly be seen as part of Steerpike's function: as the sexual threat to Gormenghast's barren society, as the seeker after forbidden knowledge, and as the murderer, he, like Stoker's Dracula, explores and exposes those areas defined as social taboo. In this sense, Steerpike can therefore be conceived as "a vehicle for exposition"⁸ on many levels. As well as allowing the reader access to the physical realms of Gormenghast, his craving for personal satisfaction - and Gormenghast's reaction to him as he indulges it - allows an exploration also of the psychological realm of the castle's society.

It is clear that Gormenghast and its rituals maintain a psychologically inhibited regime. As we have seen, many of its inhabitants suffer from mental disorders and neuroses. Steerpike, by laying bare what they have sought to suppress, brings about their destruction. Sepulchre and the Twins are sent mad; Fuchsia is arguably so by the end. It is only towards the conclusion of Gormenghast - after he has been unmasked - that he resorts to straightforward murder: up until that point, he has confined his attack to the weak psychological 'underbelly' of the castle.

His degeneration increases the appeal of both Gormenghast and its inhabitants: witness how heroic the mechanical Mr Floy and the odious Barquentine become in their struggles against the murderer, for example. What is less clear, however, is Peake's position with respect to this opposition. Steerpike, even to the death, retains a certain heroic quality: he is the antagonist rather than the anti-hero. After all, he remains the individual pitted against the established force of the world; and as such, his destiny is a tragic, or at least pathetic doom, not capitulation (see

p.227 below).

Again, we are drawn to a comparison with Stoker's *Dracula*. Particularly, the pursuit of Steerpike by Mr Flay, the Doctor and the young Titus, and which leads to the castle's discovery of his treachery, reminds us of *Dracula's* flight from England to his home in Transylvania. Of course, Steerpike is unaware of his pursuers, while Stoker's supernatural antagonist is able to perceive that he is being followed. However, on a symbolic level, there are many points of similarity. Steerpike initiates the action by moving out of the courtyard and into the shadows and dark corridors that have become, increasingly, his natural habitat; *Dracula* seeks also to return to the source of his power - the ancient earth that lies in the vaults beneath his castle. Both move away from the sun (Steerpike with a curse) and towards the safety of darkness.

In *Dracula's* wake are the representatives of society: Dr John Seward, the physician of a lunatic asylum; Professor Van Helsing, his mentor; Quincey Watts, a somewhat ingenuous Texan; and Jonathan Harker, the young 'hero' who had originally been imprisoned in Castle *Dracula*, and whose bride, Mina Murray, has fallen prey to the Count's charms. If not entirely comparable as a representative group (though both doctor and young hero are present), they are remarkably similar to Peake's trio. Between them, Flay, Prunesquallor and Titus can also be said to represent the society of Gormenghast.

What we are witnessing, therefore, in the pursuit of Steerpike through the forgotten passageways, deep in the bowels of Gormenghast, is the symbolic hunting down of the transgressor by the society whose taboos he has exposed. Punter sees this opposition as a central concern in late Victorian Gothic literature - and in fact "one of the most important expressions of the social and psychological dilemmas of the late nineteenth century."⁹ It is, appropriately, a journey through uncharted territory: "[T]hey were speeding through a new world. A world unfamiliar in its detail - new to *them*, although unquestionably of the very stuff of their

memories". (GG, 372) Again, we notice the elemental, mythic quality here - a feeling that, in approaching the brink of civilisation, as it were, it is inevitable that all social protection is stripped away (cf. chapter 12 below). Steerpike's revelation (with Satan now as his familiar¹⁰) is not only his individual depravity, but the moral stance of the society (our own, as well as Gormenghast's) which observes it.

Steerpike, in his defiance of the mores that hold the society of Gormenghast together, is therefore weakening the structure on an essential level. Once the ground rules are questioned - in a world where rules are everything - then collapse is inevitable. I have said that Steerpike is no iconoclast: he doesn't seek the destruction of Gormenghast; but, at crucial moments - when the disguises are stripped away - his essential nature is revealed to be one which cannot exist in the same world as Gormenghast: like Dracula, the very fact that he lives threatens the existence of society.

Dracula, according to Rosemary Jackson, is "a myth born out of extreme repression;"¹¹ we may confidently assert that Steerpike comes from the same source. The society of Gormenghast is extremely repressive; in fact, the basic dysfunction of that society - a lack of sexual maturity - is the same which Stoker attacks. In Jonathan Harker and Mina Murray, Dracula has found victims who perfectly represent the inhibited social mores of Victorian society; Dr Seward seeks relief for his sexual angst in opium; even the relatively uninhibited Van Helsing (not himself a Victorian Englishman, but an eccentric Dutch academic) is lured to the brink of a sexual encounter with the possessed Mina - and then horrified at the thought. Dracula's elemental power is that he is a deeply erotic creature, who controls through what is essentially sexual enticement his female victims - and, by asserting such power, also controls the men whose society prevents them from achieving what they themselves subconsciously desire. As Jackson puts it: "the fantasizing activities of the whole novel point to a barely concealed *envy* for the

count's erotic and sadistic and appropriating pleasures.”¹² Of course, the resolution of the novel sees Dracula defeated, and the social order reaffirmed; yet I would argue that such a fiction reveals more than such a moral conclusion would indicate. Dracula's mythic power comes out of the fact that such questions as his existence forces on late-Victorian society in Stoker's novel still remain after he has been destroyed.

Dracula presents clear opportunities for a psychoanalytic analysis; indeed, Jackson goes on to assert that the vampire enacts “a symbolic reversal of the Oedipal stage”.¹³ I shall go on to consider the Titus novels in terms of Freudian and Jungian theory later (see chapter 12 below); and I feel that, particularly in terms of the psychological significance of Titus's departure from Gormenghast and subsequent quest, such analysis can present an interesting perspective on the structure of the novels as a whole.

Steerpike, despite his increasingly symbolic status, does not, as an individual, have the same elemental power as Dracula. Firstly, Stoker's count is supernatural. As Fred Botting remarks:

[H]e is both villain and ghostly diabolical agent whose magic and power cannot be reduced to mere tricks or effects of overindulgent, superstitious imagination: more than rational, he serves to elicit rather than dispel superstitious beliefs, demanding, not a return to reason and morality, but a reawakening of spiritual energies and sacred awe.¹⁴

Steerpike, more in keeping with the earlier Gothic villains, is mortal, and must rely on the psychological state of Gormenghast's inhabitants - and his own ingenuity - to further his ambitions. Moreover, Count Dracula is an aristocrat, returning to the world to do battle with the bourgeois society that has emerged to rule in his place. Steerpike, as Punter has asserted, is a “proto-capitalist revolutionary”¹⁵; he is, in other words, representative of the emergent bourgeoisie. Those he opposes are the aristocrats - the Groans, who have ruled by inheritance

for a millennium. Therefore, though we can accept Steerpike as a development from the Gothic vampire who, in Punter's words, encapsulates "the endless desire of the unconscious for gratification, which has to be repressed",¹⁶ we must question the extent to which he expresses the same ancient impulses as Stoker's count.

How, in this case, are we to interpret Steerpike's primitive exhibitionism - the depraved, warrior-fiend that dances among the bones of his victims? After all, this is clearly where we encounter the elemental character of Steerpike; and Mr Flay, significantly is "all but [blinded]... with a kind of bourgeois rage". (GG, 382) Such a response would appear to support the contention that Steerpike does elicit the same kind of "primal awe" as Dracula - and also confound the supposition that he is a "proto-capitalist".

I would submit, in fact, that both positions are tenable. If we consider that Steerpike's display represents the elemental urges that society must necessarily suppress, then we must also accept that they exist whether that society is fundamentally aristocratic or bourgeois in organisation. The moral codes of a feudal hierarchy are based on suppressing instinctively destructive or selfish drives (as the 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes implied¹⁷), just as those of the democratic system of bourgeois Victorian England. Steerpike simply represents that which threatens the cohesion of any 'civilised' society.

In this sense, Steerpike also illustrates the fact that is often difficult to decide Peake's position relative to the moral questions he presents. He is a Romantic, undoubtedly; yet he is also a modern writer, whose constant use of parody lends an ironic detachment to even the most earnestly presented themes. This rather equivocal stance informs our understanding of many of the questions one might ask about his work. His apparent nostalgia for a world of comfortable, fixed values, for example, is undermined by the parodic presentation of many of the characters who represent it; while this ironic stance is itself constantly eroded by an awareness that the

same characters are invested with a degree of nobility, even tragic grandeur, not only by their inability to escape their predestined roles, but by their awareness of this fact.

I shall be returning to the question of Peake's position regarding Romanticism and modernity in the next section, when I shall go on to consider Titus himself. However, I feel it is appropriate to point out that it is the character of Steerpike that brings this dilemma out into the open - and emphasises the fact that Peake tends to prevaricate between a purist sensibility and a more cynical one. In this sense, he seems very 'Victorian'; and it is therefore appropriate that our examination of the character and function of Steerpike leads us back to the nineteenth century: not only to Stoker, but beyond - to Dickens. David Copperfield, the first of Dickens' two great Bildungsromane, certainly has enough in common with Peake's novels for us to consider it as a source: indeed we find, in the character of Steerforth those attributes most typical of his near namesake, Steerpike. Both are selfish, morally corrupt - and corrupting - individuals; both use their powers to exploit the innocent (though I would hesitate to find more than a passing resemblance between Fuchsia and Little Em'ly); and both are aware of, and enjoy, the success which their deviousness brings them. Furthermore, Dickens' character is, like Steerpike, a master of guile: he has "a natural gift for adapting himself to whomsoever he pleased, and making direct, when he cared to do it, to the main point of interest in anybody's heart."¹⁸ As John Carey has suggested, Dickens presented his villains with much more vitality and enthusiasm than he did his heroes, suggesting, at the least, an ambivalent approach to moral issues.¹⁹ Like the Gothic villain, the Dickensian antagonist is always defeated; but as with the later, more psychological Gothic novels, the destruction of the villain is accompanied by a degree of heightened awareness on the part of the protagonist: a realisation, in other words, that what has been exposed is, in fact, the enemy within.

Steerforth certainly resembles Steerpike in his amoral attitude to the individuals he

manipulates; but he does not degenerate to the same extent as Peake's villain: he is, in fact, replaced by Uriah Heep, who has more in common with the later, more diabolic aspect of Steerpike - particularly by way of the fact that, when discovered as a transgressor, he discards his "umble" disguise:

The suddenness with which he dropped it, when he perceived it was useless to him; the malice, insolence, and hatred, he revealed; the leer with which he exulted, even at this moment, in the evil he had done - all this time being desperate too, and at his wits' end for the means of getting the better of us...²⁰

It is clear that Steerforth is David's alter ego, just as Steerpike is Titus's. Yet Uriah Heep, in his defiance, represents another facet of David - another aspect of those tendencies that must be kept in check. David's success is contrasted by that of Uriah, his rival: he must be defeated for the hero to prevail. It is clear, above all, that only in recognising this conflict of interests - and in acknowledging it as an aspect of himself - can David achieve that level of understanding which is the maturity of adulthood.

Heep shows that, in David Copperfield, Dickens wasn't prepared to create in Steerforth the diabolic villain. Whereas Steerpike degenerates, Steerforth is simply misjudged by David. He occupies the same moral (or amoral) position throughout: it is just that David is not immediately aware of what this position is. Uriah Heep is also constant; and, a little wiser, David finds him repellent from the first. That he is revealed to be so merely confirms the protagonist's suspicions - just as Steerpike's unmasking confirms those of the Countess and Doctor Prunesquallor. In David Copperfield therefore, as in many Bildungsromane, the development of character is on the part of the hero, who grows to understand that the world is not a perfect place.

The second of Dickens' novels of youth, Great Expectations, is in many ways the maturer

work - and Dickens' presentation of the same moral issues is evidence of this. Again, the protagonist is brought into a confrontation with his alter ego - in this case, Orlick - with the resulting realisation and acceptance. However, Pip is presented much more cynically than David; and though Orlick is a rather unsavoury individual, he therefore has a certain amount of moral power. He functions as a sort of revenant - an aspect of Pip's past which the hero, in his pride, has suppressed. In the confrontation at the limekiln, Orlick makes it clear that he holds Pip responsible for his attack on Pip's sister: "... it warn't Old Orlick as did it; it was you. You was favoured, and he was bullied and beat. Old Orlick bullied and beat, eh? Now you pays for it. You done it; now you pays for it."²¹ Harry Stone has described this confrontation "as if with a devil at the gate of hell".²² If this is to be accepted, then it should be asserted that this "hell" is at least partly of Pip's own making. Like Steerpike, Orlick's wretched existence is a result of the nature of the society he inhabits. Pip, in taking his stand within the moral majority of his society, must accept that he is supporting the exclusion of certain individuals from that society. Titus's confrontation with Steerpike brings him, perhaps, a degree of insight into this dilemma.

J.H. Buckley has asserted that any interpretation of Orlick as Pip's double must maintain that he is the agent of the hero's subconscious desires - an interpretation which would lay the blame for Orlick's actions firmly on Pip.²³ Buckley contends that this is not the case, as Pip could only be fully implicated if he were fully cognizant of the results of his actions. He is guilty, therefore, not of criminal (and therefore immoral) behaviour, but of a degree of thoughtlessness. I feel that the two positions are not, however, irreconcilable. If Pip's actions are the result of subconscious desires, he cannot be held individually responsible for the results - rather, one must accept that he is acting according to the society to which he belongs, and which has necessarily suppressed those desires. Furthermore, the act of exclusion of which Pip is guilty is also societal - and therefore not consciously performed. In presenting this opposition therefore, Dickens is

exploring the fundamental notion of duality: that the suppression of the alter ego - and the process which leads to a realisation of what is being suppressed - exposes the fact that the mores of a society depend on exclusion: in other words, on the generation of taboos. Only when the protagonist can come to terms with this fact is he able to move on.

Pip does move on, as does David; as, indeed, does Titus. Each can proceed, in the knowledge that they have faced their fears. For each, the exposing of their 'other-selves' has led to a catharsis, and thence to a decision. Pip resolves to atone for his earlier injustices; David exiles himself, as does Titus (though, unlike Titus, he has something to go back for, once he has gained enough distance to realise it). This is, in the cases of David and Titus, the initiatory process which leads to the protagonist's quest. (See chapter 12 below)

The literature of the nineteenth century reflects the development, broadly speaking, from a Romantic to a realist/cynical approach to the moral dilemmas described above. Dickens, somewhere in the middle of this process, anticipates the psychological realism of the latter part of the century, while retaining some of the confidence of earlier moralists in the ultimate triumph of the individual over his failings. In many ways, the Gothic genre parallels this development. As I have stated above, the early Gothic novelists perceived that the key to overcoming fear was by externalizing it. Thus, the imagined horrors of Mrs Radcliffe's heroines are ultimately revealed to be just that. Often, of course, giving tangible form to those fears did not always result in their banishment - and often the power of the unleashed demon destroyed that which created or summoned it: thus The Monk, Frankenstein and Vathek. However, in these early texts, the destructive spirits are externalised representations of the protagonists' inner impulses. In later texts, the vanquishing of such demons became increasingly difficult. Naming the inner beast did not necessarily exorcise it. Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde construed man's hidden nature to be not only ever-present, but necessary for the survival of the whole. With the birth

of modern psychology, it became apparent that those aspects of human nature that are suppressed are those which it is necessary to suppress: in other words, that what we most fear is in fact what we most desire.

This is the essential paradox that informs the tradition of the double in literature. It affirms both the validity and the futility of what is essentially a flight from oneself. Therefore, Pip is drawn to the limekiln and Orlick; Van Helsing and his posse chase Dracula across Europe; Victor Frankenstein pursues his creature to the icy wastes of the North Pole; and Titus falls through the ivy - the natural 'cradle' of his civilisation - towards Steerpike.

I have considered above the many functions of Steerpike within the novels; but I feel some final comments are necessary on an essential aspect of his character, and one which informs our interpretation of these functions. For, as David Kennedy has pointed out: "Steerpike is the only character to recognize his own fictionality as an actor in the rituals of the castle."²⁴ This awareness is the basis of his power. He has access to more of his world than the other inhabitants of the castle, and an ability to move about unperceived; he is able to imitate those characteristics which he feels will most impress others; and he is driven by the ambition of the outcast to take control of his world. Yet underlying all these attributes is a basic self-awareness: a knowledge that he is performing a role. He is the postmodern descendent of the classical villain; his potency derives not only from his antagonism, but from the fact that he perceives himself as the antagonist.

It is appropriate, therefore, that with his unmasking, he also loses the awareness of "his own fictionality". His final role is one which he has not created: it is his true, uncontrolled nature. Ironically, as he stops acting, his perception of the world becomes more fictionalised: "He lived now among the abstractions... His mind was engaged in a warfare of the gods". (GG, 444) As we shall see, Gormenghast, in its representation of a world at war, moves towards the 'real'

world (see chapter 16 below). Conversely Steerpike withdraws into a world of shadows - a primitive, mythic world of absolutes: a fiction. Within it, he is once again an elemental spirit, ruled by those fundamental urges his society sought to suppress. As his diabolic essence is unleashed, he allows that society (and therefore Titus) the possibility of release: he has externalised its fears/desires.

Notes.

1. Titus Groan, 273.
2. Lawrence Bristow-Smith, A Critical Study of the Novels of Mervyn Peake (unpublished PhD thesis, The University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1979) 82.
3. Golding, 69.
4. Bristow-Smith, 80ff.
5. *Ibid*, 82.
6. *Ibid*, 108.
7. Punter, 144.
8. Bristow-Smith, 82.
9. Punter, 256.
10. The monkey Steerpike adopts as a pet in Gormenghast is called Satan.
11. Jackson, 120.
12. *Ibid*, 119.
13. *Ibid*, 120.
14. Botting, 147.
15. Punter, 377.
16. *Ibid*, 260.
17. Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (1651). Hobbes stated that mankind is constantly in a state of war, and must therefore be controlled by absolute rulers.
18. David Copperfield (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 346.
19. John Carey, The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination (London: Faber and faber, 1973).
20. David Copperfield, 817.
21. Great Expectations (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994) 389.

22. Harry Stone, 'Fire, Hand and Gate', Kenyon Review XXIV (1962) 663-691. Cited in J.H. Buckley, Seasons of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1974) 47-8.
23. Buckley, 55.
24. David Kennedy, 'Beneath Umbrageous Ceilings - Postmodernism and the Psychology of Mervyn Peake's Titus Groan', Peake Papers 1994, 35-48.

9. Keda and the Thing.

If Steerpike can be conceived as the inner demon, the exorcism of which is necessary for Titus's development, then in the ephemeral figure of the Thing, we have the opposite - the otherworldly, vibrant symbol of everything that isn't Gormenghast. As such, she is clearly intended to act as a catalyst for Titus's rebelliousness: she is, of course, a rebel herself. However, according to Colin Manlove, her essential opposition to that which looms so massively throughout, must ultimately be futile; and this lack of power creates a problem: "Whatever lust for freedom Titus is supposed to desire [sic] from this creature, can only appear as nebulous as she is when set against the ponderous weight and omnipresence of Gormenghast."¹ This "nebulous" quality can also be seen as developing from Peake's difficulties with the character's function. John Batchelor points out that she "is never successfully brought into focus in [Gormenghast]... because she is required to fulfil... too many symbolic roles."² These problems clearly stem from the same dilemma: the sheer super-reality of Gormenghast rends intangible anything that is not part of it - so that any perceived power is largely undermined, given a peripheral, inconstant quality.

Yet the Thing plays an important part in Titus's development: she represents, at least to him, a vital counterpoint, both to the unchanging, ritualised life he has inherited, and to the brutal megalomania of Steerpike. Though Titus's conception of the Thing is as an otherworldly (and in many ways an ideal) being, she is, in fact, the illegitimate child of one of the Dwellers - and therefore, at least by birth, very much a part of the reality represented by Gormenghast. Keda, her mother, is in fact intimately connected with the inhabitants of the castle: she becomes Titus's wet-nurse, and lives inside the castle for several months. Batchelor rightly suggests that this compounds the problem we have in defining the Thing as "otherworldly": when her ancestry is

so thoroughly known, it is difficult to separate her from the real, in fact earthy, world of the Mud Dwellers.

Peake attempts to overcome this problem in a number of ways. Firstly, he presents Keda as somewhat distinct from the other Dwellers. Having just borne a dead infant, and suffering after her aged husband's death from the attentions of two men, Braigon and Rantel, she seizes on the chance to become Titus's wet-nurse, as it gives her the opportunity both to escape from what has become for her an unhappy environment, and to fulfil the maternal role for which she had been prepared. This movement away from her society proves ultimately to be irreversible: in her absence, her dead husband's belongings, and his dwelling, are taken from her; and the conception of the Thing on her return to the Dwellings leads to ostracism and exile.

Among the patriarchal society of the Dwellers, Keda is a natural radical - a proto-feminist, almost, who defies the iron laws of the Carvers in asserting her individual freedom. There are echoes of Lawrence in the sensual world of the Dwellers; and Keda certainly has something of the Lawrentian *anima mundi* about her - though, as with the Thing, this strength of character is diffused in the deep shadows of Gormenghast.

She is therefore a rebel from her own people. Ironically, in accepting the role of wet-nurse, she also provides an opposition, however slight, to the norms that prevail within the castle. Firstly, she is an outsider who, though her entry into Gormenghast is entirely legitimate, is an intruder; and secondly, she has (though, cursed by the ageing affliction of her kind, she is losing it) a fertile vibrancy that is in stark contrast to the stagnant and barren environment of the castle. A wet-nurse has to be found outside the walls of Gormenghast, simply because one cannot be found within them.

Keda is therefore conceived from the beginning as a displaced character. She has, it seems, her own sphere of existence, neither within nor outside of the castle walls. This peripherality

is one important distancing factor when transferred to her daughter, the Thing. However, isolation alone is not enough to account for the Thing's strangeness; and Peake, clearly aware of this, attempts to enhance the singularity of her mother's character in a number of ways. The first, and most obvious, is her period of exile, which occupies the whole of her pregnancy - and is therefore intended to confer upon her offspring a symbolic distance from her origins.

Much of the narrative that deals with Keda's exile is weak. This is true both before and during her exile. Peake, as a modern writer, is at his best when portraying character at a little distance; where his Romantic outlook draws him in - as in his portrayal of Keda - this ironic stance is unfortunately lost. From her first appearance, though Peake is at pains to emphasise her dignity, she is too earnestly drawn. The result is an unfortunate irony. In what is intended to be an elevating comparison, Keda is described as being "in strange contrast to little Nannie Slagg". (TG, 94) The outcome is not as intended, for Mrs Slagg, however diminutive (and she is not one of the best of Peake's characters, either) is nevertheless more real than this 'tragic' figure.

The dramatic weakness remains after Keda's entry into the castle. In nursing Titus, she is able to find a degree of maternal fulfilment and assuagement for her grief: "[A] calm came over her as from her very centre, the milk of her body and the riches of her frustrated love welled up and succoured the infant creature in her keeping." (TG, 97) This doesn't work particularly well, being too reliant on an emotional response which Peake has not evinced. Her conversation with Mrs Slagg is also lacking in colour, which again tends to undermine Peake's efforts at investing her with a degree of mystique. She relates to the old nurse a personal history which is clearly intended to have a symbolic resonance; but it is unable to preserve the folkloric quality that its content is meant to create.

Briefly, her story is this. Under the "iron laws" that govern her society, she had been forced

to marry an old but respected Carver. He died three months after their marriage - though he had left her pregnant. The infant is still-born, and she is left alone and grieving. Two men, Braigon and Rantel, come to love her; she admits to a certain degree of reciprocation - though it is not clear how much. From this, it appears she has attracted a certain amount of criticism.

While he was still alive, the old Carver had been fashioning a dryad, of which Keda remarks: “‘To me it seemed he carved the child of leaves.’” (TG, 193) Unfortunately, he dies before he is able to finish it. Clearly, this is of considerable symbolic significance. Given that one of the original names for the Thing was Leaf³ and that she is referred to throughout as a sprite, or faun, or elf, then evidently Peake was attempting to create a mythological point of reference from which the character of the Thing could ultimately be drawn. As I have suggested, however, this potentially powerful symbolic link between the Carvers and their art is not developed successfully due to the weakness of the personality of the character that relates it.

When Keda leaves the castle, and the Dwellings, behind, there is a further attempt to enhance the mythological or folkloric ambience, principally in the form of the Brown Man:

It was as though Autumn was standing beside her, or an oak, heavy with its crisp, tenacious leaves. He was of brown, but lambent, as of sepia-black glass held before a flame. His shaggy hair and beard were like pampas grass; his skin the colour of sand; his clothes festooned about him like foliage along a hanging branch. All was brown, a symphony of brown, a brown tree, a brown landscape, a brown man. (TG, 351-2)

This figure, with his supernatural powers (he calls Keda to him telepathically) and his role as natural healer, has much in common with Tolkien's Tom Bombadil, in whose house the Hobbits find much-needed succour from the perils of the Old Forest, after their departure from the safety of the Shire.⁴ However, he is not so successful as Tolkien's character, whose semi-mythical

status seems perfectly consonant with the fantastic milieu of Middle-Earth. As other commentators have suggested, Gormenghast is such a powerful focus for Peake's imagination that he is unable to sustain his vision much beyond its walls. This is apparently acknowledged by Peake, who gives the Brown Father an enigmatic connection with the distant castle: "For me it is not yet dreadful, although it has changed. When I was young it was for me the steeple of all love. As the days die, it alters." (TG, 358) We are left to speculate on this: possibly he was, in the distant past, a loyal retainer - and one may hypothesize about the guardian figure that Flay remembers from his childhood; but as Peake chooses not to expand, all that can be claimed is that Gormenghast's pull is felt over a wide area - and that all that exists outside it is perceived comparatively.

Before stumbling into the Brown Man's sphere of influence, Keda, we are told, has spent many months travelling "through many regions" as a migrant worker. Again, this attempt to locate her outside of Gormenghast only succeeds in weakening the plausibility of her character - and in fact must be considered as a major flaw in Titus Groan, the success of which is largely due to Gormenghast's complete autonomy and isolation. Peake seems to realise this, as the reference to these outside realms is brief and vague; possibly for this reason also, he decides to fashion some sort of connection between the Brown Man and Gormenghast, and locate his cottage within sight of the Tower of Flints.

Despite the reservations I have indicated, the Keda sub-plot is not entirely unsuccessful. The strongest aspect of it, appropriately, is when she returns to Gormenghast, to give birth to her "child of alabaster" and end her life. Her suicide is given dramatic power for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is an heroic death. Unwilling to accept the ageing curse of her people, and in defiance of those who have ostracised her, she chooses the time and manner of her own death. Secondly, the description of her suicide plays to Peake's strengths, seen, as it is, across a wide

vista, and therefore in silence. As I maintained in the previous chapter, the absence of dialogue often lends a symbolic weight to events and actions in the first two novels. Finally, the fact that Keda's death is witnessed by Flay adds a further symbolic significance to the event, in that it emphasises the concept that, beyond the parameters of Gormenghast, the individual gains access to hidden knowledge.

This final, symbolically charged event imbues Keda's character with a little of the power intended for her. More importantly, however, it provides something of the mystique necessary for Peake to be able plausibly to develop the character of the Thing as 'otherworldly': her mother's legacy is a certain separateness, and perhaps an insight into the world that exists beyond Gormenghast.

Before Keda left the Brown Father, he promised that her child would find him - that he would act as her guardian. Peake, probably wisely, chooses to leave this out of the subsequent plot, however; and the Thing's childhood is largely a mystery. Her first appearance, as an infant, is an attempt to establish two things: her strangeness, and her link with her 'foster-brother', Titus. On the occasion of Titus's Earling, she is being held by a woman, standing "a little apart from the group" (TG, 489) of Carvers. The intended point is that she is different - and, as the illegitimate child of Keda, is ostracised by them. However, this is rather undermined by what appears to be a careless mistake by Peake. We are unsure who exactly is holding the baby: "There was a woman by the shore. She stood a little apart from a group. Her face was young and it was old: the structure youthful, the expression, broken by time - the bane of the Dwellers. In her arms was an infant with flesh like alabaster." (TG, 489) Given the fact that Keda was shunned by the Dwellers, and that, in their superstitious fear, none of them would go near her unnatural offspring, it seems unlikely that this woman could be anyone other than Keda herself. Yet Keda is dead by the time of the Earling; and to suggest that this is a ghostly apparition is not

in accord with the sense of reality, however strange, of Gormenghast. One must therefore put it down to the fact that the author has slipped up at this point.

The encounter between Titus and the Thing is, as Colin Manlove maintains, “too contrived and melodramatic”.⁵ Peake attempts to confer a sort of fundamental empathy between two infants - a concept which is not possible to accept. It is only when Titus is older, and has a degree of self-awareness, that any sort of emotional link can be developed. As it is, this episode, being the last major sequence of action in Titus Groan, is something of an anticlimax. Though it does have a certain dramatic appropriateness, maintaining as it does the theatrical quality of Titus Groan (see chapter 13 below), this does not confer dramatic power on the scene.

It is in the second novel, Gormenghast, where Titus’s dissatisfaction with, and ultimate denial of, the laws that control his life is developed, that the nature and function of the Thing is largely examined. In fact, as both ‘foster-siblings’ grow, we become more aware of the link that Peake attempted to forge between them in Titus Groan - if only because, in this lonely and isolating environment, they are both ‘lost’ children: the Thing, through the alienating process I have described above; and Titus, through his apparently innate objections to authority.

I have suggested that the Thing is presented as the catalyst of Titus’s rebellion; and at the end of Gormenghast, it is acknowledged that “His longing to escape had been fanned by his passion for the ‘Thing’.” (GG, 506) However, it must be stressed that the Thing isn’t the source of his motives - her behaviour simply brings a realisation to the emergent consciousness of Titus that his urge to escape is not groundless. This is an important distinction, and one which other commentators have not, I feel, explored sufficiently. Colin Manlove, for example, suggests that, because of three basic dilemmas, “Titus’ [sic] role in the trilogy loses credibility from the start.”⁶ Firstly, he suggests, the changelessness that is so fundamental to the concept of Gormenghast precludes Titus’s heretical ‘nature’. Secondly, there is no outside force with enough weight to

draw Titus out of this unchanging world. Finally, and because of the first two problems, the protagonist is unable to condemn Gormenghast from within: having no point of comparison, he cannot conceive of any alternative reality.

The first point does not come within the scope of the present argument, and will be considered at a later stage (see pp.179ff. below). The second, however - and by implication, the third point also - brings us back to the original problem of the nature and function of the Thing. As I have suggested, Gormenghast is so central a reality that anything outside it is incidental, ephemeral. The further characters stray from the castle, the less sure their identities become. However, the Thing is an exception. She is not, has never really been, a part of the castle. She is anathema, in fact, not only to the ritualised life within its walls, but also to the equally regimented traditions of the Dwellers. Her domain is contiguous to, but not a part of, the world of Gormenghast that had been so carefully delineated in Titus Groan. If the castle, with its deep shadows and vast perspectives is super-real, then the Thing is super-natural - and, as I intend to show, a force whose potency makes plausible her function as the catalyst of Titus's liberation.

As I have shown, the origin of the Thing, though lacking in mystery, does have an element of the supernatural. Her mother is remembered at the beginning of Gormenghast as "intangible, distant and occult". (GG, 10) Though this description is not entirely acceptable for the reader, Peake suggests that, to the superstitious Dwellers, she came to be perceived in this way; and as we discover in the second novel, the Thing is certainly, in the minds of her ancestors, conceived in terms of a curse: "There was a strong belief that in some ways a love-child was evil. The mother would invariably be ostracised but it was only the babe who was to be feared - it was, in fact, a witch in embryo." (GG, 279) The character of the Thing is therefore developed as much as a symbol as she is an animate being: she is mythologised by the Dwellers, becomes part of their folklore. Rumour, based on superstitious fears, attribute to her quasi-mythical, or

supernatural, powers: “The dwellers cursed the day when the Thing was born; the Thing that could not speak but could run, it was rumoured, up the stem of a branchless tree; could float for a score of yards at a time on the wings of a high wind.” (GG, 281)

In the minds of the Bright Carvers then, the Thing represents a potent, negative force. From the point of view of the castle, she appears to be conceived in similar terms. Mention of her existence to Mr Flay (who, though exiled, is still psychologically part of Gormenghast) has an extreme effect on him:

‘Mr Flay,’ he [Titus] whispered with a passionate urgency. ‘O, Mr Flay.’

The man of the woods knelt down at once. ‘Lordship? What is it?’

‘Am I dreaming?’

‘No, boy.’

‘Have I slept?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Then I saw it.’

‘Saw what, lordship? Lie quiet now - lie quiet.’

‘The thing in the oakwoods, that flying thing.’

Mr Flay’s body tautened and there was an absolute silence in the cave.

‘What kind of a thing?’ he muttered at last. (GG, 143)

Clearly, Flay has seen the Thing - and is deeply concerned about its existence. The reactions of both the rationalist Dr Prunesquallor - who “froze into a carving of ice” (GG, 191) on hearing of it from Fuchsia - and the commonsensical Gertrude - whose reaction to the Thing’s insolent mimicry is “all out of reason” (GG, 317) - testify to the attempts Peake makes to emphasise the power this creature has over the minds of the castle. At the same time, it is not certain whether this power is based on the same fears as the Dwellers (rather unlikely, given the contrast that is

maintained between the primitive society outside the walls and the sophisticated one within it), or whether the Thing's anarchic, irreverent nature casts her as a natural enemy of the castle. I feel, however, that it is something more than this. Since the Earling, the whole castle has known about the Thing: both that it is a feared and rejected offspring of the Dwellers; and, more disconcertingly, that there exists some kind of link between the creature and Titus - a link, furthermore, which the strange creature seems fully to recognise. The reaction of the Countess referred to above is an instinctive recognition of the fact that the Thing is trying to undermine what is already a tenuous emotional link between mother and son. This is the only occasion, apart from when Titus kills Steerpike, on which Gertrude shows any maternal interest in her child - she is walking with him, showing him the plants, birds and animals that mean so much to her. The Thing's appearance is significantly timed.

It can be said therefore that, while the Thing is clearly symbolically overshadowed by Gormenghast, she still represents a fundamental threat, both to the castle's society and to the Dwellers. The reactions of the two societies seem independent: the one based on political concern, the other on superstitious fear. In fact, they are both the effects of same phenomenon: it is the very strangeness of the Thing that attracts Titus to her - and therefore threatens the foundation of Gormenghast's civilisation.

As Batchelor has pointed out, the whole concept of the Thing is based on the character of Rima in W.H. Hudson's Green Mansions, a romance set in the rain forests of Venezuela and "Guayana". The novel was, according to Batchelor (and following Maeve Peake), "a favourite book of Peake's"⁷; and it is clear that the relationship between the superstitious 'Indians', the mysterious Rima and Abel, the sophisticated traveller, informs the tensions and attractions that are presented in Gormenghast. Rima's mystery stems from the fact that she is perceived inconsistently: to the Indians, she is "a daughter of the Didi" - apparently a forest spirit - and

something therefore unnatural and to be feared; while to Abel, she is a fascinating enigma, in whose elusiveness lies her attraction. This is clearly paralleled by the responses of the Dwellers and Titus to the Thing; and I feel it would be appropriate to examine the comparison of Green Mansions and the Thing's sub-plot further.

As I have indicated, the Indians of Hudson's forest are very similar to Peake's primitive inhabitants of the Mud Dwellings. Their lifestyle is simple and monotonous, by and large, with a strong paternal hierarchy; and, though they live in the deep shadows of the forest, they have a supernatural fear of the terrors it may hide. Rima, who in fact dwells in an isolated part of the forest with her 'grandfather' Nuflo (in fact a Spaniard who saved Rima's mother many years before, and became Rima's guardian after her death), has many of the qualities of the Thing. She has a close affinity with the natural world; her senses are extremely acute; and she has the ability to move about the forest unobserved. What is most significant, however, is the language she uses. It cannot be understood by anyone living - she is the last survivor of a dead race - but serves to confer on her a certain symbolic significance. Her name, which means "rhyme", emphasises the fact that she is in harmony with nature: she will not harm any living thing, and is disgusted when Abel shares a carnivorous meal with Nuflo.

Abel first encounters Rima, not by sight, but by sound. Alone in the forest, he hears "a low strain of exquisite bird-melody, wonderfully pure and expressive".⁸ This is interesting when we consider the way in which the Thing uses bird-song to mimic Gertrude. Both are fascinating to the protagonists; but the Thing appears much less innocent: she is goading the countess, while attracting Titus's imagination, whereas Rima simply seems attracted to Abel.

Another point of comparison lies in the fact that Rima is associated with the notion of escape: like the Thing, she inhabits a 'forbidden' realm - a part of the forest which the superstitious Indians shun - and therefore, even before Abel encounters Rima, a source of attraction for him.

Indeed, Abel's emotional response to this part of the forest is strikingly similar to that of Titus when he ventures out of the castle - particularly in the fact that the intensity of both protagonists' feelings stem from a knowledge that they are discovering something new: "And it was mine, truly and absolutely - as much mine as any portion of earth's surface could belong to any man."⁹

This is significant for several reasons. Firstly, there is the notion of escape: Abel, after all, first came to the forest in an effort to seclude himself from the political turmoil of his country, in which he had played a significant part: and so, like Titus, he seeks a retreat from public life. Secondly, such discoveries represent a sort of conquest - a laying claim to something hitherto untouched. Obviously, then, this leads to another aspect of Rima which is certainly also an important function of the Thing - as the source of sexual awakening.

Both Peake and Hudson (but especially Hudson) give the rather unfortunate impression that the Thing and Rima are objects, not only of desire, but of sexual conquest. Titus and Abel yearn to possess them - and find the females' resistance to such attempts both perplexing and enticing. This, of course, is the unattainable, alluring ideal of woman that became a powerful symbol in the Renaissance: but in the case of the Titus novels, it is a characteristic quite different to those already considered. In fact, Titus's desire for the elusive Thing marks what is essentially a movement from the darker Titus Groan, with its absurd-tragic tone, to the more Romantic Gormenghast, in which we see the introduction of pastoral.

Lawrence Lerner, in The Uses of Nostalgia, describes pastoral as a longing "to escape from the centre to the simpler world of Arcadia".¹⁰ This is certainly the informing motive for Titus in the second novel: as his understanding of his role increases, so the protagonist makes more and more attempts to defy control. His striving to escape, significantly, is also a movement from the metropolis of Gormenghast to the natural world beyond. As I shall affirm below, the benign natural environment of Gormenghast Forest is a typically comic locality (see pp.253-7); it also

provides, in its less restrictive physical nature, the opportunity for an increase in movement: unlike Titus Groan, which is largely static, Gormenghast's structure, devolving as it does around a number of narrative developments, is much more kinetic; a considerable period of time also elapses, in contrast again to the first novel (again, see pp.256-7).

Returning to Manlove's assertion that the Thing lacks potency, it is therefore possible to suggest that, though this criticism is valid to a point, it does not sufficiently take into account this fundamental shift between the two novels. Though she appears nebulous, she is not the adversary of Gormenghast: she is a creature of the outside world, whose admittance is made possible by the fact that Gormenghast is crumbling - is, as I suggested in the first part of this thesis, slowly but inexorably becoming a part of the natural world itself.

There is another interesting paradox involved in this breakdown. I have already touched on the extent to which Peake can be described as nostalgic - or indeed, whether he is at all. I have suggested that he is too ironic to be nostalgic in the same way as Evelyn Waugh, for example. Yet, where his Romantic sensibility does not lead to indulgence, Peake does evoke what we might describe as an ontological nostalgia - the desire, in other words for that lost world of Eden or Arcadia that is represented in the pastoral world outside the walls of Gormenghast. I shall assert below (see chapter 12) that Titus's departure from his home is not only a movement forwards through time, but also further back - to the mythical past. The world of Titus Alone is both a dystopic vision of the future and a mythical underworld, inhabited by gods and demons. However, the entrance to this world is made possible by the movement away from the centre that is initiated in Gormenghast - and particularly by the Thing.

Peake repeatedly tries to develop the character of the Thing as mythical, as I have suggested above. She is a faun, a dryad, a sprite or a nymph; she is, in the consciousness of the Dwellers, a creature possessed of magical powers - a "witch in embryo"; to the urban, sophisticated

metropolis of Gormenghast, her mere appearance is enough to make its most powerful citizens freeze in their tracks, or behave irrationally. She has this power, not in herself, but for what she represents - the faery world beyond the known.

This supernatural realm - whether prelapsarian Eden, or Arcadia, or an idealisation of pre-industrial England - was a particularly strong influence on the Romantics; and in both the Thing and Hudson's Rima, there is certainly a strong resemblance to Keats's spirit of Autumn:

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
 Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
 Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
 Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
 Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
 Drowsed with the fumes of poppies, while thy hook
 Spars the next swath and all its twined flowers;
 And sometime like a gleaner thou dost keep
 Steady they laden head across a brook;
 Or by a cider-press, with patient look,
 Thou watchest the last ooziings, hours by hours.¹¹

In Green Mansions, Abel's first sight of Rima is certainly reminiscent of this:

It was a human being - a girl form, reclining on the moss among the ferns and herbage, near the roots of a small tree. One arm was doubled behind her neck for her head to rest upon, while the other arm was extended before her, the hand raised towards a small brown bird perched on a pendulous twig just beyond its reach.¹²

Yet, in the Thing, Peake creates, at least in snatches, a vision that is much closer to that of Keats.

As with the soundless description of Keda as she leaps from the precipice, the most effective image of the Thing is purely visual: a short, expository chapter in which she is 'discovered' sleeping in the bole of a hollow tree:

There was no cavern of that high and silky cliff but had its occupant. Save for the bees whose porthole dripped with sweetness, and the birds, there were few of the denizens of this dead-tree settlement that could get any kind of grip upon the surface of the bole. But there were branches, which swept from the surrounding trees to within leaping range for the wild cat, the flying squirrel, the opossum and for that creature, not always to be found in the moss-lined darkness of its ivory couch, who, separated by a mere membrane of honey-soaked wood from the multitudinous murmur of a hive, was asleep as the evening light stole through the small round opening so high above the ground. As the light quickened the creature moved in its sleep. The eyes opened. They were clear and green as sea stones and were set in a face that was coloured and freckled like a robin's egg.

(GG, 178)

This Romantic, pastoral image, with its rich, fertile concentration of language, is one of many that develop, in Gormenghast, an increasingly important tension, to add to those created in Titus Groan. Whereas in the first novel, the developing pressures are largely internal, the contrast between the natural, outside world and the man made, unnatural world within (both the walls of the castle and the minds of its inhabitants), widens the field of vision. Just as Keats and the Romantics turned away from what they saw as the corrupting and limiting metropolis of London, seeking inspiration in nature and in their imaginations, so Peake, having presented a total world, looks to what lies beyond it. Titus, the child of the metropolis, begins, intuitively (and thus Romantically), to question his world - and finds a focus for his as yet unformulated

impulses to escape in the appropriately ephemeral Thing.

Such an approach, I believe, makes possible the potency of the Thing in the imagination of Titus. She is the ideal representative of all that Gormenghast is not - a fleeting, insubstantial extension of that side of him which his home has sought, through its super-reality, to repress. She is, it might be said, Titus's spiritual aspect or anima: and as such, she is also his Grail. Titus's departure from Gormenghast, unacceptable as it may seem to some commentators, is in this sense inevitable. Like Perceval, brought up in the cloistered protection of a monastery, Titus has seen, in the Thing that is both natural and supernatural, both of the world and out of it, a glimpse of a deeper, gnostic reality: he cannot but accept the quest.

Notes.

1. Colin Manlove, Fantasy: Five Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 237.
2. Batchelor, 96.
3. *Ibid*, 94.
4. J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings (1968. London: GraftonBooks - HarperCollins, 1991) vol.1: The Fellowship of the Ring, chapters VI-VII.
5. Manlove, 235.
6. *Ibid*, 238.
7. Batchelor, 91.
8. W.H. Hudson, Green Mansions (1904. New York: Dover, 1989) 37.
9. *Ibid*, 60.
10. Lawrence Lerner, The Uses of Nostalgia: Studies in Pastoral Poetry (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972) 35.
11. Keats, 'To Autumn' (1819), ll.12-22. Cited in The Norton Anthology of English Literature (5th edition) vol.2, 844.
12. Hudson, 65.

Part Three: The Literary Functions of Titus.

It may be considered ironic that Titus Groan, in the novel that bears his name, does not have much of a role to play, being still an infant at its conclusion. Furthermore, the title of the second novel, Gormenghast, again appears inappropriate, concentrating as it does on the growth and development of Titus (and his alter-ego Steerpike). However, this inversion is not completely without justification. As we have seen, in Gormenghast context is everything; and so the characters and events in the first novel have an important effect on Titus - as do the structures that have been set in place long before his birth. A product of his environment, Titus's character is more fully understood if we have some insight into that environment. (Thus I have followed Peake's logic in structuring this thesis.)

Yet Titus rebels. Turning his back on centuries of tradition, Titus Groan abdicates as 77th Earl of Gormenghast and leaves the only home he has ever known. In the first half of this thesis I have examined the nature of this home in detail, as well as the society it has produced. We have seen that the intransigence of the social system of Gormenghast has led to its current degenerated state: many characters, stripped by their barren lifestyles of any individuality, have been unable to respond; others have proved themselves remarkably resilient.

Titus is both heir and symbol of this world. Valued only in the abstract, his basic struggle is in asserting his individual identity. As such, he is a representative of the modern age, rather than the feudal, medieval period that his 'Gothic' home connotes. In this basic difference lies the reason for his disenchantment with, and subsequent departure from, Gormenghast.

His abdication therefore symbolises the fundamental estrangement between the individual and his environment which recalls the dilemma of both the Romantic hero and the alienated modern. In the following chapters, I shall compare the nature and functions of Titus with these

literary 'types', an analysis which will provide evidence to suggest that Peake as an artist draws on both traditions - yet in very different ways.

In the final chapter of this section, I shall return to the basic reasons for Titus's departure. I shall propose that his estrangement and subsequent journey constitutes a reworking of the mythical quest - a motif central to both Romantic and Modernist traditions, signifying as it does the movement of the individual out beyond the limits of the known in an attempt to achieve a more profound understanding of the human condition.

10. Romantic Hero.

The whole sequence of the Titus novels, but especially Gormenghast, abounds with Romantic images - many of them associated with the nature of Titus himself. His growth and development; the increasing tensions he experiences between conformity and rebellion; his iconoclasm; and, in Titus Alone, his quest: these are all dominant themes which provide the impetus around which the complex plots are built. The Gothic atmosphere of the castle, with its extremes of sublimity and madness, is also a Romantic leitmotif. Many of the characters are drawn in the Romantic tradition - particularly Sepulchrove, who is almost certainly inspired by Scythrop Glowry, the heir to Nightmare Abbey in the novel of the same name by the Romantic writer Thomas Love Peacock:

Scythrop was left alone at Nightmare Abbey.... The terrace terminated at the south-western tower, which, as we have said, was ruinous and full of owls. Here would Scythrop take his seat, on a fallen fragment of mossy stone... the Sorrows of Werter in his hand.... He began to devour romances and German tragedies, and, by the recommendation of Mr Flosky, to pore over ponderous tomes of transcendental philosophy... In the congenial solitude of Nightmare Abbey, the distempered ideas of metaphysical romance and romantic metaphysics had ample time and space to germinate into a fertile crop of chimeras.... He passed whole mornings in his study, immersed in gloomy reverie, stalking about the room in his nightcap, which he pulled over his eyes like a cowl, and folding his striped calico dressing-gown about him like the mantle of a conspirator.¹

Much of Peacock's humour is retained in Peake; yet, with his Romantic temperament, he often becomes more closely involved with his characters: even as he illustrates his awareness of the

absurdity of the human condition, it is clear that his vision affirms its tragic/heroic grandeur. The word “equipoise” is a favourite of Peake’s; and it is clear that he vacillates between “cynicism and true belief”, as Bristow-Smith puts it.²

Where he is closest to the Romantic, however, is in his exploration, through the character of Titus, of the assertion of individuality against a background of rigid conformity. The Romantic insistence on the fundamental importance of the individual identity, and their concern that personality was being suppressed by the laws that controlled civilisation, is acknowledged in Titus’s rebellion; and Wordsworth’s contention that such restriction created a disharmony between an individual and the natural world, obscuring the more fundamental bond, the “something far more deeply interfused”³, is echoed in Titus’s awakening consciousness: “Something more fundamental than tradition had him in its grip... He had slapped a god across its age-old face”. (GG, 407) Thus Titus responds to an essential desire that has been suppressed by his environment: and this manifestation of an emergence of the individual consciousness clearly belongs to the tradition of the Bildungsroman (see pp.150ff.). This style of narrative, which details the emotional or spiritual development of its hero, was adopted by the Romantics, in particular by Wordsworth.

The subtitle of The Prelude, ‘Growth of a Poet’s Mind’, confirms Wordsworth’s major work as a Bildungsroman. At its beginning, the poet/speaker describes himself as “A discontented Sojourner”⁴; there is within him a sense of a lack of fulfilment. Likewise Titus, even as a young schoolboy, broods over an “itch for rebellion”. Yet Titus is not only a product of his environment - he is the product: he is the heir, the culmination of his ancestral past. The emergence of Wordsworth’s individuality is the emergence of one from many; yet Titus’s development is not quite of this nature. It would be tempting to suggest that Titus’s consciousness develops as a result of a process of submergence rather than emergence - that he

is unique by virtue of his heredity and, in seeking to escape from this, his is a quest for anonymity. However, this would preclude further association of Titus with Romanticism, as it would imply a denial of the significance of the individual consciousness; and furthermore, certain statements in Gormenghast tend to refute such a thesis. Here, for example, when he is about to face Steerpike, he exhibits an explicitly Romantic sensibility:

He, Titus, the traitor, was about to prove his existence, spurred by his anger, spurred by the Romanticism of his nature which cried not now for paper boats, or marbles, or the monsters on their stilts, or the mountain cave, or the Thing afloat among the golden oaks, or anything but vengeance and sudden death and the knowledge that he was not watching any more, but living at the core of drama.

(GG, 493)

It may therefore be more accurate to describe Titus's progression as one of both submergence and emergence, in that he seeks to escape the attention that his status as heir demands, in order that he might develop his own personality. While it might be argued that Wordsworth and indeed all individuals are heir to a tradition which subverts and confines the consciousness, Titus's legacy is implicitly connected to him to a greater degree than any of the other characters: it is for the perpetuation of the Groan line that he exists; and his preservation is thus both the most fundamental law and the *raison d'être* of the Ritual.

Titus's liberation can therefore be conceived as more complete than that of Wordsworth's poet for, in order to achieve that freedom, he must destroy, rather than transform, the environment that confines him. At the end of The Prelude, the poet returns to Grasmere. He is a different person, perhaps, having achieved spiritual liberation through an alteration of his perception. Titus returns to the regions of his past, not in order to claim his heritage, but simply to affirm his existence by completing the cycle necessary for his personal growth. The

emergence of his consciousness has involved an alteration not only in himself but in that which made him. It is a temporal shift which transcends the spiritual: Gormenghast becomes for Titus a 'myth' (see p.221) - as, for the reader, our disengagement from it emphasises its fictionality (see pp.268ff.). It is not contrary to reality; but he has confined it to his memory. From the beginning of Gormenghast to the end of Titus Alone, what we are witnessing is an inversion, opening with the words, "Titus is seven. His confines, Gormenghast." (GG, 7), and ending with the realisation that "He had no longer any need for home, for he carried his Gormenghast within him." (TA, 262-3) The boy grows out of his past, until he becomes a man: then the man holds his past inside him.

This shift in consciousness therefore involves a more profound revolution than that sought by Wordsworth. It is manifested not in any positive statement, but in a confused nihilism: "Why can't they burn the whole place down, and him [Steerpike] with it, and us with it, and the world with it, and finish the whole dirty business, and the rotten ritual and everything and give the green grass a chance?" (GG, 396-7)

Such a desire for destruction, however desperate, is nevertheless not completely nihilistic: it is unselfish, and ultimately creative. It would therefore perhaps be more appropriate to describe it as iconoclasm, a term freely associated with Romanticism. Wordsworth, however, was no iconoclast: he believed that a transcendence in the spiritual state of humanity could be achieved without recourse to violence. When the ideals of the French Revolution were overshadowed by the dark days of the Terror, he recoiled. Titus's ideal, the ephemeral Thing, is also destroyed; but her death is a natural disaster, arbitrary rather than predetermined. Her death was revelatory: she "had shown him by her independence that it was only fear that held people together." (GG, 505) This is the enlightenment not only of the social critic, but of the prophet: and in this respect, Titus recalls not Wordsworth's poet, but the more visionary idealism

of Blake. (Indeed, it is interesting that the cult popularity of Blake among radicals in the 1960s coincided with the Peake cult: it may well have fed it.)

Titus's unprecedented reaction against his background may be interpreted as the emergence of a 'visionary' consciousness. Gormenghast forms the sum of his childhood experience: "He knew no other world." (GG, 99) Yet he responds to stimuli beyond the experience of this environment. Barquentine, for whom more than anyone the law forms the totality of knowledge, notices this alien quality in Titus: "It was almost as though this heir to a world of towers had learned of other climes, of warm, clandestine lands, and that the febrile and erratic movements of the child's limbs were the reflection of what lived and throve in his imagination." (GG, 266)

This innate understanding of other worlds, other conditions, and indeed the idea of experienced innocence, is, I believe, much closer imaginatively to Blake than Wordsworth. As Titus becomes more aware of his predicament, he appears to accelerate towards liberation, albeit involuntarily. This helplessness, or at least a domination of inspiration over rationality, with its necessary descent, is a central motif of Blake's cosmic mythology: Oothoon's plucking of the flower of Marygold in 'Visions of the Daughters of Albion'⁵, interpreted neo-platonically, is a fall, a development from the innocent to the impure state; but in Blake, such a decision is an inevitable one and, lacking volition, is blameless. Blake is not Milton: his ethic is not puritanical, but based on a more mystical philosophy - and, in fact, received directly from divine sources. Thereby he was able to maintain his criticism of the forces which he believed were at the root of the degeneration of the human condition.

As I shall confirm in the subsequent chapter, Peake, as a modern writer, does not have the same recourse to a common belief system; and his artistic vision of transcendence cannot be perceived in religious terms as Blake's is. However, this does not undermine the assertion that the development of Titus recalls, in a literary sense, the iconoclasm of Blake. Although Peake

is no prophet in the sense that Blake might be regarded as one, the transcendence of Titus beyond the parameters of his social milieu shares the apocalyptic vision that one would associate with Blake rather than, for example, Wordsworth. Thematically, the Titus sequence follows the latter's concerns, in that it is a Bildungsroman, with the motifs and elements - crisis, catharsis (often deferred), progression - that are associated with that genre; but imaginatively at least, Titus follows the tradition of Blake.

As a Bildungsroman, the central narrative of Gormenghast is concerned with the education of Titus, both formal and informal. The formal component is uninspiring: as another facet of the traditional life of the castle, Titus appears to learn nothing from it. In fact, the only episode concerning his teacher, Bellgrove, that he gains any inspiration from is when the Headmaster visits him in the Lichen Fort, along with the Doctor. (GG, 149-58) Doctor Prunesquallor has a more significant role in Titus's upbringing than Bellgrove. As I have suggested (pp.108-11 above), the Doctor's otherworldly (because scientific) wisdom, coupled with his flippant and irreverent manner, and his self-conscious sense of the absurd, define him as a fool. In his prophetic, amoral attitude, Blake appears at times to adopt the guise of the fool, also (indeed, he was popularly believed mad). As with the Doctor, Blake's apparent eccentricity had something of the political prudence of the fool; certainly in the dangerous climate of 1793 onwards, his radical views were most effectively protected by encouraging the projection of a maverick persona.

Peake was not political in temperament: his mannered, individual style, if it indicated a certain maverick sensibility, was not that of a socially radical artist. Yet it is an attractive notion that Peake and Blake, both illustrators as well as writers, both Londoners by habit (Peake in fact rented a studio opposite the chapel in Lambeth where Blake produced much of his best-known work) and metropolitan by nature, and both, perhaps, typical English mavericks, share in their

art a certain similarity of vision. If one considers that, in the Thing, the most important single factor behind the development of Titus's identity (see chapter 9 above), encapsulates in her fey manner the "experienced innocence" that Blake conceived as the transcendent and transcending ideal state of being, then such identification seems entirely appropriate.

The education of Titus, then, originating as it does from as diverse sources as the rational Doctor Prunesquallor and the ephemeral, 'spiritual' Thing, confers on him something of the contradictory state of awareness that Blake sought, and which can be seen as a central principle of Romanticism:

Because of the wild vista that surrounded Gormenghast and spread to every horizon as though the castle were an island of maroons set in desolate water beyond all trade routes: because of this sense of space, how could Titus know that the vague, unfocused dissatisfaction which he had begun to feel from time to time was the fretting of something caged? (GG, 99)

As I have suggested above (pp. 162-3), this paradox can be conceived as a weakness in the plot of the novels. Colin Manlove finds Titus's urge to rebel improbable, given the exclusivity of the world he inhabits.⁶ Furthermore, the world of Gormenghast does not admit of visionary experiences: as I have demonstrated, it is obliquely but fully realistic (chapter 1 above).

This, of course, is the dilemma of the Romantic artist in the modern age. Schlegel had defined the term 'Romantic' as essentially Christian (as opposed to 'classical', and therefore pagan), in that it referred to, in René Wellek's paraphrase, "the poetry of infinite desire."⁷ In the secular twentieth century, the spiritual emphasis is difficult to maintain. However, I would argue with Northrop Frye that, if one considers the shift in focus from an outer to an inner ideal that Romanticism expounds, then it is possible to reinterpret also the object of that "infinite desire" as an individual gnosis that can be defined, in psychological terms, as the emergence of identity.⁸

Titus, locked within the confines of a world which excludes the possibility of any other experience, nevertheless becomes aware of that possibility: "He knew no other world. Here all about him the raw material burned: the properties and settings of romance. Romance that is passionate; obscure and sexless: that is dangerous and arrogant." (GG, 99) Here, perhaps, is the optimism of Wordsworth's liberated poet, "with a heart / Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty"⁹; yet here, also, is the inspiration with which Blake's innocents could liberate themselves from their "mind forg'd manacles".¹⁰

While he remains within Gormenghast, Titus is also bound, restricted. As the symbol of his world, he is, one might say, defined as well as confined. This restriction is such that he cannot recognise the stirrings within him as anything but a malcontented yearning for escape: having no experience of worlds other than that of which he is the centre, he has no external points of reference. He is unable to transcend his society whilever he continues to belong to it: in order for his individual identity to emerge, he must dissociate himself from his social identity.

Blake and Wordsworth both sought change in their society; arguably, the realisation that this was increasingly unlikely led, in the former, to an increasing introspection (much of Blake's later poetry is self-referent and obscure) and in the latter, to a more cautious conservatism. M.H. Abrams, in fact, charts a shift in focus which includes both Frye's cosmic analysis and the above social and philosophical cynicism: "faith in an apocalypse by revelation had been replaced by faith in an apocalypse by revolution, and this now gave way to faith in an apocalypse by imagination or cognition."¹¹ For Titus, however, this inner revolution is not possible; so he rides out of his world, revelling in the fact of his rebellion, "in the simple faith that in his disobedience was his inmost proof." (GG, 508) In his heedlessness, he recalls more readily the younger generation of Romantic poets - in particular, Byron.

An overtly Romantic image towards the end of Gormenghast, in which Titus envisions

himself as “a man upon a crag with the torchlight of the world upon him”, (GG, 488) casts Titus in the heroic mould of the Byronic archetype: a defiant and heterodox individual who has rejected society, reforming and reactionary elements alike, leaving it to its own ends. “To hell with Gormenghast”, he declares. (GG, 459) Given Peake’s ambivalent, heroic/comic presentation, we see Titus’s defiance also as a partly parodic representation of youthful naivety. Yet such scepticism is appropriate to Byron also, if we consider Don Juan. As Aidan Day suggests: “An unstated joke of Byron’s poem is that while Don Juan does have numerous romantic encounters, he is not the calculating initiator of these encounters, but the object of the women who pursue him.”¹² If we look forward to Titus Alone and the young protagonist’s sexual encounters with Juno and Cheeta, the ambivalent Byronic hero is clearly a type we can identify with Titus.

Once he has left his home, it may be argued that he loses definition; that by implication, Titus, being no more than an extension of Gormenghast, has no identity. This, however, suggests that Titus Alone is a weaker novel structurally than its predecessors, whereas I believe that loss of identity, and Titus’s struggle to rediscover it, is an integral part of the sequence. (I shall examine the structural unity of the novels in Part Four below) His quest may be seen, as has been suggested above, as a Bildungsroman; but Titus seeks Gormenghast in order to affirm his existence, not in order that he may return to his home. He is an unrepentant wanderer; and throughout his wanderings, his arrogant and disdainful attitude towards others recalls the titular hero of Byron’s Manfred.

The motivating force behind Manfred’s antisocial behaviour is guilt: it is implied that he has committed incest with his sister, Astarte. Titus, too, feels a deep remorse; he is a traitor, “Titus the Abdicator.” (TA, 9) Burdened by this sense of guilt, he can no longer savour his rebellion:

[H]is feelings were not those of a child or a youth, nor of an adult with romantic

leanings. his responses were no longer clear and simple, for he had been through much since he had escaped from Ritual, and he was no longer child or youth, but by reason of his knowledge of tragedy, violence and the sense of his own perfidy, he was far more than these, though less than man. (TA, 12)

A change, therefore, has taken place since the end of Gormenghast when, “exulting as the moonlit rocks fled by him” and “with his eyes fixed excitedly upon the blurred horizon” (GG, 511), he leaves his home behind him. In the nature of this change, Titus again illustrates a centrally Romantic paradox: that rebellion, the passage of the self towards consciousness, is kinetic, involving struggle against what seeks to inhibit it; but that the achievement of that state which is desired by those who strive for it, necessarily involves an end to strife. Revolution, taken literally, connotes a turning of the cycle back to its original position.

This paradox is encapsulated in Keats’ ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’: the opening line, ‘Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness’, with its dual meaning (does “still” act here as an adverb or an adjective?), allows the poet to hold both positions simultaneously; and, in the second stanza, Keats envies the eternal longing of youthful desire: “Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss, / Though winning near the goal - yet, do not grieve; / She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss, / Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!”¹³

Titus’s youthful goal has been achieved: he has rebelled, he is free of his childhood. Yet his quest has just begun. As P.H. Butter says in his introduction to Blake’s Selected Poems: “The young man thinks he must fight against the father and the mother seen as external obstacles; the mature man knows that the struggle is within the self.”¹⁴ Titus’s mother and father are little more than extensions of the House of Groan, which, as I have indicated above (see pp.36-9) might properly be called his true parent. But he fights against all of it; and now his quest indeed becomes the struggle within the self. Clearly, this struggle can be interpreted in psychological

terms; and, as I shall illustrate (in chapter 12 below), such an approach, which acknowledges the mythical structures underlying fictional patterns, allows us to consider the Titus novels as a coherent and unified sequence.

This internal division recalls that of Byron's *Manfred* who, having suffered the loss of his sister, Astarte, refuses to exist within the moral restrictions of society. His guilt stems from the fact that Astarte, following their illicit liaison, has committed suicide. Titus, too, holds himself responsible for his sister's death; the Thing, another 'sister', is also destroyed; and Steerpike, his alter-ego, and who he regards as having murdered both of these, has been killed by Titus. In psychoanalytic terms, he has therefore taken upon himself the burden of all these deaths: in holding himself responsible (a feeling which is perhaps encouraged by his personal association with the repressive society which, it may be argued, has killed them all), Titus gives the quest that his emergent identity desires some kind of focus.

Of course, this psychoanalytic interpretation is not available to Titus himself. The central theme of *Titus Alone* is loss, a lack of direction. He is unable to take root in any place outside of Gormenghast, and has to be led. In this orphanism we see another Romantic aspect of Peake's protagonist - one which, in fact, is fundamental to his character, even before he leaves his home. *Manfred*, the self-exiled wanderer, is a typical Romantic figure: the Promethean outcast who, by reason of his own curiosity or desire for knowledge (or power), is ostracised. Milton's Satan is such a figure; so are Faust, and Frankenstein, and Melmoth. *Titus Groan* is drawn in this tradition - yet again, in Peake's ambivalent style, partially as a comic inversion of the type. There burns within him "the hunger to be always somewhere else" (*TA*, 149); Titus, the orphan, testifies to the paradoxical spirit of the Romantic searcher: "There is no calm for those who are uprooted. They are wanderers, homesick and defiant." (*TG*, 69)

The wanderer is an essentially Romantic type because he invokes a number of emotional

responses. His escape from the restrictions of society excites our own egoistic impulses; the loss of that society, reminding us of our own fear of loss, engenders our pity; and his defiance in solitude invokes our sense of tragedy. The heroic quest is a projection of our own individual quest for identity; even if the quester is not wholly heroic (as is the case with Titus), his spirit engages our imagination. When Manfred rejects a pact with the spirits and powers of darkness, declaring: "I bear within / A torture which could nothing gain from thine", our admiration may be tempered by a sense of the pathetic¹⁵; and when the eyes of the adolescent Titus "blaze like the eyes of a beggar - or of a lord" (*TA*, 27), we are aware of Peake's parody; yet we must acknowledge, nevertheless, the heroic appeal of both figures.

Manfred's search ends in death, whereas Titus lives on; and he achieves, at the end of the book, a kind of calm. This, arguably, questions our interpretation of him as the defiant, Byronic hero; in fact, it suggests a return to Wordsworth's poet, perhaps, whose awakened consciousness, having survived the trauma of its birth, has achieved a degree of contentment in acceptance. However, the revolution has not been literally achieved: Titus, as I have stated above, does not return to Gormenghast, but chooses another path, and so his quest continues. He has evolved rather than revolved, and achieved a synthesis: "It was a sense of maturity, almost of fulfilment. He had no longer any need for home, for he carried his Gormenghast within him." (*TA*, 262-3)

This Miltonic image of personal achievement is tempered (as is that of Milton) by an understanding on the part of the protagonist that this catharsis marks just another beginning. As such, it returns to the Keatsian motif of the dilemma of eternal desire. This quest, according to Harold Bloom, is the motivating force behind Romanticism, the cause both of its inspiration and its melancholy:

English Romanticism legitimately can be called, as traditionally it has been, a revival of romance. More than a revival, it is an internalization of romance,

particularly of the quest variety, and internalization made for more than therapeutic purposes, because made in the humanizing hope that approaches apocalyptic intensity. The poet takes the patterns of quest-romance and transposes them into his own imaginative life....

The movement of quest-romance, before its internalization by the High Romantics, was from nature to redeemed nature, the sanction of redemption being the gift of some external spiritual authority, sometimes magical. The Romantic movement is from nature to imagination's freedom... and the imagination's freedom is frequently purgatorial, redemptive in direction but destructive of the social self.¹⁶

As we shall see (chapter 12 below), Bloom's final statement can be as appropriately applied to Titus's quest as it can to that of the High Romantics. He moves through Titus Alone towards a state of redemption; but his reconciliation cannot be social, only imaginative.

Walter Pater, in his Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1868), reworked the Romantic dilemma into what was to become a basic philosophy, firstly of the Decadent writers of the end of the nineteenth century, and later, of the Modernists. In the conclusion, Pater stated: "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits."¹⁷ In Titus's refusal to return to Gormenghast, there is something of this active, self-conscious denial. One might suggest that such an action paradoxically affirms the emergence of individual personality, in the manner of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus. In the next chapter, I shall examine this interpretation of the individual, offering a further commentary on the literary function of Titus's character.

Notes.

1. The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock, ed. David Garnett (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1948) 362-3. This extract cited in Aidan Day, Romanticism (London: New Critical Idiom - Routledge, 1996) 156-7.
2. Bristow-Smith, 40.
3. Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey', 96. Cited in The Norton Anthology vol.2, 154.
4. The Prelude, Book 1, line 8. (Norton, 229)
5. William Blake, 'Visions of the Daughters of Albion': Visions ll.8-11. Cited in Selected Poems, ed. P.H. Butter (London: Everyman, 1982), 67.
6. Manlove, 238-9.
7. René Wellek, 'The Concept of "Romanticism" in Literary History: I. The Term "Romantic" and its derivatives', Comparative Literature, vol.1, no.1 (Winter 1949), 1-23.
8. Northrop Frye, 'The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism', Romanticism Reconsidered, ed. Frye (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1963) 5, 16-17.
9. The Prelude, 1, 15-16.
10. 'London', line 8, Selected Poems, 36.
11. M.H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1971) 334.
12. Aidan Day, Romanticism (London: The New Critical Idiom - Routledge, 1996)166-7.
13. 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 17-20.
14. Butter, xxvii.
15. Manfred, act 3, 127-8. Cited in The Norton Anthology vol.2, 571.
16. Harold Bloom, Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism, ed. Bloom (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1970) 5-6. This extract cited in Day, 104.
17. Walter Pater, Studies in the History of the Renaissance. Cited in The Norton Anthology, vol.2, 1560-8.

11. Modern Everyman.

If we consider Titus as a Romantic figure, whether as iconoclast or as fugitive, then what seems to be central to his development is the preservation of his youthful vitality: he remains, despite his experience, a “ragged infant... a final innocence that has survived in spite of a world of evil.” (TA, 122) However, it may be argued that this is an oversimplification. The innocence that survives has done so because of a metamorphosis that was not conceived by the Romantics. Consider T.S. Eliot’s comment in his essay ‘Imperfect Critics’: “Romanticism is a short cut to the strangeness [of life] without the reality, and it leads its disciples only back upon themselves.”¹ By considering Titus as a Romantic hero we are therefore, according to Eliot’s definition, placing him at the periphery of human experience. His development is merely a disengagement from society, a marginalisation which has been echoed by the tendency to consider Peake’s work as neo-Gothic.

As we have seen (chapter 1 above), the Gothic genre in its more sophisticated form, which produced Frankenstein and Dracula, for example, explores aspects of human nature which society has suppressed or denied; and throughout much of the period in which it developed, there existed a moral consensus against which such darker images could react, thereby both interrogating and redefining human notions of morality and judgement. In the nineteenth century, however, such objectivity increasingly came to be perceived as a chimera: the conscious, socially-conditioned individual concealed a much deeper and more elemental subconscious self, free of such inhibitions and moral codes. Society, with its rules of behaviour, was, as George Eliot implied in Middlemarch (1872), nothing more than the preserving instincts of the collective ego: ‘normality’ was increasingly being seen as a subjective concept. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, writers began to find that the certainties of society and its

norms were melting under their feet²; and without such foci, deviation became simply idiosyncratic expression. Of course, as Oscar Wilde could testify, those whose power and station was based on the perpetuation of this tension between deviance and conformity did their utmost to preserve it; they still do. However, the shift towards subjectivity was irrevocable; and the Gothic genre could not easily transgress parameters which had become so uncertain. Neo-Gothic, as we might wish to describe the stories of H.P. Lovecraft, for instance, does not have the same interrogative power as Dracula: it reveals only a desire to explore the irrational in order to affirm our rationality. In this respect, it conforms to Eliot's criticism of Romanticism - its disciples tread a circle.

This increasingly uncertain, relativist attitude is echoed in the structure of the Titus novels. By constructing a total and enclosed world, the veracity of which it was not possible to question, and then moving outside of it, Peake forces us (and Titus) to reconsider the whole nature of our response to Gormenghast. As long as we remain within it, we judge the actions of its inhabitants according to our own preconceptions - a process which is fundamentally realist. When we leave it behind, however, the objectivity engendered by its inclusiveness is revealed as a falsehood. Titus is soon lost, not only physically, but in terms of his most basic perceptions of truth and reality. Structurally, then, Titus Alone serves to create a more subjective, modern analysis of the human condition. According to the precepts of Romanticism described above, Titus's abdication is a reaction against the repressive forces of the centre; but once he leaves his home, he demonstrates, in a Copernican moment of revelation, that his world is no longer the centre of the universe - further, that there is no centre:

That Gormenghast was of no consequence came over him. That Gormenghast was of no consequence and that to be an earl and the son of Sepulchgrave, a direct descendent of the blood line - was something of only local interest. The

idea was appalling. (GG, 402)

It is a shock, after the solid, centripetal certainty generated by the massive presence of Gormenghast throughout the first two novels; and we, with Titus, feel the loss - which is, after all, tantamount to a loss of faith - most keenly.

In this sense of solitude, then, Titus expresses the fundamental state of the modern condition. As Thomas Wolfe claimed: "My view of the world is based on the firm conviction that solitude is by no means a rare condition, something peculiar to myself or to a few specially solitary human beings, but the inescapable, central fact of human existence."³ Furthermore, Modernism argues that man, being alone, must be defined only in terms of his own experience: he is solitary in terms of his origin and destination. Following Heidegger, the modern hero is "thrown-into-being", without meaning, by chance.⁴ If interpreted thus, Titus is truly alone.

The dark tone of Titus Alone stems from the fact that, set as it is in a modern, technological world, it explores the effects of alienation on the individual - not only Titus, but all the individual characters in the book. Each suffers from an acute disaffection that is the result of the barbarising condition in which they exist. To this, in Titus's case, is added the trauma of loss: he has moved from a world which, though hated, is understood, to one in which all is meaningless. The futility of the Ritual is as nothing when set against the nihilistic absurdities of this new world.

The plot of Titus Alone, though rather incoherent, revolves around Titus's growing sense of unease, as he struggles to come to terms with his loss of identity. Given that his journey can be conceived, as I have suggested in the previous chapter, as a search for identity, such confusion puts him at some distance from the Romantic hero. In attempting to acknowledge the wider world, he is forced to recognise that it does not acknowledge him. Moreover, much of it appears to conspire to affirm that loss. In a series of increasingly insidious episodes, Titus's identity is

scrutinised, doubted and threatened, as he spirals helplessly towards madness.

This alienating process recalls that of Fuchsia (see chapter 5 above), who, like Titus in the final novel, is by virtue of her lack of real status, largely passive. In particular there are, in certain of the scenes in Titus Alone, echoes of Alice's predicament (which, as I have illustrated on pp.94-5, are shared by Fuchsia). The Court in which Titus is tried, following his unwitting entry into Lady Cusp-Canine's party, clearly resembles that in which Alice finds herself at the end of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland; one might argue that the avuncular but absent-minded Magistrate and his Clerk of the Court, Mr Drugg, recall the King and the White Rabbit in that scene. Titus's problem, that of a loss of identity, is Alice's predicament throughout; moreover, the fact that both have entered worlds in which, unable to make any sense of them, they are forced, by and large, to remain passive agents:

‘What do you know about this business?’ the King said to Alice.

‘Nothing,’ said Alice.

‘Nothing *whatever?*’ persisted the King.

‘Nothing whatever,’ said Alice.⁵

The comic tone of the court scene belies a deeper predicament, however, as Titus is forced to confront the problem of his identity. As the plot progresses, the threat to his personality becomes increasingly serious, until finally, thrown into the path of Cheeta, he becomes the target of her malicious insecurity. At the Black House, a dark parody of Gormenghast, he is forced to endure an elaborate masquerade, in which the grotesque caricatures of the inhabitants of his home are paraded in front of him. The implications for Titus of the absurdity of these figures threatens to send him insane; yet unlike Alice, he cannot cast off the illusion like a pack of cards or a set of chessmen: he is a passive victim of circumstances, who has to be rescued by his allies.

Titus is therefore very much adrift: and his passive state forces him to acknowledge the fact

that the significance of his past is significant only to himself. Yet he also comes to realise that this alienated state is an essential part of him: "I have always been lost", he tells Juno. (TA, 164)

In this world, where people seem simply to exist, there seem to be no patterns. In the distant border town to which Muzzlehatch travels after the slaughter of his animals, the inhabitants buy tickets to watch the sun rise and set; in the extremity of their alienation, it is the only thing they still have any claim to. It is a place which "had never had a past, nor could ever have a future." (TA, 150)

Gormenghast, by comparison, is a secure place indeed. As we have seen, it is an amalgam of historical epochs; yet all the various identifiable indicators - medieval hierarchy, Enlightenment man of science, Edwardian schoolroom, Renaissance, Augustan or Victorian literary motifs - all are retrospective: they hark back to ages in history in which some degree of absolute truth could be aspired to.

However, there are also many symptoms of disaffection, as I have noted. The motif of sexual barrenness, the dry and meaningless Ritual, the great tree whose painted roots are dead and rotten - the castle is riddled with the metaphors of decay that are readily associated with Modernist writings. Indeed, certain passages in the first two novels recall directly some of the most pungent images of High Modernism. Eliot's *Waste Land* is remembered in one such example: "There was no growth, and no movement. There was no sense here that a sluggish sap was sleeping somewhere; was waiting in the stony tracts for an adamant April." (GG, 179)

The significance of Gormenghast to Titus is that, despite such barren images, it retains meaning, at least to him: it is the sum of his past experience, and as such must be retained. He becomes increasingly aware of this only after leaving his home - an irony which, according to Eliot, is an important facet of modern experience. Tellingly, he also uses the tree as metaphor:

We become conscious of these items [ie. Habits and customs], or conscious of

their importance, usually only after they have begun to fall into desuetude, as we are aware of the leaves of a tree when the autumn wind begins to blow them off - when they have separately ceased to be vital.⁶

In considering both the relative vitality of Gormenghast, and the barren images it presents, we may consider that it functions in Titus's solitude in much the same way as the "fragments" of cultural memory Eliot, to paraphrase the conclusion of The Waste Land, shores against his ruins:⁷ it provides a series of lived experiences with which to judge more surely those that await him in the future.

Raymond Williams' commentary on the social origins of Modernism also provides an interesting interpretation of Gormenghast: "[T]he key cultural factor of the modernist shift", he suggests, "is the character of the metropolis."⁸ Williams argues that the increased mobility and resultant homogeneity of modern populations, within metropolitan centres which were expanding and merging until they became, potentially, a single complex body, constituting the whole world, ironically undermined social cohesiveness, and resulted in a profound individual alienation. This development in turn generated the basic themes of Modernism: "the elements of strangeness and distance, indeed of alienation, which so regularly form part of the repertory."⁹

As I have proposed above (see chapter 3), Gormenghast, in its omnipresence and vast complexity, functions very much as a metropolis, in Williams' sense of the word. Its inhabitants belong to a society which coheres only on a formal level, and therefore suffer a deep sense of personal isolation. As I shall demonstrate in the subsequent chapter, Peake's expansive style and parodic tone has the effect of making the strange familiar (thus inverting the tendency to illustrate the strangeness of the familiar that is the intention of Modernism). However, this familiarity is constantly disrupted by his undoubtedly modern methods of presentation. The composition of Titus Groan in particular, in which Peake presents a series of isolated episodes

either synchronistically or achronistically, though not exclusively modern, is a method of presentation commonly employed by modern writers. As Georg Lukács has commented, Modernist theories suggest that the sense of progression through life is in fact a delusion: having no recourse to a truly knowable past, we do not develop in relationship with the world, but in that it is gradually revealed to us. I shall return to the significance of this later; but one effect of such a theory is the preference for methods of exposition which, like Titus Groan, are not constrained by the linearity of time.

Such methods of composition are preferred by modern writers, as they involve a close scrutiny of the method itself. Naturalistic representation tends to undermine the importance of form, as it concentrates exclusively on the reality being represented. Modernists argued that more emphasis on the methods of artistic expression itself, which thereby encouraged the reader to engage more actively with the text, could allow for a more objective understanding of experience. Whereas the Romantic artist perceives himself as the centre of his imaginative universe (and therefore the 'hero' of his art), the Modernist asserts his relativity. The alienated world is inhabited by isolated individuals, each with his or her own relative, and subjective, perceptions. The integrity of art can only be maintained by avoiding prescriptive methods of representation - methods which, as T.S Eliot averred, were tendentious, reliant as they were on the subjective analysis of the artist: "We must ourselves decide what is useful to use and what is not; and it is quite likely that we are not competent to decide."¹⁰ This recalls Pater's assertion that "our failure is to form habits"; and it led to the Modernists' insistence on a dispassionate, inclusive art. Virginia Woolf, in typically paradoxical modern fashion, declared: "What a discovery... would be - a system that did not shut out."¹¹ This "system", though recognised as an impossible ideal, was the means by which the artist could retain, in the modern world, true integrity. Woolf claimed that the writer should "record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in

the order in which they fall... however disconnected and incoherent in appearance.”¹²

As we have seen, Peake is inclusive: he draws on a wide variety of literary forms and traditions, contrasting melodrama with absurd comedy, Romantic heroism with scepticism, grotesque caricature with poignant naturalism. As Williams remarks, Modernism, though critical of realism, is made possible by the form that preceded it: “without Dickens, no Joyce.”¹³ Indeed, we may consider elements in the Titus novels, such as the interior monologue technique in the ‘Reveries’ section, which recall Joyce, just as we have acknowledged Peake’s debt to Dickens. This literary inclusiveness, coupled with the amalgam of social and political history that is Gormenghast, and the recurrent images of stagnation, combine to present an effect of stasis. Once Titus moves out of this world, there is a further degeneration, emphasised and illuminated by the many events in Titus Alone that mirror earlier episodes. As we shall see, (chapter 12 below), the journey is a device used repeatedly throughout the books, with obvious psychological and in fact mythical connotations. Titus’s subterranean journey along the secret passage beneath Gormenghast (GG, 179-183) anticipates that which he makes to the Under-River (TA, 109-10) - though, significantly, the first is upwards, the second a descent. Steerpike’s escape from the Kitchens prefigures Titus’s ultimate liberation. The Black House, as I have described, is a parody of Gormenghast. Characters, too, in Titus Alone recall those in the first two novels. Fuchsia becomes Black Rose; Cheeta, perhaps, is a ‘civilised’ (and therefore malevolent) Thing; the murderous Veil is an elemental version of Steerpike. The constant echoes between characters, events and places create a labyrinthine structure which give the novels an intense, though necessarily incoherent, psychological power - and confer upon them a modern outlook.

I referred earlier to Lukács’ assertion that the modern view of the human condition involves a process of revelation rather than progress. This is, I would suggest, a crucial difference

between the Romanticism, certainly of Wordsworth's poet (see pp. 176-8 above), and the modern individual who is "thrown-into-being." The narrator (or the characters who act as vehicles through which he exposes the world) is "in motion; the examined reality is static."¹⁴ This interpretation suggests in fact a reworking of the Bildungsroman described in the previous chapter, implying as it does the relativity of the 'growth' of the individual. Titus, in the process of growing up, has rejected his symbolic, passive role, in an attempt to claim his own individual identity. Beyond the confines of Gormenghast, however, he is forced to realise that such an identity is subjective - that individuality is in fact subjectivity, and therefore confers only an awareness of "his inward isolation" upon him. (GG, 413)

Such an interpretation sounds rather bleak, and would tend to undermine Peake's affirmation of the enduring aspects of the human condition which is indicated in his comic vision. This rejuvenating element is evident in the resilience of certain characters throughout the novels; and the progression it implies, and which confers upon the Titus novels a profound and elemental unity, is vital to our understanding of Peake's art. I shall be examining the nature and significance of comedy in the novels in the last part of this thesis (see chapter 14 below); but, in considering the modern characteristics of his presentation, it is important to stress that, implicit in Titus's growing awareness of his isolation is a positive stance. Modernism does not advocate nihilism: as Joyce affirms, it involves an understanding and acceptance - even a celebration - of the disinterestedness of the world.

According to such a vision, we may acknowledge that Titus's departure from his home is both Romantic and modern. In his youth and inexperience, he represents the vitality of the individual who takes responsibility for his own actions, and has to progress beyond that which remains static. Yet in the act of his leaving, he becomes aware that any ultimate state of consciousness must remain a potentiality - and that, furthermore, due to the neutrality and passivity of the

universe in which he moves, cannot be anticipated. If, in leaving Gormenghast, Titus enacts the movement from childhood to adulthood that is essentially Romantic, then, with the denouement at the end of Titus Alone, he becomes aware, both of the naivety of the spirit in which that movement was initiated, and its necessity. The wisdom that his adventures have brought him allows him to recognise the fact that Gormenghast was as inclusive before he left it as it is relative and isolated now. He cannot return to it because, in this sense, “he had outgrown his kingdom.” (GG, 467)

This final section of Titus Alone is one whose images are readily associated with literary Modernism. The process of disengagement that is the result of Titus’s passivity (and Peake’s irony), and which will be discussed below (see chapter 15), culminates in a physical departure from the anguished scene of the Black House, which is prefigured by the sweeping vision of the scene provided by means of another vehicle, appropriately (remembering Gormenghast) the dispassionate gaze of an owl:

What did it see? It saw the dwindling of the juniper fire. It saw a long corpse lying by itself. Its head was turned on one side. It saw a dormouse under a bunch of couch-grass. It saw the glint of up-turned helmets, and a little to the west, their one-time owners. There they lay, sprawled across one another.

It saw Titus’s bandages and Anchor’s red hair in the foul morning light. It saw a bangle glinting on Juno’s wrist. It saw the living and it saw the dead. (TA, 255)

This rather heavy-handed image (a reworking, perhaps, of the conclusion of Joyce’s ‘The Dead’) is strengthened by Peake’s artistic awareness: though his innate Romanticism is evident in the presentation of Muzzlehatch’s death, he shifts our focus, with ironic poise, redefining the scene:

Owl or no owl, it was essential to get Juno and Titus out of this sickening place, where in the full, if beastly light of the risen sun, objects that appear mysterious

and even magnificent during the night appeared now to be tawdry; cheap; a rag-and-bone shop. (TA, 255)

Again, there is an echo here of Titus's original departure: his perceptions alter as the experience recedes into the past, just as the mystery and magnificence of Gormenghast, reduced to memory, is now limited and finite. With the end of the Black House episode, Titus has again reached the limits - has gained all he can from this world, and must move on again. This is the modern denouement, what Lukács describes as "the qualitative leap", which has the effect of "cancelling and at the same time renewing the concrete potentiality of individual consciousness".¹⁵ Lacking the satisfactory conclusiveness of the Romantic denouement, in which the poet/hero achieves 'true' insight into his nature, this modern conclusion nevertheless offers the possibility of further revelation.

At the end of Titus Alone, it is as if we are returning to the beginning of the whole sequence. Titus descends to earth, hanging helplessly from a parachute - passive, and with no idea of where he will land. This again emphasises the modern sense of loss; but it is also a metaphor of birth - or rebirth. It is another stage of his journey, a passage which is timeless and spaceless, and which is oddly reassuring:

For a little while he forgot his loneliness, which was strange, for what could have been a lonelier setting than the night through which, suspended, he gradually fell? There was nothing for his feet to touch and it was right for him to be, for the last time, so out of touch with any kind of sense. (TA, 260)

His fall is through a world which apparently has no sense: "a universe lit by a hundred lights and thronged by shapes and shadows; alive with endless threads of circumstance... action and event. All futility: disordered; with no end and no beginning." (TA, 258) Yet it is a descent which ultimately, is to lead him to a greater understanding of his condition. He is 'reborn' (he lands

in a tree, where he lies for a while “like a child in a cradle.” (TA, 261)) in the vicinity of Gormenghast. Wandering alone through apparently virgin wilderness, he recalls the Romantic figures of Adam and of Frankenstein’s creature, as “hungry, weary, he made his solitary way, eating roots and berries and drinking from the streams.” (TA, 261) Yet this time, he is no longer an innocent. When he happens by chance upon his old home, in a moment of insight that resembles a Joycean epiphany, he becomes aware, of the fact that he has changed. He cannot return, therefore, to Gormenghast: “he carried his Gormenghast within him.” (TA, 263) It is enough that it exists. In a fragmented, alienated universe, personal integrity - Eliot’s “fragments” - is the only thing between the individual and the madneses of nihilism and solipsism. Muzzlehatch summarises this appositely: “Everything lost, except to find the lost realm of Gormenghast. And then to guide young Titus to his home. But why? And what to prove? Only to prove the boy was not a madman.” (TA, 158)

For Titus, the emergence of identity involves a coming to terms with “the knowledge of his inward isolation.” In this, he enacts the fundamental ‘revelation’ of the modern individual - not a hero, but an everyman: a figure who represents the human condition, yet must be alone. It is, perhaps, a sobering realisation; but it is also one which allows for a reconciliation - and then to another beginning. As Eliot put it: “What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning.”¹⁶ Having completed the cycle, Titus realises it is only part of a wider movement, in which he will constantly return to, and constantly leave, his past experience. His mother had warned him that his quest would be futile: “There’s not a road, not a track, but it will lead you back to Gormenghast.” (GG, 510) This is true; but the quest was not futile. Titus has followed a cycle whose elementality confers upon it, as I shall describe in the next chapter, a cosmic or mythical quality; and this transcendence of literary parameters, I would argue, confirms his role as fundamentally modern.

Notes.

1. T.S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood (1928). This extract cited in Peter Faulkner, Modernism (London: The Critical Idiom - Routledge, 1990) 23.
2. I paraphrase here from Pater's Conclusion to The Renaissance: "While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion..." Cited in The Norton Anthology, vol.2, 1567.
3. This statement is mentioned by Georg Lukács in what is in fact a critique of Modernism. Lukács, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, transl. E. Bone (Merlin Press, 1963) 19-27. Reprinted in Literature in the Modern World, ed. Denis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 158- 64.
4. Lukács, *Op. Cit.*, 160.
5. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 140.
6. 'Tradition', After Strange Gods (1934). Cited in T.S. Eliot: Selected Prose (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953) 20.
7. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins", The Waste Land (1922), 431. Cited in The Norton Anthology, vol.2, 2196.
8. Raymond Williams, 'Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism' from The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists (Verso, 1989) 46.
9. *Ibid*, 46.
10. 'Criticism', in Selected Prose, 19.
11. Virginia Woolf, 'A Writer's Diary', 2nd October 1932. Cited in Faulkner, 33.
12. 'Modern Fiction', cited in Faulkner, 31.
13. *Op. Cit.*, 32.
14. Lukács, *Op. Cit.* 160.
15. *Ibid*, 162.
16. 'Little Gidding', Four Quartets, 214-5 (London: Faber and Faber, 1944) 47.

12. Titus and Myth.

In an earlier chapter (see pp.160ff. above), I suggested that the power of the Thing, in Titus's imagination if not in our own, is based on the fact that she has a certain mythical quality. She exists on the margins of civilisation, in the realms beyond the metropolis. An ephemeral creature, independent of the laws of Gormenghast, she is an object of anxiety to the inhabitants of the castle; to the Dwellers, she is a devil, possessed of supernatural powers. To Titus, therefore, the boy who has outgrown his kingdom, and seeks something more, she has the charisma of the defiant, and provides the impetus for rebellion. As such, the function of the Thing is clearly to provide an imaginative focus for Titus's emergent personality. As elusive as she is alluring, she is an animate Holy Grail: in other words, the inspiration behind Titus's quest.

The concept of quest very much conforms with Peake's inherent Romanticism: as I have implied above (pp.177ff.), the essential movement of the Romantic hero is outward, away from the urban centre. Only thus can the individual hope to gain an understanding of his own personality. David Copperfield, in confusion and dismay, leaves England with "a heavy sense of loss and sorrow, wherein I could distinguish little else."¹ Wandering across Europe, he gradually comes to accept his situation "not quickly, but little by little, and grain by grain." He seeks solace and inspiration in the Alps - the Heliconia of Romanticism.

However, the inner search - the quest for the real self - is also a fundamental topos of the modern, post-Freudian age. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is as much a Bildungsroman as David Copperfield or The Prelude. It is clear that Romanticism and Modernism (despite the claims of many Modernists) share the same initial impulse: as Edmund Wilson put it, as early as 1931, Modernism is "not merely a degeneration or an elaboration of Romanticism, but rather a counterpart to it, a second flood of the same tide."² This impulse, according to Perry Meisel,

is the acting out of “the loss of something primary that [Modernism] wishes to regain.”³ Clearly, the desire that drives an individual away from the centre and “out of his world” is common to both traditions. Peake, as I have suggested, has a certain literary ambivalence: he is a Modernist writer with a Romantic temperament. The world he presents is fragmented, its inhabitants isolated; yet the fundamental dynamic is heroic rather than ironic: Titus shares too much of David’s earnestness, too little of Stephen’s detachment. I would therefore like to end this discussion of Titus’s character and function by examining the impulse common to all these individuals. I hope to show that Titus, in deserting his home in response to an “itch for rebellion”, is re-enacting the desire for self-awareness that is common to all literatures - the mythical quest that is fundamental to Western perception.

Titus embarks upon a quest - but for what? As Colin Manlove has noted, he can have no knowledge of what lies outside Gormenghast and its immediate environs. Where does this initial impulse come from? Peake, in fact, is deliberately vague:

He ran as though to obey an order. And this was so, though he knew nothing of it. He ran in the acknowledgement of a law as old as the laws of his home. The law of flesh and blood. The law of longing. The law of change. The law of youth. The law that separates the generations, that draws the child from his mother, the boy from his father, the youth from both. And it was the law of quest. The law that few obey for lack of valour. The craving of the young for the unknown and all that lies beyond the tenuous skyline. (*GG*, 508)

As with many such declamatory passages, the significance is here somewhat undermined by Peake’s tendency to overdramatise. His Romantic sensibility overrides the more rational modernity that pervades, for instance, the distanced observations of the minutiae of change that take place, day to day, throughout the castle. However, there is also an explicit indication within

the body of the passage of what Titus is responding to - and, by implication, what significance Peake attributes to the notion of quest.

The first statement, which describes Titus's ignorance of the nature of his quest, is one of the concerns Manlove has about the appropriateness of Titus's abdication: as Titus can have no knowledge or understanding of any alternative reality (ie. to the total reality of Gormenghast), then he is unable to make any relative judgement of his home - let alone harbour any desire to escape from it. However, the appearance of the Thing provides Titus with at least an oblique awareness that there is something other than Gormenghast: she is an elusive symbol of what Titus feels to be a greater truth than can be known within the limits of his own world. The fact that he has no concept of what she does represent - and what, therefore, can be said to be the purpose of his quest - is perfectly consistent with the elemental notions of quest. The Celtic quest story that is at the centre of the Arthurian cycle, for example, suggests that the innocence of the quester is inseparable from the attraction of the quest: it is a journey of discovery - a desire to reveal what was hitherto unknown. As Jessie Weston notes, Gawain sets out on his quest for the Holy Grail "with no clear idea of the task before him... whither he rides, and why, he does not know, only that the business is important and pressing."⁴ Perceval, too, is also unclear as to the nature of the Grail: in fact, he is, according to many versions of the story, brought up in ignorance of the wider world, and only journeys to Arthur's court (and ultimately embarks on the Grail quest) after seeing, by chance, a group of knights passing through the forest near his home and which he mistook first for devils and then for angels.⁵ On seeing a vision of the Grail, he neglects to ask those present about the nature or significance of what he is witnessing - a fact which has dire implications for Arthur's kingdom. Thus the connection between the ignorance of the quester and the fact that he is chosen for the quest, far from being untenable is, in one of the most enduring of quest legends, explicit. In terms of the Arthurian cycle - infused as it is

with the morality of Christianity - the concept of the quest is seen in terms of a vocation, a calling. Clearly, the impulse behind Titus's journey can be interpreted in this way: "Something more fundamental than tradition had him in its grip." (GG, 407)

However, despite the fact that, in the sacred Ritual and the weight of tradition, Gormenghast is imbued with an atmosphere akin to orthodox religion, there is no evidence of an external creator. The castle itself is the sole deity. To respond, therefore, to something "more fundamental than tradition", is tantamount to blasphemy. Again, Peake is ambivalent in his approach. Gormenghast, presented as a totally autonomous reality, yet points its Tower of Flints "blasphemously at heaven" (TG, 15) - suggesting that there is a greater force beyond that of Titus's home. To maintain that this were so would be to undermine the power of Gormenghast - and so Peake elects to keep any sort of prime mover well covered. If there is a God, then there is no space for devotion in the minds of all those who worship the Line.

It would therefore be highly questionable to interpret Titus's quest as overtly religious; yet the allusion is there. The need for something beyond his own experience, the inspirational vision, even the initiatory killing of Steerpike: all allow for an interpretation of this dynamic as a vocatory, and therefore quasi-religious, process. However, the basic elements - desire, revelation, initiation - though suggestive of a religious progression, also lend themselves to a number of modern, humanistic theories, all of which are themselves interpretations of the most fundamental of Western myths.

Oliver Taplin, in his exploration of the influence of classical Greek civilisation on the modern world, cites the Delphic proverb "Know thyself" as a basic tenet of the human condition - and, as a result, as the fundamental impulse behind all classical myths. In the twentieth century, with the advent of psychoanalysis, many such myths have come to be defined in terms of this basic impetus. The myth of Oedipus, particularly, can be seen as "epitomising man's urge - need, even

- to go on searching, whatever the consequences".⁶ It is interesting to consider the way in which the Oedipal myth has been interpreted in the modern age. Existentialists such as Sartre saw the will to know oneself as a precondition of genuine existence - that Oedipus, therefore, represents the acknowledgement of this fact. Freud also conceived of the myth as representative of the desire for self-knowledge, though he attributed it as a desire, initially, to escape the self - and therefore indicative of psychological guilt. For Jung, the Oedipal myth was an archetype of the collective unconscious - an elemental enactment of the need to face the dark, primordial essences within all of us.

Titus's quest can be interpreted according to all these theories. It is a desire for knowledge beyond that which his world can give him - a search for gnosis - that fires his inspiration. As I have suggested, Titus is his world: he and Gormenghast are indivisible. However, as Titus begins to realise this, he recognises the need for escape. He must prove to himself that he is more than just a symbol - however all-encompassing that symbol may be. To prove his individual existence, he must shed the abstract. Though he is ignorant of the significance of his quest, therefore, he is embarking on a search, not for other worlds, but (as I have suggested in chapter 11 above) for his inner self.

There is also, it may be argued, a Freudian analysis. When he leaves Gormenghast, it is with a deep sense of guilt. He has abdicated - he is a traitor; he has killed - he is an assassin; and he also feels that he is responsible for the death of his sister, Fuchsia. Much of the sense of confusion that accompanies his departure from the castle is due to the fact that he is fighting these inner demons: "[H]e was no longer child or youth, but by reason of his knowledge of tragedy, violence and the sense of his own perfidy, he was far more than these, though less than man." (TA, 12) His departure can therefore be conceived as a paradoxical, yet natural, desire to escape himself. This brings us back to the notion of duality - a concept central to the Gothic

tradition examined earlier. In his killing of Steerpike, in particular, Titus has become aware of the darker possibilities of humanity: though considered as preserver of the castle's traditions, he has become, as an individual, a destructive force. Returning to the Oedipal myth, this can be identified as the scapegoat motif. The classical, Sophoclean rendering of the myth is a powerful tragedy (an area I shall return to in the final section of this thesis), whereas the dynamic of Titus's quest is not tragic. However, one aspect of Oedipus Rex that does bear comparison with Titus's predicament is that of the scapegoat (see pp.226-7 below) Oedipus, driven from Thebes, shoulders the burdens of the world, allowing the city to gain some degree of compensation from the tragedy that has unfolded. Titus, though self-exiled - and having acted heroically - takes with him the taint of murder: in destroying Steerpike, he has acknowledged the burden of destruction.

The central dynamic of the Oedipal myth is the dramatic change in fortune of the protagonist, following the revelation that he has killed his father and married his mother. From good fortune, power and prosperity, he is fated to descend to the depths of tragedy and despair. Though Titus's departure is not tragic in itself, it is the culmination of a tragic sequence of events; and it is interesting to consider the relationship between Titus and his parents in the light of the Oedipus myth. On an individual level, Sepulchre's death cannot of course be attributed to Titus, as he was only two years old when it occurred. However, on a symbolic level, Titus's sense of guilt can be linked to his wish for the demise of Gormenghast (a necessary precondition for his own personal development). In addition, any interpretation of Gormenghast as Titus's 'parent' would support an Oedipal reading of his rebellion. Returning to the passage quoted above, this sense of conflict is made explicit, in "The law that separates the generations, that draws the child from his mother, the boy from his father, the youth from both."

Connected with the sense of guilt fundamental to an Oedipal reading of Titus's departure from Gormenghast is a subconscious desire to resurrect what has been destroyed. Though this

impulse is not explicit, there is, in Titus's need for his absent home in Titus Alone, a growing realisation of the values represented by what has been lost, as I have suggested above (chapter 11); and in the final reconciliation achieved by the protagonist, we witness an idealisation of Gormenghast. Such a process of rejuvenation suggests another mythic interpretation - and, again, one which has been a major focus for modern writers: that of the Fisher King.

The Fisher King myth, according to Frazer, originated in the primitive association between the divine king and his kingdom. The strong and virile king would, through his divine powers, bestow health and virility upon his realm; yet, when he began to weaken, so his kingdom would also succumb to the ravages of age. In many primitive societies, therefore, the king would be sacrificed - indeed, would sacrifice himself - so that his virile successor would receive his divine powers undiminished. As Frazer puts it: "[B]y putting him to death before his natural force was abated, they would secure that the world should not fall into decay with the decay of the man-god."⁷ This association between man-god and land forms the basis of an extremely enduring and widespread mythical topos. The Sumerian god Tammuz was worshipped as a nature deity, whose disappearance from the upper regions of the earth had disastrous effects on animal and vegetative life. His return, conversely, symbolises a revivification of the world. Clearly, this myth indicates the seasonal cycle of birth, growth and decay. Tammuz was incorporated into the Greek pantheon as Adonis, the beautiful youth. Adonis, beloved of Aphrodite, is fatally wounded in the thigh by a boar. Aphrodite prays to Zeus, who grants that Adonis be allowed to return to the living world for a portion of each year. Again, the yearly cycle is the basis of this myth. Adonis was worshipped as the Lord of Life, and his health was implicitly connected with the health of the world, which dies each year to be reborn the next.

It is widely accepted that the myth of the Lord of Life or Fisher King is also associated with Arthur, who attempts to resurrect his sickening kingdom by initiating the quest for the Holy

Grail. As Jessie Weston points out, it is clear that there are many common elements between the Arthurian cycle and earlier myths - particularly that aspect of the myth of Adonis that refers to his wounding in the thigh (which is probably a decorous version, in fact, of castration). Arthur has confidently been associated with the ancient British deity, Bran, who was also known as "pierced thigh".⁸

Another tradition connects Arthur with Cronos, the last of the Titans.⁹ Both deities (Arthur, in his earliest manifestations, can be described as such) are rulers over a lost golden age; and in the passing (or, symbolically, castration) of each is repeated the theme of the replacement of the older, weakening generation by its virile descendents. Furthermore, Cronos is the god of time: his name reflects the passing of the generations and the natural cycle of decay, death and rebirth - and is therefore linked with Adonis/Tammuz and the Fisher King.

While it is unlikely that Peake sought actively to use the Fisher King myth as a structure for the Titus novels, the mythical cycle of decay and renewal is representative of such a fundamental process that it is inevitable that the epic scale of Peake's work will necessarily evoke those myths associated with it. The underlying theme of the novels is that of change: how an atrophied and stagnant society is affected by the necessity of a change which must be destructive, in order to bring about a degree of progress and rejuvenation. Whether it was Peake's intention or not, the process he describes clearly alludes to the mythical archetype of change.

Titus's quest, then, appears to be a response to a number of factors. It is a search for truth, for an understanding of self which Gormenghast cannot allow him. It is an attempt to escape that aspect of the self which the protagonist feels to be unacceptable - an Oedipal complex. It is also a search for a Holy Grail - a journey across the waste land in an attempt to enact a rejuvenation of the lost kingdom. All three factors, I would like to suggest, are interlinked; and I shall now go on to examine the quest itself in the light of this interpretation.

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As soon as Titus leaves Gormenghast, a sense of confusion and unfamiliarity develops. This is to be expected: he has spent his whole life until this point, not only within a familiar physical environment, but also as part of a civilisation whose knowledge of the outside world is non-existent. Naturally, therefore, he has no idea where he is going, or what he is looking for. As I have suggested, this is redolent of the Arthurian questers, particularly the original Grail Knight, Gawain, and the innocent Perceval (who ultimately becomes the new Grail King). He wanders aimlessly through a landscape which, though not suggestive of a waste land is, at least, barren of people. Furthermore, Titus's disorientation as he embarks on his journey, and which denies us the firm boundaries we had become accustomed to within Gormenghast, creates a background which is much more appropriate for the development of mythic structures. The endurance of myths is largely due to their eclectic nature - they are developed, interlinked and refined over many centuries, and as such, are invested with an essential, elemental quality. This quality is what distinguishes the mythic from the real - and, I would argue, the world of Titus Alone from Gormenghast. For the inhabitants of the castle, context is everything. Mr Flay's banishment induces in him a sense of panic which is only completely assuaged when he returns to his ancient home.

When Titus does finally happen upon another civilisation, the manner of his arrival is highly significant. He drifts there, unconscious, down the currents of a river. Both of these facts would suggest that the first phase of Titus's journey is into what may be recognised as a mythical world, the river a variant of both the Styx, which bore the dead to Hades (Titus is dead, to his world at least), and the Lethe, its twin, in whose waters all memories of life are carried away. When Titus awakes, he is in a different world; and his previous life is slipping quickly from him.

It has been acknowledged that the world of Titus Alone is a modern dystopia, whose high technology and sterile values are representative of our own present/future. The ancient stones of Gormenghast have been replaced by harsher, more clinical surfaces of metal and glass; and the inhabitants of this world are correspondingly two-dimensional. Cast into this tenuous society, Titus longs for his home: we do, too. Just as Charles Ryder, in Waugh's Brideshead Revisited, mourns the displacement of the great English families by the moderns - those, like Rex Mottram, "A tiny bit of a man pretending he was the whole"¹⁰, so we regret the passing of Gormenghast, despite its faults. This new milieu is a colder world: a world whose philosophy is expressed in the words of one of its inhabitants: "Cold love's the loveliest love of all. So clear, so crisp, so empty. In short, so civilised." (TA, 45) Yet, while it is clear that Peake's intention is to parody the modern world, its stark simplicity allows the mythic interpretation I am suggesting. What the Modernists envisaged, in their insistence on the relevance of the "mythic method" of artistic representation¹¹, was that such an approach allowed a distillation of the complex experience of modern life - a stripping away of all but the essential past of human experience: those enduring themes represented in myth. Similarly, though Peake does not employ the same method, he initiates, in casting Titus out from Gormenghast, the same reductive process. The furniture of tradition that is Gormenghast is reduced to a single flint in the palm of Titus's hand. What his quest represents is a descent - a journey back to the raw and fundamental world of myth.

Just as Steerpike is used as an expository vehicle within Gormenghast, it is Titus himself who performs this function in the third novel. However, whereas Steerpike's every movement had a purpose, Titus is aimless: innocent of the world he finds himself in, he wanders through it, trying in vain to make sense of it. To Cheeta, he claims "I have always been lost". (TA, 164) He therefore needs a guide - and in Muzzlehatch, he unwittingly finds one.

Of all the characters in Titus Alone, Muzzlehatch is by far the biggest - big enough, in fact, to fill the deific role that Titus ascribes for him. He appears, not alienated, but autonomous. As elemental as the “atavistic” beasts he looks after, he is “like some ravaged god” - and fundamentally impious: “[N]o one with such a mouth could pray to any god at all, for the mouth was wrong for prayer. This head was like a challenge or a threat to all decent citizens.” (TA, 26) His power is rooted in this elemental quality; and it is underlined by the fact that he, more than any other, has an objective wisdom. He knows of other realms than this one (though not of Gormenghast) - of regions “where no one can remember who is in power”. (TA, 144) He remembers, also, the heroic world of his youth, before it became as it is: “Days flamboyant; days at large, and days in hiding, when he lay stretched on his back upon the high rocks, or lolled in glades until he took their colour; his arrogant nose, like a rudder, pointing at the sky.” (TA, 153) This is something of the “languor of Youth” that, for Waugh, epitomised an earlier, heroic age - and which, significantly, marks him as doomed. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Titus comes to worship Muzzlehatch, just as Charles Ryder does Sebastian (though the relationship, appropriately, is more that of son and father than the apparently homosexual bond forged between Waugh’s protagonists). “You have been a kind of God to me. A rough-hewn God”, he admits. (TA, 144) In this hostile world, Muzzlehatch is the only one who is able to save him. It is significant, therefore, that it is he who guides Titus to the Under-River, clearly a metaphor of the mythical underworld - Hades, or Hell.

The journey there, as Muzzlehatch describes it, is full of mythic imagery. It involves passage through darkness: “[Y]ou will see ahead of you, dimly, a tunnel, vaulted and hung with filthy webs as thick as blankets.” (TA, 109) It is also a journey through time: the ground is “littered with the relics of another age”. There is a fundamental change - a passing beyond, into a place where “If you whisper the world sighs and sighs again.” It is, in total contrast to the world of

science above it, a poetic world, elemental and eternal:

Ahead of you will spread a half-lit field of flagstones, at the far end of which you will see the glow of a green lantern. This lantern is set upon a table. Seated at this table, his face reflecting the light, you will see a man. Show him the badge I have given you. He will scrutinize it through a glass, then look up at you with an eye as yellow as lemon peel, whistle softly through a gap in his teeth until a child comes trotting through the shadows and beckons you to follow to the north.

(TA, 110)

This description, based as it is on certainty, is reminiscent of the Ritual of Gormenghast; but here, there is no parody. Like Titus, we are uncertain, lost: we must trust in Muzzlehatch's integrity. Whereas the ceremonies of Gormenghast can be recognised as stagnant and meaningless, we are, in this strange world, forced to accept events as having meaning and seriousness. This, after all, is the power of myth: though fictions in their details, they are real in their essence, and therefore vital, dangerous.

The mythic resonance of the Under-River is further confirmed when Titus arrives there. It is intimately connected with a distant past: "Days half forgotten. Days with a dew upon them." (TA, 110) It is a place where "All is reflected... in the dim glazes"; and above all, it is dark: "[T]here were of necessity deep swaths of darkness hanging beyond reach of brand or lantern, dire volumes at whose centres the air was thick with dark, and smelt of desolation." (TA, 111) It is reminiscent of Gormenghast, perhaps; but Gormenghast's shadows were full of the sentience of the castle, whereas here, there is an absence. Gormenghast is also lived in: it is a home, and real. The Under-River has a legendary quality, known to the inhabitants of the city above only "by echo or by rumour". It is defined ambivalently - a place both real and unreal, "in the nature of a bad dream, both too bizarre to be taken seriously, yet horrid enough to speculate

upon, only to recoil, only to speculate again, and recoil again, and tear the clinging cobwebs from the brain.” (TA, 112) If Titus, at the beginning of his quest, crosses the Styx into Hades, then the Under-River can be conceived as its core. It exists as a realm of hopelessness and despair, an allegory of the psychological state of the world above - that which has been repressed. His descent, therefore, into this place, can clearly be interpreted as a metaphor of his inner quest - his attempt to understand, or come to terms with, his psyche. If his reasons for leaving Gormenghast are as a response to deeply felt psychological impulses, then such a reading would be entirely appropriate - and also totally in keeping with the mythical traditions of quest.

The descent into the Under-River most readily evokes the myth of Orpheus, who travelled into the glooms of Hades to petition the gods for the return of Eurydice to the upper world. This myth itself suggests that of Tammuz/Adonis, from which it probably evolved. However, in the later myth, the emphasis is on loss, rather than the cyclical concept of death and rebirth. For, unlike Adonis, who is allowed to return to the upper realm (if only for a part of the year), Eurydice is ultimately lost forever. Yet there is more to it than this. Were the gods simply to deny Orpheus his wish, the tragedy would be, perhaps, transitional (certainly to the reader); but she is allowed to return with Orpheus: it is only his very human response - in looking behind him to make sure she is following - that dooms her, “on the lip of Daylight”.¹²

While such quintessential tragedy is far beyond that which informs Titus Alone, there is at least an echo of it in the figure of Black Rose. It has been suggested, with justification, that the dying consumptive Peake encountered in Belsen at the end of the war was the inspiration for Black Rose, “the ghost of unbearable disillusion.” (TA, 128)¹³ In his poem ‘The Consumptive, Belsen 1945’, the metaphor of the garden underlines the connection:

And at death’s centre a torn garden trembled

In which her eyes like great hearts of black water

Shone in their wells of bone,
 Brimmed to the well-heads of the coughing girl,
 Pleading through history in that white garden;
 And very wild, upon the small head's cheekbones,
 as on high ridges in an icy dew,
 Burned the sharp roses.¹⁴

Though Titus is unable to bring her back from the Under-River himself (it is Muzzlehatch who does this), there is still, in her tragic demeanour, and the fact that she is under the thrall of the demonic Veil, a quality reminiscent of Eurydice. She is the innocent, caught in the elemental struggle between light and darkness - the upper world and the lower. She, too, is brought to the "lip of Daylight"; but she is a wraith, and cannot survive the journey: she dies "the moment her head had touched the snowy pillow." (TA, 147)

I would like to suggest that this incident in Titus Alone has a far greater significance, in terms of Titus's character, than is generally credited. The muted nature of the presentation of Black Rose's death tends to undermine the fact that what Peake has achieved is an effective fusion of modern disillusion and mythical tragedy. Titus's descent into his own underworld has brought him face to face with despair - and a realisation that he must accept loss and futility as a part of the experience of life. In a sense, Black Rose's death, and her role as victim, reminds us of Fuchsia; yet here, there is a hardening of attitudes: in psychological terms, Titus's grief has progressed from a sense of denial and confusion, through one of anger, towards a gradual acceptance - as I affirmed in the previous chapter.

With this change, Titus's understanding of death also moves from the personal to the general. Not only is Black Rose more abstracted, more representative than the individual Fuchsia; but the killers are also of a different nature. Steerpike was an individual as much as Fuchsia: he was a

human adversary (however 'inhuman' his actions) - a fact acknowledged by Titus's killing of him. Veil is not human: his name - a crude anagram of 'evil', his extreme brutality, his mutant form and his superhuman strength, all emphasise his abstract, elemental quality. If Muzzlehatch is a god, then Veil is a devil - or a god of the underworld. It takes a god to destroy him; and even his destruction, we are aware, is a largely pyrrhic victory. Evil and death, Peake is asserting, will always be present. As Muzzlehatch explains to Titus: "There is nothing in life unless there is death at the back of it. Death, dear boy, leaning over the edge of the world and grinning like a boneyard." (TA, 27) Again, this underlines the purpose of Titus Alone: it allows both reader and protagonist to realise a more relativist, more objective stance. Titus's descent into the Under-River is an exploration of his inner self: and it has brought him knowledge of his own mortality, as it does Orpheus. According to Elizabeth Sewall, the Orphic myth, due to this self-reflective emphasis, or "the reflection of myth in its own mirror"¹⁵, is what gives it its poetic power. Following this interpretation, therefore, Titus is facing himself.

This brings us back to Oedipus, and the Freudian analysis of myth. In acknowledging the fact that the unconscious suppresses those aspects of an individual that are unacceptable, the conscious mind is attempting to come to terms with the self. The sense of guilt felt by Titus at the end of Gormenghast, and the initiation of his quest for understanding, was simply a desire to make sense of what has happened to him. In the Under-River, he goes a long way towards achieving this. Yet, though for Freud this understanding of the irrational aspects of the self leads to a rationalisation, and therefore an exorcism, of these suppressed elements, to Jung, they are intrinsically part of ourselves. To face them does not make us any less fearful of them (as Titus is justifiably afraid of Veil); it is simply that we are able to face them that is significant.

All myths are interconnected: and in this Jungian assertion of man's essential duality, we are reminded of the significance of the Minotaur - the dark, savage side of our nature that

civilisation has striven to repress. This is certainly an important theme in the first two novels. Gormenghast, as I have suggested, is a metropolis - the epitome of urban civilisation; its inhabitants' psychological states result from centuries of denial and repression - which is why any deviation from the norm is so catastrophic. Steerpike's psychosis is a result of this denial: he is the Minotaur of the labyrinth - both physical and psychological - that is Gormenghast. It is therefore unsurprising that, once revealed as the villain, he is hunted with such unequivocal fury. Who, in Auden's words, "will not feel blind anger draw / his thoughts towards the Minotaur?"¹⁶ Clearly, the inhabitants of the castle are aware of what he represents - though only the Doctor is able to rationalise their response to any extent. Steerpike's behaviour is so shocking, not because it is completely alien, but because it is, subconsciously, so familiar. The Minotaur is only half beast: the other half is human.

As I maintained in the previous section (pp.150ff.), Steerpike can also be conceived as the alter-ego of Titus - an interpretation supported by the fact that Titus is the symbolic representative of Gormenghast. It therefore follows that, in destroying Steerpike, Titus is delivering his civilisation from its dark side. However, though for Freud, such a reading would be acceptable, the Jungian interpretation is not so straightforward. The Minotaur cannot be destroyed, only subdued. If we enter the labyrinth, we can only hope to survive the experience, that we may re-emerge into the light of day. This more complex understanding of our inner drives and impulses is a more appropriate analogy of modern experience - and also describes more completely the dynamic of the Titus novels.

Theseus was able to find his way out of the labyrinth by rewinding the clue, a ball of thread given to him by Ariadne. This is analogous, according to Jung, to the goodwill of those around us. In Titus Alone, it is the goodwill of Muzzlehatch and Juno, principally (performing the role of his surrogate parents), that provides Titus with a way out of the labyrinth. However, after the

solid reality of Gormenghast, these two are rootless: a feature of this world, in fact, is the lack of context. This is why Muzzlehatch, as I suggested in the previous chapter, intuitively realises the importance of Titus's origins: "Everything lost, except to find the lost realm of Gormenghast. And then to guide young Titus to his home. But why? And what to prove? Only to prove the boy was not a madman." (TA, 158) Again, the emphasis is on guidance: a finding of the way back through Titus's memory to some sort of reality. Cheeta's threat is that she strives to separate him from that memory - to break the thread which, in fact, is his sanity. Of course, being of a modern sensibility, she employs a modern, psychological approach, in the parodic form of the Black House.

It is very nearly successful. The succession of caricatures paraded before him, though obviously not original, create in his mind so close an association with his past as to distort his memory of them. However, through the intercession of Muzzlehatch and the others who he has befriended, his sanity is preserved. The distinction between fact and fiction is maintained: the artifice is revealed as such simply by interruption. Titus, having come face to face with the dark side of himself - his irrationality - is brought back from it by the goodwill of those around him. This sanity, however, is secured at the expense of Muzzlehatch, who, having destroyed the Scientist's factory (and the insanity it patently represents), is himself killed. His dying statement affirms both the inhumanity of this world, and the fundamental value of Gormenghast: "Something of a holocaust, ain't it," he whispered. God bless you and your Gormenghast, my boy." (TA, 254) Compared with the depravity of this bleak world, Gormenghast, despite the tragedy that led to Titus's departure, was very much a human civilisation; and through the trauma of the Black House he has just experienced, Titus's guilt has been assuaged. Like Gawain, the questing hero of the fourteenth century story, Gawain and the Green Knight (and whose locus of catharsis, the Green Chapel, performs a similar function to the Black House) he

comes to realise his humanity through an acknowledgement of his limitations.¹⁷

Thus he can move on, carrying his Gormenghast within him. When the reality of the place is affirmed at the end of Titus Alone, this is enough. His memory of the place, he has come to realise, is a fundamental part of himself. His quest has been for his own identity: an identity which was submerged beneath the vastness of his legacy. In attempting to escape his heritage, he has become aware only that he cannot escape it; but the journey that took him away from Gormenghast allowed him to understand this. Like Titus, we are, at the end of Gormenghast, so immersed in his world that we cannot make sense of it. As he has discovered, we cannot leave our universe; it is only by a removal of the furniture that is civilisation that we can hope to make some kind of sense of our experience. As Oliver Taplin maintains, this is the power of myths: “the clue, the guiding thread, may be a myth, a way of shaping chaos and of giving significance of aspects of the human condition which cannot be reached by objective or scientific discourse.”¹⁸

Interestingly, Gormenghast itself has become a myth - a place where “an infinity ago he had struggled with a nymph.” (TA, 262) In order to make sense of it, it has had to be reduced to this elemental, and therefore enduring, form. Were he to return, Titus would be forced to dispel the myth. He therefore turns and walks away.

Notes.

1. David Copperfield, 885.
2. Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle (New York: Scribner's, 1931) 1-2.
3. Perry Meisel, The Myth of the Modern: A Study in British Literature and Criticism after 1850 (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1987) 1.
4. Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance: An Account of the Holy Grail from Ancient Ritual to Christian Symbol (New York: Anchor Books, 1957) 12.
5. See, for exemple, Chrétien de Troyes, 'Perceval: The Story of the Grail', in Arthurian Romances, transl. D.D.R. Owen (London: Everyman, 1987) 374-495.
6. Oliver Taplin, Greek Fire (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989) 104.
7. Sir James Frazer, The Golden Bough: A History of Myth and Religion (London: Chancellor Press - Reed, 1994) 266.
8. See Weston, chapter 9.
9. See for example, John Matthews, The Grail Tradition (London: Element Books, 1990), chapter 1.
10. Brideshead Revisited, 193.
11. This term is used by T.S. Eliot in his essay 'Ulysses, Order and Myth'. Cited in Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975).
12. Virgil, Georgics IV, 490-1, transl. C. Day Lewis. Cited in Michael Grant, Myths of the Greeks and Romans (London: Phoenix, 1994) 304-6.
13. Gilmore and Johnson, 65.
14. Mervyn Peake, The Glassblowers (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1950).
15. Elizabeth Sewell, The Orphic Voice, cited in Grant, 316.
16. W.H. Auden, 'New Year Letter'.
17. Pearl. Cleanness. Patience. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. A.C. Cawley and J.J. Anderson (London: Everyman, 1985).
18. Taplin, 109.

Part Four: “The rhythm titanic”: Literary and Social Perspectives.

If I could feel
 Beyond each slender
 Movement of her head, that trails
 A track of earthless clay
 Through gloom,
 The rhythm titanic
 Whence the tender
 Gesture drifted, like a feather
 Fallen from the downy throat
 Of some winged mother,
 Desolately, to fail and flutter,
 Falter, and die
 In the rented room -
 Then would I plunder splendour
 At the womb.¹

This is an extract from Peake’s poem, ‘If I could see, not surfaces.’ Its central concern - the desire to uncover the basic and universal essences of life - is a typical expression of Peake’s Romanticism, recalling Wordsworth’s “something far more deeply interfused” (‘Tintern Abbey’, line 96). The indulgent richness of the language he uses, however, also implies a parodying of High Romanticism, and suggests a more distanced, ironic position. An awareness of this ambivalence, which is central to Peake’s artistic sensibility, informs our understanding of the Titus novels. In this final section, we shall see how such a position allows the artist to rework

the elemental narrative of epic in a way which is wholly consonant with - in fact, illuminates - the dilemmas of the modern condition.

In the previous chapter, I asserted that an understanding of the dynamic which drives Titus Groan away from Gormenghast can be enriched by a mythic reading of the novels. The protagonist, in responding to the questing impulse, is conforming to the role of epic hero - or to a parodic inversion of it. However, in subscribing to such an interpretation, it is also necessary to consider the relationship between the epic or romantic impulse and the states of existence or awareness that lead to such an initiative. As I have suggested (pp.201-9), Titus's departure is brought about through a need to transcend the moribund state to which his society has descended - a state which, as I shall describe, corresponds to a tragic vision of the world. Peake, however, is not fundamentally tragic; though Titus Groan has a tragic structure, the dramatic elevation conferred upon its characters also allows an effective parody of such a condition, as we shall see in the first chapter of this section.

Such a tension is further informed by the development from a tragic (or mock-tragic) to a comic vision in the second novel, Gormenghast. I will illustrate in chapter 14 that such a shift, associated as it is with the education of Titus, provides an insight into the necessary conditions in which the dysfunction and resultant alienation of his society can be transcended. The central role of Doctor Prunesquallor in initiating this shift of perception, as well as the significance of Gormenghast Forest in the light of such a reading will provide the focus of this consideration of the second novel.

Once Titus leaves his home, thereby revealing its subjectivity, he allows for a radical reconsideration, both of his own position within what is now seen as a passive universe, and of the fictionality of Gormenghast (and, by implication, of the other worlds he encounters). Within the mythic framework of progression I am proposing, this revelation affirms Titus Alone as

performing a vital function. In disengaging the reader from the fiction he has created, Peake has drawn attention to the irony of it, thereby giving a more objective value to those revivifying elements of comedy defined in Gormenghast - the principal of which is the necessity, and difficulty, of the ironic vision. This function will be examined in chapter 15; and, with its concentration on the movement from fantasy to reality, it will also lead us towards a consideration of the socio-historical background of the novels. The mythic vision of art, relating as it does simultaneously to the personal experience of the artist in his environment, and to those aspects of the human condition which are seen to transcend the individual, allows us to consider the relationship between the two. Focusing as it does on the most elemental cycles of life, it provides a reading of literature which is as cohesive as it is inclusive. The final chapter of this section, which will provide an analysis of the relationship between the Titus novels and the Second World War, will illustrate that, in attempting to make sense of his own experience, Peake is also reworking the basic theme, as fascinating as it is elusive, of the Romantic, yet ironic, quest.

Notes.

1. 'If I could see, not surfaces', stanza 3; Shapes and Sounds (London: Chatto and Windus, 1941).

13. Tragedy and Pathos.

Much of what we consider to be tragedy is either pathos (which may or may not be tragic) or melodrama. Peake's ambivalent presentation of the sudden and violent change that has been precipitated on the society of Gormenghast, as well as his depiction of the innately violent society of Titus Alone, means that our responses to the many deaths in the novels are mixed. While any untimely death can be conceived as disastrous, it is not necessarily tragic. In this chapter, I intend to illustrate how we might distinguish between what is tragic and what is pathetic or melodramatic, by considering those of the many characters killed in the Titus novels that may be conceived as conforming to the tragic role. As I will explain, such a distinction helps provide an interpretive framework for the whole sequence in supporting the notion that it conforms to the general "poetic archetype" - what Northrop Frye calls "a half-involuntary imitation of organic rhythms or processes".¹

Death is fundamental to the structure and development of the novels. Of the seventeen characters I have considered in Part Two of this thesis, only five survive to the end of Gormenghast. In Titus Alone, there are many more deaths. As Batchelor has stated, Peake uses death as a useful way of developing the plot: "Sudden death is a convenient means by which a novelist can get his characters off the stage and his plot forward, and Peake often resorts to this to give shape to his narrative in the Titus books."² This, I feel, suggests a lack of finesse on Peake's part that in some cases (though only a few) isn't justified. As we shall see, the deaths of Sepulchrave, Fuchsia and the Twins have a great deal of dramatic power - even when, in Sepulchrave's case, the effect is somewhat equivocal.

The origins of the word 'tragedy' underline the necessity, in dramatic terms, of the presence of death. *Tragoedia* signifies 'goat-song', and refers to the chant which, in Ancient Greek

festivals honouring Dionysius, accompanied the violent dismemberment of a sacrificial goat.³ In Golding's Lord of the Flies, we see a modern rendering of this act of 'tragedy', when Jack and his hunters kill the innocent Simon, signifying their final dehumanisation. In the sacrificing of a goat to appease the gods is also suggested the concept of the scapegoat, the animal on which, according to Judaic law, the sins of the people would be symbolically conferred, before it was released into the wilderness, thus purging that people of its guilt. Aristotelian concepts of tragedy imply a combination of these rituals, in that it involves the arousal and then allaying of pity and fear on the part of the audience who, through identification, suffer the pain and cathartic release of the tragic hero whose actions they witness. His death denotes the sacrificial killing of the beast (which, in psychological terms, is conceived as the beast within); while the fact that drama is ultimately fiction allows the beast to escape into the wilderness, taking those forces destructive to us with it. As we have seen (pp.207-9 above), Titus can be seen as a version of the scapegoat figure; it may be argued that Steerpike functions as another - though he is destroyed. According to Frye, the driving out of the scapegoat may ultimately mean his destruction - he cites Christ as the archetype.⁴

The scapegoat figure, Frye remarks, suggests a primitive response to fear, in that he is driven out of society in what amounts to mob belligerence. This is certainly the case in Lord of the Flies, which culminates in the erstwhile leader of the marooned group, Ralph, not only being cast out, but also being chased across the island in a savage manhunt. Steerpike, although the source of disharmony in the castle, also elicits both fear and loathing amongst the inhabitants, who, as I have suggested above (pp.77-9 and 142ff.), unite in their determination to run him to ground. We have also seen how the Gothic villain arouses the same communal, essentially moral response to his actions. The vehemence and self-righteousness of the pursuing pack (in, for example, Dracula) can be seen as a reaction grounded in psychological unease and fear - the

guilt of a society forced to face unpalatable, and therefore suppressed, implications about its anti-social desires.

Neither Steerpike nor Titus are tragic heroes, despite the fact that both, in different ways, have the tragic function described above. The scapegoat need not necessarily perform as the tragic hero - as in these two cases, when one is the villain, and the other departs his society of his own free will. The tragic hero, contrary to the former, is a figure whose status engenders in him a representative of his society; and, in contrast with the latter, he is also unable to do anything about his 'fate'. According to Frye, he therefore combines divine and human attributes - one whose symbolic power is undermined by his individual susceptibility.

This incongruous function immediately suggests Lord Sepulchrave. He is, as we have seen, a figure whose public status and private character are in conflict. Acutely aware of the degeneration of his world, he is unable to do anything about it. As the head of an ancient feudal dynasty, his role is simply to continue the traditions of his ancestors, ironically undermining the validity of those traditions by acting them out helplessly and without initiative. I suggested above (pp.207-10) that a mythical interpretation of the malaise of Gormenghast would infer a connection between that degeneration and the weakness of its ruler. In fact, Gormenghast conforms to, or at least reworks, this archetype in a number of ways. Sepulchrave, like Arthur, or Bran, or Cronos, is sickening; his kingdom is also ailing. Psychological strain manifests itself in internecine strife. A strange, spirit-like creature appears, inspiring the champion of the kingdom to accept the challenge of a quest (implying that the kingdom can be rejuvenated). The quest leads ultimately, not to material rejuvenation, but to understanding and acceptance of the impassive quality of the world, and of the necessity of change.

Such an interpretation of the basic dynamic of the novels would therefore be supported if it were possible to consider Sepulchrave as a tragic hero. I have said already that he is, like the

moribund Roderick Usher, so much a part of his ancestral home that they are essentially symbiotic: in the demise of one is anticipated the destruction of the other. His death, therefore, initiating as it does profound change, assumes a symbolic importance. If his identity has been eroded by the role he has had to assume, then conversely that role has conferred upon him a status much beyond that of the individual.

Earlier (see p.73 above), I made the comparison between Sepulchrave and Marlowe's Edward. I feel it would be appropriate at this point to consider this similarity in the light of the present argument. Importantly, Edward II is a play whose protagonist lacks the stature normally ascribed to the tragic hero. Edward's demise is brought about by the fact that he is unable to fulfil the role which has been bestowed upon him. The tragedy of his life is that he has been put into a position in which he cannot avoid making those errors of judgement that are ultimately to lead to his death. He is a weak man; but weak men can survive if they are not expected to be strong.

Sepulchrave, in many ways, is a stronger figure than Edward - or was. Gertrude remembers him as a man of powerful intellect, reduced by the pressures of his position to a melancholy shadow. However, like Edward, the power of his role - in Edward emphasised by his powerful rhetoric, in Sepulchrave simply by virtue of his status - always far exceeds that of his individual character; and inevitably, under the mask of his symbolic power, the individual deteriorates. In fact, the responsibility of the role he has inherited is so great that, unlike Edward, Sepulchrave, as his name suggests, desires only death.

This desire is undermined, however, by his public role. Sepulchrave, engulfed by melancholia, seeking the end which will put him alongside his ancestors, is by virtue of his responsibility as Earl of Gormenghast, divided. His intellect and sensitivity allow him to understand both his personal desires and his public position. He spends his free moments in the

library - the only place where, cut off from the rest of the castle and lost in the abstractions of the poetry of his ancestors, he is able to forget the pressures of public responsibility. Ironically, this has the effect of reinforcing his melancholia. He is painfully aware that he is not of the same stature as his forebears; and both his nostalgia for the past and his disillusionment with his ability to fulfil his present role adequately, combine to worsen his condition.

Such division - between one's outer responsibilities and inner needs - is the basic attribute of the tragic hero's character. He struggles in vain to reconcile the two; and this struggle is mirrored in the world around him, and which he symbolises. This is not only true of the social and political situation, as in King Lear, for example, but also extends to the natural world, as I have described above (see pp.30-4). This identification between the human and natural worlds, which is referred to as pathetic fallacy, most readily recalls Macbeth. Despite Peake's use of this device, however (and the fact that the locus of the action is, as in Macbeth, a castle), I would hesitate to accept more than a passing similarity between this play and Titus Groan. Though Steerpike's ascendancy is accompanied by an increased inhumanity, as I have asserted above (pp.31-2), he has neither the redeeming qualities nor the stature of Macbeth; and, due to this, he has none of the inner division that troubles, and then haunts Shakespeare's hero. Moreover, the rise of Steerpike is set within a society which is already foundering; the state of Gormenghast at the outset is not that of Duncan's Scotland.

Thematically, Titus Groan has more in common with King Lear - which, indeed, bears comparison with the mythic archetype referred to above. Like Lear, Sepulchre feels heavily the psychological burden of responsibility. Just as Lear announces at the outset of the play that he wishes to divide up his kingdom in order "To shake all cares and business from our age, / Conferring them on younger strengths, while we unburthen'd crawl towards death"⁵, so Sepulchre, seeking solace in his library, tries to escape the pressures of his public role.

Furthermore, Sepulchrave's relationship with his first servant, Mr Flay, recalls that of Lear and Kent - particularly in the agony Flay suffers in witnessing the madness of his master. In the feudal social structure of Gormenghast, the bond between lord and servant is particularly strong. According to H.A. Mason, such a relationship is an important element in tragedy⁶, in that it signifies the bond between king and realm, and the tragedy that results from the breaking of that bond. The loyal servant, representative of the people, has served the king from birth; his devotion is undoubted, and we recognise his concerns to be well founded. The demise of the hero is therefore affirmed by the anguish of his servant - and so the inner struggle of the hero is mirrored by the divided servant, who, unable to separate the symbolic lord from the individual man, is yet forced by his master's actions into the contemplation of such a notion. It is, in Kent's case, horrifying - he has charted helplessly the demise of his king from beginning to end: "I am the very man / ...that from your first of difference and decay, / Have follow'd your sad steps".⁷ Mr Flay finds himself in a similar predicament when, during Sepulchrave's final days of madness, he is faced with a dilemma that is, for him, impossible to resolve. Faced with the sight of the earl standing, owl-like, on his mantelpiece, he is appalled:

Flay, clenching his hands, moves into the room, the hair standing out rigidly like little wires all over his scanty flesh. Something had crumpled up inside him. His undeviating loyalty to the House of Groan and to his Lordship is fighting with the horror of what he sees. (TG, 366)

Later, left to contemplate this horror on his own as he is sent to look for twigs to build a nest for the deranged earl, he is unable to function:

Flay, utterly distraught, is wandering up and down the candle-lit stone lanes where he knows he will be alone. He had gathered the twigs and he had flung them away in disgust only to re-gather them, for the very thought of disobeying

his master is almost as dreadful to him as the memory of the creature he has seen on the mantelpiece. (TG, 369)

The malaise of the society of Gormenghast is not a direct result of Sepulchrave's madness, of course: he is only the last in a long line of rulers over what has been a gradual degeneration. Yet in him, we are presented with the culmination of those centuries of decline. Titus Groan is a vision of a world which is at once stagnant and inexorably moving towards entropy. Insignificant in himself, Sepulchrave is nevertheless the last of the Line to rule Gormenghast; and his madness and death, as such, are fundamentally important to his people. This does not necessarily make him a tragic figure, of course. His death, in particular, is rather macabre/grotesque than tragic, despite the formal, rhetorical structure of his final soliloquy. Yet there is, in Titus Groan, a certain dramatic quality which, if not tragic, is not wholly parodic either. The organisation, rather than the tone, of the novel implies at least that Peake sought to use the same structures as those associated with tragedy. His ambivalence impels him to admire the dramatic power of tragedy even as he undermines it with parody.

Titus Groan clearly has a highly formal dramatic structure. With its minimal plot progression, montage presentation of characters and events, and rigidly formalised Ritual, it is organised more like a play than a novel. Characters spend a great deal of time hidden in the vastness of the castle - off-stage, as it were. There are several 'public' events, which bring the majority of the important characters together, and which tend to have great significance for the development of the plot. These events therefore function in the same way as the final scenes in a play - and also support the formal, Aristotelian structure of drama, by pulling together disparate strands of the plot into a single locus.

Moreover, it is possible to maintain that Titus Groan can be divided into five dramatic acts, each one culminating with a significant and (in most cases) unifying scene. The first is the

occasion of Titus's christening, by which time all the main plot lines have been set in motion. The heir of Gormenghast has been born; a wet-nurse has been found for him (introducing the Keda sub-plot); and he has been christened, thus confirming his central status. Steerpike has escaped the Great Kitchens and identified his future victim, Fuchsia. The characters of Sepulchrave, Gertrude and Doctor Prunesquallor have all been introduced; and Flay and Swelter have 'declared' their mutual enmity.

By the end of this first 'act' or movement, then, the reader has been made aware of the central tensions that are to provide the dynamic of the plot. He already feels sure that the stability of the old regime is to be threatened, and who by; and he can detect, in the developing feud between two of the castle's main servants, the precarious state of Gormenghast's society. Mason asserts that a central aspect of dramatic tragedy is "to bring together the beginning and the end; to show the one implicit in the other."⁸ Peake is certainly aware of the dramatic advantages of what we might call tragic anticipation, even if he is not wholly tragic.

The second 'act' opens with Steerpike's escape and ascent to the roof of the castle. Most of this section, in fact, concerns his development, and the beginning of his relationship with Fuchsia. Sepulchrave's library - the location for the climax of the subsequent 'act' - is also introduced. This second sequence concludes with a moment of high tension, as Flay witnesses Swelter sharpening his cleaver, in the chapter 'In a lime-green light.' This, of course, is a private event; but it has the intensity and dramatic significance of a final scene.

The next movement is the pivotal one as far as the main plot is concerned. It is almost entirely taken up with the Twins' (and of course Steerpike's) plans to burn down the library. The Keda sub-plot which progresses alongside it does not, as I have suggested (see p.158 above) have a great deal of dramatic power; and so it doesn't divert our attention from the main developments, which culminate in the fire scene.

The fourth section returns our attention to the feud between Flay and Swelter. It opens with Swelter leaving a cake for the sleeping Flay, and progresses with Mr Flay's banishment from the castle. Keda's sub-plot takes the action out of the castle for a time (and the relative weakness of these chapters in fact serves to heighten the tension of the situation inside Gormenghast). The 'act' closes with the Dark Breakfast scene, in which in an inversion of the 'public' event, focuses on the inner, incommunicable 'reveries' of the major characters. We are therefore reminded of the major preoccupations of the characters at this point, as well as Sepulchrave's madness.

In the final 'act', the dramatic form breaks down. The reason for this is simple: Peake intended to continue beyond the end of Titus Groan; and so a number of events in this final sequence look beyond the end of the book. Keda returns to Gormenghast and gives birth to the Thing; at the Earling (the culminating scene, in which all the major characters are again present), her bond with Titus is forged; and Steerpike's influence continues to grow. There is, of course, a dramatic watershed, in the fight between Flay and Swelter, which ends that sub-plot; and this is followed immediately by Sepulchrave's death. The dramatic qualities of his exit, as described above (pp.73-5), augmented by the duel between his minions, provide an effective climax to the book, though this is somewhat undermined by the continuation of various other elements of the plot beyond the death of the Earl. As I shall describe, such progression is central to an organic interpretation of the overall structure of the Titus novels; but it necessarily weakens the formal structure, and therefore the dramatic power, of Titus Groan.

The Rottcodd scenes may be conceived as an attempt to compensate for this, providing as they do the opening and closing visions of the book. The isolation of the curator and his correspondent disengagement from the action that evolves below him implies that he functions as an audience, or perhaps as a mock-chorus, to what occurs. He makes no attempt to interpret the two momentous events - the birth and later Earling of Titus - that he becomes privy to: given

his remoteness, he is in fact unable to. However, the inclusion of these two such scenes do have a formalising effect on the organisation of Titus Groan as a whole.

The first book, as we have seen, has the formal structure and grandeur of dramatic exposition, rather than narrative progression. It draws on the tragic mode in an ambivalent manner, blending the inflated rhetoric and anticipatory tension with grotesque, macabre and absurd elements. In the anguished contemplation of his master's madness, Mr Flay is perhaps the truest tragic figure; while Sepulchre himself, despite his status and his inner struggle, is cast, in the manner of his death, as a mock-tragic hero. His situation is tragic; but we feel this tragedy through the effects of his derangement and death on others.

Apart from Mr Flay, it is Fuchsia with whom we feel the effects of Sepulchre's 'tragedy' the most. Furthermore, her isolated life and death are tragic in themselves: in fact, I would argue that she is the most tragic of characters in the novels. Yet she is more appropriately described as pathetic. Northrop Frye gives the following definition of pathos:

The root idea of pathos is the exclusion of the individual on our own level from a social group to which he is trying to belong. Hence the central tradition of sophisticated pathos is the study of the isolated mind, the story of how someone recognizably like ourselves is broken by a conflict between the inner and outer world, between imaginative reality and the sort of reality which is established by a social consensus.⁹

This is clearly applicable to Fuchsia. She is a most convincing character, as I have asserted above (chapter 5); and as such, we can sympathise with her predicament. Furthermore, that predicament is created by "a conflict between the inner and outer world", the adolescent confusion which leaves her too open to abuse, and results in her reliance on the compensatory fantasies she develops. The tragedy of Fuchsia is that she is an emotionally vulnerable child in

a dysfunctional and therefore unsupportive society, whose end can certainly be seen in her beginning.

Though there is a clear distinction between a tragic hero and a pathetic victim, the latter is as much a figure of tragedy as the former. In many cases, she (in the traditional and therefore patriarchal Western canon, the victim is usually female) is destroyed by a combination of the hero's misjudgement and the villain's malice; Othello is a typical example. However, the pathetic suppliant is also a central figure in melodrama, a mode which includes Gothic structures. In such fictions, the opposition is clear and uncomplicated: "normally a ruthless figure strongly contrasted with some kind of delicate virtue, generally a helpless victim in his power."¹⁰ As we have seen, Fuchsia's destruction is attributable to a complex variety of misfortunes, she is also not subject to the same emotive condition (ie. fear) by which the Gothic villain is able to control his suppliant prey; and I would therefore suggest that she is a pathetic victim in the tragic tradition.

As Hugh Brogan has remarked, there are certain points of comparison between Gormenghast and Elsinore¹¹; indeed, there is also some degree of correlation between the basic plot structures and devices of Hamlet and the first two Titus novels, such as the motif of revenge and the concept of the disaffected heir. However, the most obvious resemblance is that between Fuchsia and Ophelia; and it is interesting that critical reactions to Shakespeare's pathetic heroine is somewhat equivocal. G.S. Gordon, for example, is almost dismissive, suggesting that she deserves little more than pity. In fact, he regards her as "one of the failures in Shakespeare's world"¹². A.L. Rowse, on the other hand, finds her plight deeply disturbing, describing Ophelia's madness as "heart-rending" and delivered with such a "force of impact... that one can hardly bear to see what is going on"¹³. Such opinions are not to be reconciled, perhaps. However, even Gordon admits that Ophelia is so because she cannot be otherwise - that "a touch of Beatrice or

Rosalind and the tragedies of Hamlet and Othello could hardly have been.”¹⁴ This is also precisely why Fuchsia is both pathetic and tragic. She suffers because of her weakness, not in spite of her strength. Were she able to bear her predicament better, she would be heroic, but not tragic.

Fuchsia’s lonely death is the most harrowing in the novels. Others are disturbing: the Twins starving to death in their silent madness, for example, or Black Rose’s hopelessness; but these arouse only the uneasiness that surrounds the contemplation of dying such deaths, and is horrific for that reason only. Neither is the tragedy of her death alleviated by any sense of the parodic or absurd, as is the case with Sepulchre. We are able to identify with the character of Fuchsia, and so we feel more acutely her loss.

Unfortunately, any acknowledgement of Fuchsia’s tragedy would suggest a weakness in proposing Titus Groan as the dominantly tragic work, for her death occurs towards the end of Gormenghast. Furthermore, as I shall explain in the next chapter, the second novel has a predominantly comic structure and function. However, as Frye asserts, comedy can contain within it tragic episodes¹⁵; in fact, as I shall explain in the subsequent chapter, it is often necessary for the integrity of the comic world to allow of the experience of tragedy. The function of Titus Groan, resembling as it does a dramatic tragedy, is to announce the dysfunction of its society; the tragic elements in Gormenghast remind us of that dysfunction, contrasting it with the comic elements that provide for renewal and rejuvenation. The purpose of the tragedy in both is to allow for progression. Peake’s approach with respect to tragedy is undeniably equivocal; the horror of violent death can even be portrayed comically (as is the case with Swelter); but he is aware of the essential power over the imagination that tragedy has - in the modern world as much as in antiquity. As Tony Harrison puts it: “This dismay and despair of our age is the terror that tragedy allows us to gaze into... *yet*, and this is a very important yet,

without being turned into stone by the vision.”¹⁶ Thus tragedy is symbolised as the gorgon which, like the minotaur (see pp.217-9 above), is that part of ourselves we are compelled to face if we are to progress. The gorgon’s head is an horrific reminder of our inhumanity; yet carrying it provides us with protection against future perils. In the Titus novels, the death of Sepulchrave and later of Fuchsia initiate a movement, in dramatic terms, out of the tragic sphere and towards the comic.

Notes.

1. Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) 344.
2. Batchelor, 74.
3. Grant, 173.
4. Frye, 39.
5. King Lear, I.i. 38-40.
6. H.A. Mason, The Tragic Plane (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) 56-60.
7. King Lear, V.iii. 285-8.
8. Mason, 63.
9. Frye, 39.
10. Frye, 39.
11. Hugh Brogan, 'The Gutters of Gormenghast', The Cambridge Review (23rd November 1973) 38-42.
12. Hamlet: Oxford Plays of Shakespeare, ed. G.S. Gordon (1912), xxxi.
13. The Annotated Shakespeare. Ed. A.L. Rowse (Orbis, 1978) 1729.
14. Gordon, xxxii.
15. Frye, 214.
16. Cited in Taplin, 36-7.

fundamental cycles of existence, asserting that art is often described “in the creative metaphors of organic life”, while the patterns of life in general synchronise “with the rhythms of the turning year that vegetable life makes.” He concludes from this evidence that it is appropriate to conceive of an elemental link between “human culture” and “the rhythms of an organism.”⁴

According to this hypothesis, it is perfectly possible to reconcile the concept of ritualisation with rationalisation. Tragedy is an act of defiance - a refutation. However, it is only tragedy because its perpetrator is unable to overcome the inevitable. The moment of catharsis which ends the tragic action is one of revelation - an understanding of the ‘true’ state of things. Ritual is a way of affirming enduring values - and is therefore a rational acceptance of the way things are.

Of course, this is not to suggest that comedy conforms. As Morton Gurewitch suggests, the vision of comedy is an irrational one.⁵ It seeks to undermine the sense of stability, to question norms. However, it is able to question those norms because it encourages a higher degree of awareness than tragedy. Moreover, it introduces an element of narcissism that is more objective than the corresponding sympathy evinced by the tragic and pathetic: the audience of comedy (along with certain comic characters) is able to recognise the actions of individuals against a larger perspective and therefore to acknowledge the shortcomings of its own behaviour. Inevitably, comedy also recognises the fact that simply striving for such disinterestedness is no guarantee of achieving it. An acceptance of rational behaviour does not mean that it is possible always to behave rationally - nor should it be. The “irrational vision” is that which enables the individual to survive misfortune (ie. irrational, or unforeseen, circumstance) by accepting it, thus allowing a clearer understanding of the condition of life. C.L. Barber describes this process as “release through clarification.”⁶

Comedy, then, is a preserving, unifying impulse: its goal is often marriage or some other form of reconciliatory or unifying movement, which can only be achieved by forcing on those resistant

14. The Comedic Vision of Gormenghast.

Two commonly cited definitions of comedy are as follows. Byron, in Don Juan, asserts that “All tragedies are finished by a death, / All comedies are ended by a marriage.”¹ Horace Walpole, on the other hand, suggests that the two genres can be separated by a consideration of the way in which experiences are received: “The world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel.”² Apparently simplistic as these epigrammatic statements may seem, they do in fact form the basis for two of the most influential and far-reaching critical theories on the nature of experience - and will therefore serve as a useful starting point for an investigation into the form and significance of comedy in the Titus novels.

Byron’s statement clearly refers to the fact that what we might call the two poles of experience are defined by what are essentially ritualised conclusions - an assertion which anticipates the Jungian concept of archetypal states and processes I have referred to above (see chapter 12) - and also provides the framework for the “mythic method” of literature, described by T.S. Eliot in his essay ‘*Ulysses, order and myth*’, which was so fundamental to the Modernist approach.³

Walpole’s definition may be interpreted in modern, psychoanalytic terms too: he is demarcating the two areas of experience that we would call the rational and the irrational - the conscious and subconscious. As I have implied, Freudian theory (of which Walpole’s definition may be seen to be a prototype) infers that suppression creates conflict and so must be externalised, in order that harmony can be restored. Jung, on the other hand, asserts that we cannot exorcise, only come to terms with, the ‘darker’ side of our personalities - and (in the comedic reconciliation often symbolised by marriage) acknowledge this fact of our existence.

Northrop Frye suggests that the archetypal patterns of literature correspond to the

to it the inevitable, cyclic nature of life. However, comedy is not romance (though they have certain characteristics in common): it tends usually towards realism, in that it perceives that progression can only be achieved by accepting things as they are. This point emphasises that the comic impulse is at first, and crucially, disturbing; only later is it unifying. It is only possible to achieve wholeness if one admits of division.

As we have seen, the disintegration of the society of Gormenghast is due both to its intransigence and the inability of its inhabitants to realise what is happening. It is a world of shadows, labyrinths and impenetrable walls; its people cling to the certainties of ritual, rather than celebrating what they represent. Unable to rise above the darkness, they come together through habit and the unconscious desire for company, rather than through any conviction. Ritual in Gormenghast is not a comedic affirmation, but a parodic negation: it undermines, rather than promotes, the rejuvenative powers of celebration. Barber's study of the festive comedies of Shakespeare reminds us that the observance of ceremony is a fundamentally societal impulse: that the many festivals traditionally operated as "landmarks framing the cycle of the year", thereby giving a coherent structure - "a way that men cope with their life."⁷ Yet the solemn nature of the Rituals in Gormenghast are restrictive, not liberating. Though, as we have seen, they provide what can be contrived as a social function in bringing the inhabitants of the castle together, this only secures a physical rather than spiritual or emotional community. The comedic aspect of these ceremonies is in the deviance they promote, rather than in their symbolic relevance.

Most of the characters central to the first book react to such gatherings introspectively. Unable to effect any change in this degenerate situation, they attempt to suppress it. This is indicated by the fact that, though some do not enter into the spirit of the ceremonies, they nevertheless perform them with due solemnity. Furthermore, as I have described, each character

has developed a mental condition which isolates him from his society. Societal behaviour, though sought by each individual, is by this point unattainable, as it would necessarily involve dialogue - and threaten to uncover what is, in fact, the source of the problem.

As I suggested in the previous chapter, Titus Groan conforms to the structure of dramatic tragedy. This assertion is clarified if we consider the attitudes of the majority of the pre-eminent characters in the first novel towards the various rituals they have to perform. Only Steerpike and Doctor Prunesquallor show any great degree of individual (as opposed to communal, and therefore unquestioning) awareness of the significance of these performances. Steerpike's shrewdness is part of his personal ambition to control society. Only the Doctor, therefore, displays what might be called irreverence. In the gathering in the Cool Room, on the occasion of Titus's christening, it is Prunesquallor, arriving early, who attempts to involve those already present - Swelter, Flay and Sourdust - in some form of social interaction, first by taking a cake from the table, then by attempting to draw the others into the abstract consideration of the consciousness of cedars quoted earlier (pp.105-6). Both initiatives are, expectedly, treated with scorn: but this is at least some kind of reaction. The Doctor does not of course expect to generate any sort of philosophical discussion - he purposely addresses Mr Flay, the most taciturn of individuals; but his actions do have important dramatic implications. They serve to emphasise the inability of the castle's inhabitants to communicate at even the most banal level; and they allow the Doctor himself a degree of relief from the psychological pressure afforded by the unsocial environment in which he lives.

In my discussion of the functions of Doctor Prunesquallor above (chapter 6), I suggested that his role is in some respects that of the fool - that an important function of his character is to provide a more objective perspective on his society. This also has a rejuvenating effect on his own mental state - as illustrated in the episode described above. As Barber asserts, this is an

important effect of verbal trickery: “[T]he most important games in which the elation of the moment finds expression are games with words, and the wordplay does for the most part work, conveying an experience of festive liberty.”⁸ His badinage is perceived by those around him as a symptom of madness; and he consciously perpetuates this, knowing that it enables him to maintain a certain degree of autonomy. He is also in the fortunate position of being an outsider who has an invaluable role to perform, giving him the privilege of status without the attendant restrictions.

However, the fool is a figure from tragedy, not comedy. Typically, his appearance is attendant upon disaster. He is called a fool only by a society which does not have the breadth of vision to understand him. We, the audience, see the tragic absurdities of life, not in him, but through him, in the actions of those who scorn him.

Prunesquallor, though an important figure throughout the first two novels, is a more central figure in Gormenghast. It is also clear, that his function develops. While retaining something of the fool in his wordplay - an affectation which is fundamental to his character - he becomes increasingly moral in his outlook. Morality, according to Frye, is more properly associated with romance; yet there is also a moral element in comedy, in that the restoration of a cohesive society involves the acceptance, on the part of those who have caused disruption, of a fair moral ethos. If they continue to resist it (as Shylock does), they become the object of abuse or ridicule. Doctor Prunesquallor, therefore, functions first as a fool - in the predominantly tragic environment of Titus Groan - and then, increasingly, as a loyal servant of Gormenghast. This qualified foolishness, according to Barber, is a symptom of the “tolerant disillusion of Anglican or Catholic culture” which “allowed nature to have its day” - so long as it was accepted that this was a temporary reversal.⁹ This concept, in which liberation in fact underlines order and control - the “misrule which implied rule”, as Barber terms it - is, I would suggest, also consistent with

the tenets of the eighteenth century, and supports Dr Prunesquallor's characterisation as a typical figure of the Enlightenment.

In the second novel, as I have already suggested (pp.142ff.), Steerpike's rise to power is accompanied by an increasing polarisation of attitudes. Though he is not revealed to the castle as a traitor until quite late in the day, Gertrude's suspicions about him create a focus of resistance to his endeavours which operates throughout the novel. Her first appearance in Gormenghast contrasts significantly with the corresponding introduction in the first novel - in which she was laid up in bed, following the birth of her son, and with nothing more profound on her mind than the well-being of her cats and birds. Here, she is mobile; and she is deep in thought:

The countess walked with her head bowed a little and her arms akimbo.

There was a frown on her brow. She was not satisfied that the immemorial sense of duty and observance was universally held sacrosanct in the wide network of the castle. Heavy and abstracted as she seemed, yet she was as quick as a snake to detect danger, and though she could not put a finger, as it were, on the exact area of her doubt, she was nevertheless suspicious, wary and revengeful of she knew not exactly what. (GG, 27)

Having been propelled into the position of supreme authority by the disappearance of Sepulchrave, she is revealed as a figure of power and moral conviction. Whereas her husband was merely one isolated individual among many, Gertrude has the capacity to draw the society of Gormenghast together - if only in order to exorcise the as yet undetected menace of Steerpike. In Aristotelian terms, the castle's society therefore begins to acquire a comic structure: one in which the dominant force is recognisably 'good' - or at least preferable to the alternative represented by the 'alazon' or impostor.

therefore, and focusing instead on the peripheral characters and plots, it is possible to identify characteristics which support the suggestion that Peake is presenting a comic environment - and one which supports and informs the heroic impulse of that struggle. After all, if we do not examine honestly the nature of the world which is the reason for the struggle, we are forced to conclude that we are simply witnessing an enactment of the endless battle between two ideological extremes, from which there can be not true progression or rejuvenation.

I have described the development of Doctor Prunesquallor's function, from irreverent fool to moral guardian. He can also be described, particularly in his domestic environment, as resembling another comic archetype: that of the dandy. His role, in this respect, is to reveal the absurdity of those around him, by introducing those modes of social interaction most likely to antagonise the targets of his satire. In the rigid social structure of Gormenghast, the most effective tool is parody - the imitation and exaggeration of those characteristics in a society which the satirist perceives both as being most typical of it, and most ludicrous. In this sense, Prunesquallor still functions as a fool: but, as a dandy, he is aping what he sees as social rather than individual faults. Thus he operates within a comic rather than a tragic environment.

The main target of his satire is his long-suffering sister, Irma. She is an easy prey: but that is the point. To anyone with sufficient objectivity, social pretension is an absurdly pointless activity. Of course, he is sensitive to the fact of Irma's suffering; but he also (partly, as I have said, to relieve the psychological pressure on himself) takes gentle advantage of her naivety to temper what would, no doubt, have become complete derangement, were she to live alone.

Irma's neurotic sensibility both characterises her as a comic figure, and tempers our reaction towards her. Ludicrous as she is, her pain is too genuine to elicit a totally satirical response. She is so disfigured by her anxiety that she is presented as a comic grotesque. I have discussed this aspect of many of the inhabitants of Gormenghast already; but I would add at this point that the

This shift in emphasis explains why our attitude to Steerpike also changes. As we have seen (p.142), he is at first perceived as heroic (the villain in tragedy is usually an ‘eiron’ or insider, whereas Steerpike is, in terms of his social position and attitude, an outsider); then, as he begins to expose the frailty of the traditional society of the castle, he becomes increasingly villainous. In Gormenghast, as he becomes both more powerful and less able to rely on the suggestibility of others, he is forced to operate at a more fundamental level of viciousness. By the time he is unmasked, it is not only as a heretic that he is perceived, but as a cold-blooded murderer. He, and those who seek to oppose him, have relinquished the psychological complexities that, in Titus Groan, impelled Steerpike to revolt, and isolated Sepulchra. The central plot is now clearly an ethical struggle between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, the result of which is never in doubt.

If we concentrate on the central plot, both in the struggle between Steerpike and the powers of the castle, and in the ensuing quest that Titus embarks upon, we must conclude that the fundamental impulse of the whole cycle is Romantic. As I have suggested (chapter 10), it is evident that Peake is essentially Romantic in temperament. (It is important to establish here that, though the term “Romantic”, which for the purposes of this thesis connotes the literary ideologies of the English Romantic ‘movement’, differs from the generic term “romance”, as used by Frye and others, and which refers to the courtly medieval tradition, the Romantic ‘movement’ was itself a revival of romance; and so certain motifs, such as the notion of personal quest, are common to both traditions.¹⁰) We may say, however, that though the central Bildungsroman is undoubtedly a Romantic motif, Peake’s characterisation, his self-conscious use of language, and his reworking of traditional structures, reflect his ambivalent stance towards Romanticism that is in turns tragic (or mock-tragic), comic, even ironic (see chapter 15 below).

Putting aside the central, morally-defined struggle taking place throughout Gormenghast,

grotesque, though it may in some cases be associated with the tragic, has a more fundamental role within the realm of the comic, in that it heightens the sense of the realistic. We must be aware, not only of the ridiculous, but also of the pathetic aspects of real life. Hence Doctor Prunesquallor's (and, to some extent, Peake's) equivocal reaction to his sister's attempt at flirtatious wilfulness:

Then, with a sudden kittenish abandon, she flung back her head so that her over-long yet pearl-white neck was tautened in a backward curve and her chignon tapped her between the shoulder-blades in so peremptory a way as to make her cough. But directly she had ascertained that it was not her brother being wilful, the ecstatic and kittenish expression came back to her powdered face, and she clapped her hands together at her breast.

Prunesquallor, staring up, horrified at yet another facet of her character coming to light, noticed that one of her molars needed filling, but decided it was not the moment to mention it. (GG, 95)

Fortunately for both the Doctor and ourselves, Irma is delivered from herself by the arrival in her life of Bellgrove. The episodes leading up to their union may seem simply to provide light relief from the increasingly tense, and ultimately harrowing, subject of the relationship between Fuchsia and Steerpike. This is certainly one of its dramatic functions - and one which emphasises the humanising role of comedy. However, a fuller understanding of the significance of this sub-plot can be achieved if we consider the relationship not only between comedy and tragedy, but also between romance (in Frye's terms¹¹ as well as generally) and realism. Both Irma and Fuchsia have naive and deeply emotional dispositions. However, there is, in Irma's determination to acquire a mate, a tempering realism. She is all too aware that time is running out for her; and though she puts a brave face on it, she is becoming desperate. She therefore

resolves to go for broke and hold a party, in which she must succeed, or be condemned to lifelong spinsterhood. Though childlike in her social inexperience, she is an adult and shows adult determination.

It is therefore telling that the man she does succeed in attracting is “poor old bloody Bellgrove”. In comic terms, he is a buffoon or clown - an object of ridicule among his peers, forever failing, yet forever picking himself up again - enduring, as the comic universe must endure, despite (even because of) his many faults. Irma, all too aware of the lengths she has gone to - and also of the ridiculous hot water bottle she is using to enhance her figure - sees in him a vision of nobility. Bellgrove’s colleagues, each as vain as the other, are nonplussed; but, in a moment of insight which is a true comic revelation, they realise that what they have witnessed is an acknowledgement of their own individual insecurities: “But now, the stretched skin of the atmosphere had split - and the professors, exultant that this was so, had, each in his own way, erected within himself [sic] the romantic image of what he fondly imagined himself to be.” (GG, 228)

This epiphanic moment corresponds to what is defined in tragedy as catharsis - the release of hitherto suppressed emotions which allows the members of a society to gain a better understanding of themselves. According to Frye, this action is “an individual release which is also a social reconciliation”.¹² Though it is, in this case, an escape from, rather than an acceptance of reality, it answers a common need, and therefore initiates a degree of social renewal.

That such a reinvigorating experience is possible at all is due largely to the fact that the party’s host is the Doctor. I have commented previously that his home, like his character, is incongruous: we might even, in this sense, ascribe to him a further comic role - that of the Lord of Misrule, the subverter of social norms. His house, in this sense, can be seen as a comic realm

within what is, certainly in Titus Groan, a tragic universe. It is, appropriately, the centre of what the reader recognises as a civilised mode of existence, in stark contrast to the essentially barbaric world around it. In Gormenghast, therefore, it is significant that the Doctor's house becomes the main focus of dramatic action. Apart from the party, there is the visit of the Countess, in which she reveals to the Doctor a tender, human aspect to her character in milking the goat; and the house is again seen as a metaphor of the civilised world when Flay, having spotted Steerpike lurking under the fountain, sends Titus there to rouse the Doctor. In fact, the Doctor's role is central to an understanding of the significance of his house as the locus of activities in the second novel. The Lord of Misrule, according to Barber, was supportive of rather than hostile to the social hierarchy, his license over unruly proceedings being confined to the festive, rather than the everyday.¹³ The Doctor's role of steward of the society of Gormenghast is thus upheld by our interpretation of this facet of his character - and his house, initially incongruous, is revealed, ideologically as well as dramatically, as the central location within the castle. Finally, when Titus calls Dr Prunesquallor from his bed, he emerges in dressing gown, socks and slippers, and selects as weapons twookers. Thus armed and clothed, Prunesquallor is the essential comic knight, the mortal who rises to the difficult and heroic task - and The Lord of Misrule who therefore proves his mettle in the service of his society.

One episode in Gormenghast already referred to (see p.180) in which Titus, imprisoned in the Lichen Fort, is visited by both Prunesquallor and Bellgrove, has interesting connotations for any consideration of the function of comedy in the novels. It is during the second novel that Titus grows up: he is seven when it opens, seventeen at its end. The Doctor and Headmaster, in the absence of Sepulchrave (even before his death), are in effect the boy's guardians - from whom he must learn adult behaviour. Yet, as the irreverent dandy and the clown, they represent, at least in the eyes of Titus (whose apprehension of adulthood is a solitary, regimented

existence), a freer, more innocent world. In the Lichen Fort, they become his companions at play:

For the next hour, the old prison warder, peering through a keyhole the size of a table-spoon, in the inner door, was astounded to see the three figures crawling to and fro across the floor of the prison fort, to hear the high trill of the Doctor develop and strengthen into the cry of a hyena, the deep and wavering voice of the Professor bell forth like an old and happy hound, as his inhibitions waned, and the shrill cries of the child reverberate about the room, splintering like glass on the stone walls while the marbles crashed against one another, spun in their tracks, lodged shuddering in their squares, or skimmed the prison floor like shooting stars.

(GG, 158)

In this short interlude, Bellgrove and Prunesquallor are freed from the trials and weariness of life - and therefore, literally, rejuvenated. The Lichen Fort is transformed into a fantasy world in the same way as Fuchsia's attic in the first novel. Like the Boar's Head Tavern¹⁴, or the magical realm of Oz, it allows experience to be deferred in the name of childhood.

The adult world to which the Doctor and Headmaster must return, and with which Titus must soon engage himself, is represented by Barquentine, who performs another important function of comedy - that of the churl, or spoiler. He is a symbol of authority who imposes his strict behavioural code on those over whom he is able to exert some influence - and who, therefore, must be overcome by the comic hero and his supporters. The classic example is Shylock; and, like Shylock, Barquentine's power is a symptom of what the audience and the comic hero perceive to be the cause of the problems existing in society. As a result, the churl is often cast as a comic grotesque - a figure who inspires distaste in those he seeks to abuse. In resisting the villainous Steerpike, Barquentine exhibits a certain heroic tenacity; and the fact that we are

given some insight into the psychological effect his physical deformity has had on the formation of his character, enables us to consider him as such. However, understanding his misanthropy does not make it any more palatable: though his death redeems him to some extent, the fact of it removes from the worlds of Fuchsia and Titus what had been to them an object of terror.

In casting the powerful churl as grotesque, Peake emphasises the negative force that controls the castle's society. Barquentine's physical and psychological deformity is a metaphor of the degeneration of Gormenghast. It is clear that, so long as he (and what he represents) remains in control of the society of the castle, the rejuvenating cohesiveness that is sought by the comic impulse cannot be achieved. Frye suggests, among his complex mythic structure of the forms of literature, that the comic hero, if he cannot overcome the 'false' society (ie. that which divides) with the 'true' one (that coheres and incorporates), then he must escape it - and find succour in the natural world.

The green world of nature is the archetypal realm of comedy, where the harmonious cycles of the seasons, the tides and the sun provide a constant reminder of the inevitability of the processes of life. The wise old Duke in As You Like It declares the Forest of Arden to be "More free from peril than the envious court"¹⁵ - whereas the wily Touchstone (who, though a clown, is an essentially urban figure) finds the court "a better place". The court or metropolis is the arena of ambition: the forest, the realm of contentment. Those who are alien to either will find both threatening; but certainly, in Gormenghast, the forest is a region associated with freedom. For Titus, approaching it for the first time, it is a magical place, a realm of endless possibility:

Fold after green fold, clump after clump of foliage undulating to the notched skyline.

His yearnings became focused. His truancy no longer nagged him. His curiosity burned.

What brooded within those high and leafy walls? Those green and sunny walls? What of the inner shadows? What of the acorn'd terraces, and the hollow aisles of leaves?

... What was this shock of love? A rattle-snake; a dell of silky grass; some great rocks and lizards and ferns, and the great forest wall. Why should these add up to so thrilling, so breathtaking a total? (GG, 104)

As ever with such flights of imagination, Peake is not as crisp or distanced as he might be here; but if we suspend our modern sense of irony for a moment, it is possible to see the forest in its traditional, dramatic role - as an alternative, more elemental world than the sophisticated urban society within the castle walls. It is the festive arena: the environment which allows escape from the mundane, controlled world of the court and into the world of holiday. Titus enters this world, appropriately, as a truant.

The two significant inhabitants of the forest support this interpretation. The Thing, of course, is the spirit of nature, whose natural domain is Gormenghast Forest. As such, she is a centrally romantic figure, in the tradition of Puck. Yet A Midsummer Night's Dream is as much a comedy as it is a romance, with its dominant theme of order and chaos - and Puck is a trickster as much as a sylvan spirit. The Thing is not a moral creature; she delights in mischief - and in fact is at times malicious. Romance, strictly speaking, is part of the moral universe; the Thing, thankfully, is not. It is perhaps ironic (yet romance, to a modern audience, is full of such ironies) that she provides the impetus for Titus's quest: were she able to communicate, she would have found such a notion inconceivable. Yet she is of the forest; Titus is not. Confined by society, he yearns for the liberation that the forest offers; yet we have seen that, once outside Gormenghast, individuals hanker to return to it. This relationship is central to the concept of pastoral, which I shall return to shortly.

The other inhabitant of the forest is the exiled Flay. Though this environment is completely alien to him, he does in fact adapt very well to it. Gormenghast had been his home throughout his life; but its damp gloominess and rigid hierarchical society had adversely affected his physical and mental condition - as we have seen above (pp.128-9). As he becomes accustomed to the natural world, however, even the arthritic cracking of his knees subsides:

He was by now a part of the woods, his eyesight sharp as a bird's, and his hearing as quick. His footsteps had become noiseless. The cracking of his knee-joints had disappeared. Perhaps the heat of the summer had baked the trouble out of them for his clothes being as ragged as foliage his knees were for the most part bare to the sun.

He must surely have been made for the woods, so congruously had he become dissolved into a world of branches, ferns and streams. (GG, 286-7)

Ironically, of course, he cannot forget "the only home he had ever known"; he longs to return to the Gormenghast that had treated him so harshly, and yet which he is willing - as he demonstrates - to die for. As the Duke implies, the pleasures of an existence beyond the court is dependent on choice: "Now go we in content / To liberty, and not to banishment."¹⁶ Flay's exile, however, changes his role from that of the loyal servant of domestic tragedy to the wise man, or soothsayer, of romance.

It would appear from this examination of the function of Gormenghast Forest that it is a romantic, rather than a comic, realm. Yet it lies within the demesne of Gormenghast; and its inhabitants are closely connected with the society of the castle. Even the Thing, autonomous, alien creature that she is, is sighted many times within the castle walls: she is intrigued by it, and would never completely desert it. This, I would argue, implies that the forest conforms to the green world of comedy and the concept of pastoral, rather than the uncharted frontier territory

of romance. In it, romance is perceived in comic terms. As Barber puts it: “The Forest of Arden... is a region defined by an attitude to liberty from ordinary limitations, a festive place where the folly of romance can have its day.”¹⁷ It is a source of imaginative inspiration for Titus; and his adventures within it anticipate the journey he is to embark upon at the end of Gormenghast. Yet they are ultimately the sheltered adventures of childhood - the “folly of romance”.

The archetypal comic movement is towards reconciliation and incorporation. It typically involves the triumph of the younger, more hopeful generation over the older ‘establishment’, whose members must either be forced to realise their errors, or be stripped of their power. However, should the establishment be particularly intransigent, or the younger generation unable to overcome it, the latter may attempt instead to escape the restrictions which society imposes upon it. The green world is the environment into which it escapes. Being both wild and controlled, it provides an appropriate region in which the younger generation can roam. Though Titus’s frequent disappearance causes alarm inside the castle, the reader is not concerned for his safety, and knows he will return to face the admonishments of his elders sooner or later.

This elopement falls into what we might call picaresque comedy, and is a form of Bildungsroman, in the tradition of Fielding’s Tom Jones or Twain’s Tom Sawyer. Gormenghast, with its strong narrative progression and comic incident, clearly conforms to this genre. Culminating in an heroic climax, in which the young protagonist, having experienced a series of initiatory events, overcomes his enemy, and leading to a revelatory catharsis, it is an entirely appropriate intermediate phase, in which the younger generation acquires the maturity necessary to replace its predecessors.

When, through the tragedy that besets his parents, a young hero is forced to accept responsibility for his actions, he is inevitably not ready to do so. Tragedy involves the untimely

death of a king, which leaves his people vulnerable and forces his heir to rise early to the challenge of adult life. If he is to succeed, the mythic cycle must move from the tragic to the comic - the world in which the faults of his youth can be excused by those who come to realise their own imperfections. Doctor Prunesquallor wonders "would the boy ever be free tomorrow?" - but he and the other comic characters in Gormenghast, along with the relative freedom of the forest, and the inspiration he finds there, ensure that he will be. If tragedy involves error, comedy does not correct that error: rather, it can be said that it promotes an understanding of the fact that human nature inevitably errs. Ironically, Titus seeks a greater understanding. The paradox of human nature is that the tragic initiates not only a comic realisation of our limitations, but also a yearning, individually, to attempt to transcend those limitations. Thus, as Frye suggested, can the cycle of artistic progression be seen to reflect the mythic perpetuation of life, death, decay and rebirth. Peake reveals the nature of this progression even as, in comic style, he mocks its grandiose aspirations.

Notes.

1. Byron, Don Juan, Canto 3, stanza 9.
2. Horace Walpole, 'To the Countess of Upper Ossory' (16 August, 1776), Letters.
3. Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975).
4. Frye, 343.
5. Morton Gurewitch, Comedy: The Irrational Vision (New York and London: Cornell University Press, 1975).
6. C.L. Barber, Shakespeare's Festive Comedy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).
7. *Ibid*, 5-6.
8. *Ibid*, 95.
9. *Ibid*, 10.
10. See also my note 1 to the general introduction, p.11.
11. See 'The Mythos of Summer: Romance', Anatomy of Criticism, 186-205.
12. Frye, The Argument for Comedy, 452.
13. Barber, 24-30.
14. The tavern in Eastcheap where Falstaff encourages Prince Hal to forget the responsibilities of the adult world by parodying it (IV Henry I).
15. As You Like It, II.i.4.
16. *Ibid*, I.iii.139-40.
17. Barber, 223.

15. Romance and Irony: “equipoise” and the function of Titus Alone.

It is clear that, despite the sense of cohesion a mythical interpretation of the Titus novels provides, Peake’s modern, inclusive approach and his equivocal presentation of the heroic narrative tend to resist such an analysis. John Batchelor has noted that his theories of art in general conflict with his ideas about his own work:

When he is writing about his attitudes to art as a whole Peake’s tone tends to become ambitious, rhetorical and unfocused. One has the sense that he is bringing his mind to bear on a majestic calling which cannot clearly be seen, its loftiness endowing it with a certain mystification. But when he writes about his own drawing his tone becomes cheerfully practical...¹

Such ambivalence is, as we have seen, reflected in the various tensions between tragedy and melodrama, romance and irony, solemnity and burlesque, horror and grotesque farce, that inform the mood of the novels.

However, as I asserted in the previous chapter, the movement from a tragic to a comic vision is initiated by an enhanced degree of awareness. The comic episodes in Gormenghast enable us to perceive the self-obsessed introspection that dominated the atmosphere of Titus Groan more astutely. This shift therefore allows us to make certain value judgements about the nature of the society presented to us. It also provides Titus with important basic notions about his own situation and therefore provides the impetus for his departure and quest for identity examined earlier (chapter 12). Ultimately, it results in a further shift which, as we have seen (chapter 11), reveals to Titus the impassive nature of the world and his rootless and arbitrary position within it. This revelation is not ultimately romantic, though its precondition is the personal, impulsive quest that is such a central motif both of the Romantic revival and of medieval romance: finally,

it is ironic.

Irony, as Northrop Frye has suggested, is indicative of a mature society, involving as it does an advanced understanding of the human condition. Romance (in Frye's scheme of "mythoi" the opposite of irony) presupposes innocence, naivety.² Thus, the naive characters in the novels (*Sepulchrave*, *Fuchsia*, *Black Rose*) are able to see little beyond themselves, while the cleverer characters (*Doctor Prunesquallor*, *Steerpike* (until he loses control), *Muzzlehatch* (until he does)) have gained a fuller insight into the state of things. The novels focus on the development of an individual between these two poles, and examine the significance of his experience which, through his own immaturity, inevitably retains a romantic sensibility. The environment in which he lives (and the one in which, in the last novel, he finds himself) comments on that sensibility in various ways, according to the degree to which the outlook of the supporting characters can be said to be romantic or ironic. Throughout this development, Titus (we perceive, as modern, ironic observers) moves inevitably from a position of innocence to one of experience - and therefore from a romantic to an ironic outlook.

I have commented on the fact that, in the first two novels, the world of Gormenghast is largely exposed through the eyes of Steerpike. Unemotional, he is able to scrutinize the emotional, irrational behaviour of those around him with a cool detachment, and plan his conquest accordingly. His desire to gain control of the castle comes from an acute awareness - and resentment - of his position within the hierarchy of Gormenghast. Though we cannot sympathize with his machinations (seeing as we do the relative weakness of his victims), we understand that his increasing power and influence comes from his objectivity. A ruthless political animal, he perceives the absurdity of those around him with a sinister scorn.

Despite such detached astuteness, however, he fails in his quest for dominance. One might posit the reason for his failure as being simply the vast intransigence of what he is up against.

However, on a symbolic level, Steerpike is not merely one individual, but a metaphor of individualism. The question remains, therefore, as to why he does fail. To answer this, I return once more to the Miltonic analogy developed earlier (see pp.54-5 and 139 above). Satan's defeat was ultimately due to self-interest: not in terms of his quest for power, but in the fact that he could not achieve the necessary detachment. In his striving for individual power, he was unable to observe his own actions with equanimity, but, in his own imagination, cast himself as heroic. In other words, he was vainglorious; and this flaw destroyed him.

Steerpike shares this flaw. Whenever he considers the significance of his own actions, he becomes emotionally driven, and loses his sense of objectivity - or at least, his objective control over his actions. After his exhibitionism among the bones of the Twins, he recovers his rationality, and is horrified at his loss of control:

He was enraged with himself. For what had seemed amusing a few moments ago was now a source, almost of fear to him. In looking back and seeing himself strutting like a cock about their bodies, he realised that he had been close to lunacy. This was the first time that any such thought had entered his head, and to dismiss it he crowed like a cock. He was not afraid of strutting; he had known what he was doing; to prove it he would crow and crow again. Not that he wished to do so, but to prove that he could stop whenever he wanted, and start when he wished to, and be all the while in complete control of himself, for there was no madness in him. (GG, 383)

From being the observer, Steerpike is now the observed (literally, as this scene is being witnessed by the Doctor, Flay and Titus); and a shift has therefore taken place in our own perception of him. When in control, he is able to maintain an ironic perspective; here, the irony is focused on Steerpike himself. The arch-rationalist has succumbed to the emotional drives that

his individualism has subconsciously generated.

The other major character who is able to detach himself, as it were, from his environment, is Doctor Prunesquallor. His complex function within the novels (as discussed above, chapters 6 and 14) is based on an ironic awareness of his world which is, in fact, more subtle than that of Steerpike. Though the power of both characters is due to their objectivity, neither of them is able completely to escape his own fundamental egoism, which is emotionally, and therefore fundamentally, driven. Were this possible, they would be inhuman - and, as I have affirmed (p.219), Gormenghast is a very human world. The difference between them is that the Doctor accepts his humanity, whereas Steerpike strives to suppress it. To remain objective, it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that we do, at times, act irrationally, lose control - and if we attempt to master this side of our behaviour, we are likely to become psychotic. Steerpike, believing that the secret of domination over his society is an extension of self-mastery, is forced to repress his natural impulses - impulses which erupt, ultimately, into the dominant, self-destructive force which leads to his downfall. Doctor Prunesquallor, though there is clear evidence to suggest that he is sexually repressed³, is astute enough to accept that his irrational self is a fundamental part of his character. He is able to perform several functions in the novels because of this ambivalence - or, more exactly (for ambivalence may indicate indecision), what Peake terms "equipoise". He is both fool and guardian, child and adult.

Another figure who exercises a certain amount of ironic awareness in the novels is Peake himself. Of course, when his Romantic imagination is stirred, he becomes subjective and thereby intrusive. However, the focus of his attention is significant: he is especially keen to emphasise the similarities between the various responses of the characters and the impulses of the artist. When, for example, Fuchsia climbs the staircase to her attic, the author indulges in an extended metaphor, comparing her "painful" love for her world with "The love of the painter

standing alone and staring, staring at the great coloured surface he is making... The window gapes as he inhales his world. His world: a rented room, and turpentine. He moves towards his half-born. He is in love.” (TG, 77-8) It is interesting that he chooses to speak directly to the reader in this way. Despite the obvious Romanticism of such responses, the analogy of the artist is one which again emphasises Peake’s ambivalence. The isolated figure, attempting through the power of his private imagination to make sense of his disordered experience of the world, is engaged in a process that is both emotional and intellectual. Throughout the novels, Peake strives to maintain this balance. Fuchsia, as described above, is compared to the artist who gives himself up to the emotional drives that feed his creative enthusiasm. Through the eyes of Steerpike, however, the Twins, when first seen from a distance in the roofscape episode, are compared in size with “those stub ends of pencil that are thrown away as too awkward to hold” (TG, 137) - a description which places the artist at the objective distance encouraged by Joyce and Eliot.⁴ Somewhere between these two extremes - and appropriately so - are the artists themselves: the Bright Carvers.

I have implied that the portrayal of the Carvers is two-dimensional (see pp.156ff.); it is therefore appropriate that the function of these primitive artists be defined symbolically. As an artist, Peake must struggle individually to transcend his personality, in order that he may communicate his experiences to the world. The harsh existence of the Bright Carvers, for whom life has little meaning except through creative expression, presents what might be conceived as an ideal of the vocation of the artist. They carve in response to an emotional urge: “Their sole passion was directed, once their days of love had guttered, on the production of this wooden sculpture”. (TG, 16) Yet their lives are also as preordained as any in the castle: they carve as their forefathers have done before them. In other words, their art combines responses to both cultural and individual needs. If we consider, furthermore, the physical location of the Bright

Carvers - in the hovels that are grouped outside, and yet contiguous to, the castle - their peripheral existence supports their inherently dualistic role. Thus, despite the apparent lack of interest with which Peake develops their characters, the Carvers have an important symbolic function within the novels: they identify the fundamental concerns of the artist (and therefore the author) who must, in the modern world, establish for himself an intermediate position between a personal involvement with it, and an objective observation of it.

To an extent, this can still be conceived as a modern approach to art. Eliot states that, in essence, the creative process is “a continual surrender of [the artist] himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.”⁵

Such a statement may be interpreted as promoting the complete denial of the subjective, emotionally driven impulses of an individual artist. However, if we consider a later extract from the same essay, it is clear that Eliot is suggesting this “extinction of personality” can only be achieved momentarily - and in fact depends on the continued impulses of that personality (I underline here for emphasis): “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.”⁶ One of the things Eliot is endorsing - and what Peake is also inferring in his presentation of the artist - is the ironic nature of much art.

This dichotomy of art as presented throughout the first two novels can therefore be interpreted as that which allows us to accept the artistic representation of reality as both heroic and ironic. If we consider this in relation to the mythic structure that I have discussed, it would appear that we are forced to distance ourselves from a straightforward progression from one mode or mythos to another. Though tragedy is undoubtedly the dominant impulse in Titus

Groan, and comedy the dominant form in Gormenghast, the two contrasting modes of romance and irony have been in competition throughout; and once Titus departs Gormenghast, the world in which the tragic and comic parameters have been established, the tension between the two remaining mythoi are foregrounded. Titus's quest, in other words, is an attempt, on behalf of the author, to establish the most enduring and profitable way of 'seeing' the world.

In addition to the self-conscious representation of art in the first two novels, and the way in which Peake highlights the relative awareness of the various inhabitants of the castle to their predicament, our attention to the tension that is developed between romantic and ironic perceptions of the world is further concentrated by the structure of the central plot. As I have described, the intransigence of Gormenghast's society is both the source of its strength and the reason behind its susceptibility to attack. Sepulchra, the symbolic representative of this ironic duality, accordingly brings on his own doom when he attempts to depart from the ritualised monotony of his life by calling the meeting in the library. There is, in this initiative, a tragic irony; yet this can also be seen as a romantic attempt to transcend the restrictions imposed by society by asserting his individuality.

The assertion of the individual will against societal control is also, of course, represented in the motives of Steerpike, whose very existence can be said to be ironic (in that the system exists by suppressing what he represents). However, the fact that he does exist gives meaning to the value system that is the basis of Gormenghast, as the existence of opposites necessary to any society. What therefore becomes clear is the fact that romance and irony are interdependent modes of vision: one cannot conceive of an ideal without being aware of its real, imperfect or simply banal counterpart. Or, in the case of Steerpike's function, one must encounter the egoistic impulses of the individual in order to realise the potential of the impersonality of society.

Titus is, of course, the centrally ironic figure. Whereas Steerpike's ultimate role is to unify the society he seeks to control, Titus refuses the responsibility conferred upon him by that society when he abdicates his position at the moment of accession. As the symbol of that which he seeks to escape - and essentially, therefore, to destroy - he is fulfilling the ironic role, as I have suggested above (pp.205-8 and 216ff.), of Oedipus. He is the one individual who should not be able to conceive of such an act; and he is also the only one capable of it. The act of abdication can be seen, therefore, as both ironic and heroic: it is the fundamental act of individual defiance on the part of the defining representative of society.

Just as the tension between irony and romance is presented on many levels in the first two novels, so is it developed in Titus Alone. As I shall now describe, the central motif of the quest can be seen, not only as an archetypal search for wholeness (as asserted in chapter 12), but also as an acknowledgement of the fact that such a goal is unattainable, given the essential duality of the modern human condition.

When Titus embarks on his journey, he is responding to impulses which are both supremely personal and (particularly as he is a symbol of a whole society) fundamentally communal. In rejecting his preordained role as the seventy seventh Earl of Gormenghast, he is seen, at least in his own mind, as a heretic. Had he remained, however, he would simply have followed the same barren routine as his father, thereby contributing to the continued decay of his society. Paradoxically, by turning away from this role, he is in fact acting on behalf of his community. It is clear that the inhabitants of Gormenghast can work as a society: the effort to rid the castle of Steerpike is testimony to this. However, the degeneration of the society - indicated by the neuroses of the characters within it, and the fact that the rituals that govern its behaviour no longer have any meaning - is so advanced that it is only in moments of crisis that it forces itself to perform its function properly. Once the crisis is over, individuals slip back into their former

somnambulant lifestyles:

It was as though all that had happened over the last decade, all the violence, the intrigue, the passion, the love, the hate and the fear had need of rest and that now, with Steerpike dead, the castle was able at last to close its eyes for a while and enjoy the listlessness of convalescence. (GG, 503)

Titus, by leaving, therefore breaks the mould. As I suggested in the previous chapter, the several comic characters have engendered in him an awareness of community which, though he is not at this point able to rationalise it, is fundamentally important to him as an individual. What has been lost over the centuries of decay must be rediscovered. Titus can therefore be said to be responding to the dual urges of self and community.

The initial irony of Titus's quest is again Titus himself. When he leaves Gormenghast, he perceives himself as conforming to the role of Romantic hero (just as Steerpike had in the first two novels). He is defiant and headstrong, and he is armed with the security of the knowledge that he is the Earl of Gormenghast. Though a traitor to his home, he is still indisputably Titus Groan, seventy-seventh Earl. However, as soon as he arrives at the city, he is almost completely in the hands of others. Though Titus is, in our own estimation, a fundamentally heroic character, in the eyes of those who inhabit this new world, he has no such status.

It has been suggested that the protagonist's role in Titus Alone is that of the picaresque - a type, according to Northrop Frye, associated with the ironic mode.⁷ This is an accurate interpretation of the third novel; but it is necessary to consider that the parody operates on several levels. The city and the Under-River are together perceived by the reader as a parody of the modern condition; the Under-River, simply by existing, also parodies the city above it; and finally the inhabitants of the city who seek to destroy Titus attempt to do so by parodying his memory of Gormenghast. Thus, the heroic sensibility that informs Titus's quest is broken down,

as reader and finally protagonist are nudged towards a higher level of consciousness.

I have suggested above that the main function of Titus Alone is that of giving a sense of perspective. In parodying the world of Gormenghast, it draws attention not only to its subject but also to the fact that it is a constructed fiction (and by implication that Titus Alone is itself constructed) - and thus allows a disengagement from it. Colin Manlove suggests that “where other writers strive to get into their fantastic worlds, Peake struggles to get out.” If we consider the first two novels alone, then this statement is perfectly true: when Peake strays outside his created world, figures and events become vague or flat. However, I believe that Titus Alone deals with this very problem; and, by the end of the novel, we must conclude that Peake has succeeded. Titus cannot return to Gormenghast because he cannot return to the past; moreover, the process of development which has consigned it to the past has also brought Titus (and ourselves) out of the fiction and to the brink of the real world.

Jorge Luis Borges, in his “Parable” entitled ‘Borges and I’, entertains what he sees as the inherent dilemma of the artist. The act of creation, he suggests, involves a transition from the private, individual world of the imagination to the public, and publicly perceived, world of reality. In this process, he implies that art involves an essential paradox - that the moment of creation is also the moment of extinction (reminding us of Eliot’s “continual extinction of personality”). The closer, therefore, an audience comes to the end of an author’s last work, the closer he gets to the living imagination of the private individual who created it. Thus he ends the parable by claiming, in tantalising fashion, “I do not know which of us has written this.”⁸

Titus Alone, with its emphasis on parody and self-reference, entertains much the same concept. In contrast to the closed, autonomous world of Gormenghast, in which an ironic understanding of the world can only aspire to a certain level, the relativist position of the world of the last novel (relative, if nothing else, to Gormenghast) allows for a more realistic

understanding of the human condition. When Titus emerges from Gormenghast, he allows it to be perceived as a fictional construct - something which Peake's elaborate and indulgent exposition had, as long as we were within its walls, tended to obscure. In the third novel however, the initial movement away from the centre corresponds with a noticeable shift in presentation which operates on many levels to bring the reader out of the fictional world.

This process of disengagement between reader and fictional construct is achieved in a number of ways. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, is the attitude of Titus to the world he finds himself in. Discovering that his title and origins have no meaning in this environment, he almost immediately begins to miss the security of his home - and his attitude to those with whom he interacts is highly affected by this sense of loss. He seems insolent and ungrateful: "I will never thank you", he declares to Muzzlehatch. (TA, 27)

The attitudes towards each other of the various characters in Titus Alone are largely unsympathetic. Relationships tend to be formed through desperation rather than genuine gregariousness. Muzzlehatch himself, who is later (and perhaps rather inappropriately) to develop into an heroic figure, is at the outset presented as an anarchist: acknowledging the fact that the world he lives in offers only material comforts, he expects, and gives, little in the way of emotional encouragement: "Don't burden me with gratitude, dear boy", he tells Titus. (TA, 27) The three inhabitants of the Under-River, Crabcalf, Slingshott and Carrow, despite their apparent social bond, cling together only to stave off the despair engendered by their sense of failure and the miserable conditions of their environment. Crabcalf voices their individual fears, when he admits, "I wouldn't care to live *alone* in this place" (TA, 116) Cheeta, of course, is incapable of love: she is "as slick as a needle", has "ice in her heart". In fact, emphasizing the sense of disengagement, she is described as "remote". (TA, 199) The only character apparently capable of any kind of emotional attachment is Juno - as is acknowledged by the fact that she

finds, in *Anchor*, a means of deliverance from isolation. However, she again is too desperate: she clings to Titus so wholeheartedly that he is overwhelmed and seeks to escape, saying: “You give me too much. It makes me ill.” (*TA*, 100) In this case, it is Titus’s sense of confusion - a result of his psychologically damaging childhood - which causes him to withdraw from emotional commitment.

As we experience the world of *Titus Alone* through the disillusioned eyes of the protagonist, it is unsurprising that we are disillusioned ourselves. All that is objectively depressing about this dystopia is made even more so by the subjective experience of Titus. Sharing, as it were, his past, we are as lost as he is - and as a result, our response to this unfamiliar environment is to reject it. At the same time, we also recognise it as an allegory of our own modern world; and these two factors work to foreground real experience - and conversely, divorce us, emotionally, from the fictional universe. The loyalties we developed to the characters and world of the first two novels remain only in the form of nostalgia; equivalent levels of emotional interest cannot be generated within this new, colder world.

Again, the role of parody is significant in initiating this process. Peake’s use of the parodic is not confined to *Titus Alone*: I have discussed the significance of parody with regard to the functions of the Prunesquallors, for example, in chapter 6. However, there is in the third novel a distinct cynicism, in sharp contrast to what is, in *Gormenghast*, a much more affectionate, or tolerant, satirical presentation of social behaviour. This emphasises the fact that *Gormenghast* is essentially a comic work, and *Titus Alone* an ironic presentation. The distinction between the broadly comic parodying of social aspiration in the sub-plot of the second novel and that of the cynical depiction of social hypocrisy in the third re-emphasises Peake’s ambiguous position in relation to the different traditions of English literary fiction. In the former, the satire is liberal and generally optimistic, recalling Defoe, Fielding and Dickens; in the latter, it is pessimistic,

closer to Wells, the Huxley of Point Counter Point and Brave New World, and the dystopias of Orwell - in other words, parody which reflects a more sceptical, modern sensibility.

The essential differences of presentation obviously engender different attitudes on the part of the reader. We recoil from a dystopia - especially if it can be closely identified with our own experience (as in Nineteen Eighty-Four), as well as with a possible future. On the contrary, we draw comfort from, and are consequently drawn towards, those fictions which represent an ultimately optimistic view of society - again, particularly when we closely associate it with our own condition. Though the social cohesion that exists within Gormenghast is in an atrophied state, it nevertheless offers a more hopeful prognosis than that envisaged in Titus Alone.

The principal effect, then, of replacing Gormenghast with a colder, more fragmented depiction of the human condition, is two-fold. Firstly, we share Titus's misgivings about the new environment, and remember with increasing fondness the relatively secure world of the past, despite its obvious failings. Secondly, we are unwilling, or even unable, to enter into the usual contract that develops between the created world and observing audience. Our capacity or willingness, to suspend our disbelief, is undermined; we remain, therefore, closer to our own reality.

Significantly, this scepticism (or inability) is echoed by that of many of the characters in Titus Alone. The sentiments of the poet attending Lady Cusp-Canine's party indicate an anti-romantic sensibility: "This is no place for maudlin-headed fays / to smirk behind their mushrooms!" (TA, 41)

Such a comment, despite its pretentiousness, is essentially a truism here. Gormenghast, the memory that is "something half real; something half dream" (TA, 10), is inadmissible. Juno, the arch-romantic, believes in Titus because, battered and bruised as she is, she is desperate to believe in anything extraordinary. The court cannot believe Titus because it requires empirical

evidence to substantiate his story. Even Muzzlehatch calls it “your so-called Gormenghast” (TA, 144) - though he has the wisdom and insight to understand the significance of the place, “to prove the boy was not a madman.” (TA, 158) Finally, Titus is almost deranged by Cheeta’s elaborate attempt to prove that Gormenghast does not exist and therefore deprive him of his identity. On many levels, therefore, Titus Alone fictionalises - and idealises - Gormenghast.

During this discussion, I have indicated the extent to which Peake moves from a romantic to an ironic position by superimposing a world which we recognise as resembling our own more closely than the arcane universe of Gormenghast. However, this is not to say that Titus Alone is more realistic. As I have suggested above (pp.210ff.), the fuller and more complex development of the characters in the first two novels makes Gormenghast a ‘realer’ world than that of the City and the Under-River, with its largely two-dimensional, symbolic figures, and its clear allusions to mythical states of existence. What is significant is that the prevalence of irony in the third novel, restricting the extent to which the reader is able to identify with its world, also maintains a level of self-awareness on the part of the reader as to its fictionality. Consequently, it is possible to see Titus Alone as a form of reflexive fiction (or metafiction), in which, by highlighting the fictionality of the world of Gormenghast, Peake is also encouraging contemplation of the third novel as a fiction.

According to Frye’s theory of modes, the ironic mythos is that in which society is most able to understand its condition. Through honest appraisal of human behaviour, in which man’s existence is considered from a disengaged position, the ironic perspective reveals what is most absurd, ridiculous or tragic about life. Yet it is also acknowledged that such insight is ephemeral - and that this is a fundamental part of the human condition. Through experience, often painful, we come as individuals to understand a little of what we are; then, being what we are, such self-consciousness becomes submerged once more, as life retakes control. At the end of Titus Alone.

Peake presents his vision of this paradox in a sequence of epiphanic moments, using a variety of appropriate techniques - the modern dynamic of which I have described above (see pp.197-200). Firstly, in the moment of stillness following Muzzlehatch's death, the reader is drawn back from the scene, by shifting from Titus's view of the scene to that of the owl, looking down from above. Thus released from the emotion of the episode, the Black House is stripped of its dramatic power.

With the next device, in which Titus and Juno are taken up and away by Anchor's flying ship, the scene recedes further:

From time to time, as they sped through the upper atmosphere, and while the world unveiled itself, ocean by ocean, city by city, it seemed that the earth wandered through his skull... a cosmos in the bone; a universe lit by a hundred lights and thronged by shapes and shadows; alive with endless threads of circumstance... action and event. All futility: disordered; with no end and no beginning. (TA, 258)

This is approaching an absurdist notion of existence. Yet, implicit within it is also the fact that the cycle of life does move inexorably on - and anticipates the fact that, sooner or later, Titus will find Gormenghast again.

This, of course, he does; but he cannot return to it - as I have already determined. Life follows a cyclical pattern; but it is also progressional. When he hears the gun booming for him, he knows he has to turn away and move on. Thus the quest which took him away from his home has brought him back to it, not in the romantic sense of a quest fulfilled, but with an ironic awareness. What lies beyond the hill may still be a crumbling ruin; and he cannot alter that fact by returning there. His experience, however, has taught him that Gormenghast is undoubtedly a part of him - and fixed in his mind, its degeneration is halted. In a moment of insight which

is fundamentally ironic, the quester realises that his ailing kingdom must be lost, in order that he can rejuvenate it.

Through the process of disengagement I have asserted as being central to the function of Titus Alone, the reader is able to achieve an awareness of the dialectic between fiction and reality that Peake sustains. In leaving Gormenghast, we gain an awareness of its fictionality which was not available as long as it remained universal - despite Peake's ambivalent, half-ironic presentation of it. Whatever Peake's conscious intentions regarding the function of the third novel, it is interesting to reflect that the process he describes in the Titus novels can be read as an unconscious attempt to make sense of his own experience over the two decades in which he wrote them. Undoubtedly, any assertion that Peake sought in his writing to come to terms with his development as an individual would be extremely tenuous - and in fact should be resisted. However, in his equivocal attitude to art, as described by Batchelor⁹, Peake reveals that his fiction inevitably draws from empirical as well as emotional impressions. As I intend to show in the next, and final, chapter of this thesis, there is much to suggest that the Titus novels can be seen as an attempt to make sense of Peake's own experience of the war and its aftermath - and what he felt its deeper implications were for the human condition.

Notes.

1. Batchelor, 57.
2. Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, 152.
3. Evident, for example, in his reaction to Fuchsia (TG, 180).
4. Eliot, in 'Tradition and the individual talent' (1919) suggests that "the progress of an artist" involves "a continual extinction of personality". Cited in Selected Prose, 26.
 Stephen Dedalus, in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, states that "The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails." The Essential James Joyce, ed. Harry Levin (London: Panther - Granada, 1977), 336.
5. Selected Prose, 26.
6. *Ibid*, 27.
7. Batchelor states that "in part, Titus Alone can be seen as a comprehensive picaresque parody of the human condition." (Batchelor, 114). For Frye's discussion of the role of the picaresque, see Anatomy of Criticism, 223ff.
8. Jorge Luis Borges, 'Borges and I', Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings, eds. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (London: Penguin, 1970), 282-3.
9. Batchelor, 55-62.

16. **“Who can tell... to what dishonour all adventure leads?”**

The Titus novels as an interpretation of war.

So at all quays and crossroads: who can tell,
 O places of decision and farewell,
 To what dishonour all adventure leads,
 What parting gift could give that friend protection,
 So orientated, his salvation needs
 The Bad Lands and the sinister direction?

(W.H. Auden, ‘The Quest’¹)

Mervyn Peake’s involvement in the Second World War has been well documented.² In the spring of 1940 he was drafted; he spent the next two and a half years being trained in various regiments around the country, largely separated from his wife and infant sons; and he was briefly admitted to a psychiatric unit at Southport Hospital in 1942. He was finally invalided out of the army the following year, and became a war artist for the Ministry of Information.

Throughout the war, he continued drawing and writing. A number of poems from the early years of the conflict capture effectively and with great immediacy the painful sense of disruption that the war - particularly the period of the blitz - had imposed on the civilian English population. His drawings and illustrations, in particular those done for Chatto and Windus for an edition of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner³, also reflect vividly Peake’s vision of a world that had apparently descended into chaos.

Such interpretations of the conflict were an important part of Peake’s creative development. However, these poetic and visual sketches were, by their very immediacy, intensely personal and

subjective impressions of war:

The limbs my mother bore me know the wrench
 That shapes them to the square machine of war.
 My feet smash gravel and I abhor
 The butt-plate of the rifle that I clench. (From 'Fort Darland')

If not within the slow limbs of that oak tree,
 If not within the uplands or the furrow,
 Where has lost sanity a resting place
 These days. For she has left these habitations
 Built in God's image. (From 'May 1940'⁴)

An event of such fundamental disruption demands of the artist not only the immediate, impulsive response; it also requires a more distanced and objective consideration of the wider implications of the wider effects upon, and significance for, society.

Between 1940 and 1945, under the most stressful and disordered conditions, Peake wrote Titus Groan. The early drafts of the first chapters were written in the autumn of 1940, while he was undergoing initial training at Dartford, in a series of publisher's dummy books, which he sent home one at a time to his wife. Amid such chaotic surroundings, it is unsurprising that Peake's presentation of the society of Gormenghast took the form it did. As we have seen, the author builds up a fragmented picture of a world whose inhabitants live in uneasy isolation, in an atmosphere which generates extreme psychological pressure. This dark urban environment (I have described it as a metropolis (chapter 3)), created as it was against the background of tension that pervaded the domestic scene in the 'phoney war' period of 1940⁵, as well as in the light of Peake's personal predicament, emphasises the fact that Peake, in writing Titus Groan,

was defining in his own terms what the early period of the war meant to him.

David Punter has described the Titus novels as “a partly traumatised attempt to deal with the war itself and with the issues of social organisation associated with it”⁶. This is true: the sudden changes precipitated upon Gormenghast’s ancient society have both an immediate effect and more fundamental implications - just as the war was to prove cataclysmic, not only to those who experienced it directly, but also to the nature of British society in general. At the time, though commentators were “partly traumatised”, they were also partly aware of the wide reaching significances of the war. In March 1941, the writer John Lehmann expressed a growing sense of purpose as regards the function of literature:

Everywhere, it is already apparent, a new consciousness is stirring, both among those who have joined the armed forces and those who are still in so-called civilian life; a consciousness that, not merely as a matter of self-preservation for the moment, but also in order to equip ourselves for a far more strenuous future when the results will be far worse if we do not avoid the dismal, sleep-walking mistakes of the past, the old ways of life and the old slogans will have to be scrapped. And in this new consciousness creative writers will have an important part to play. Their part is not to exhort, not to string patriotic jingles together, but to transmit the truth as all the fine instruments of their imagination discover it.⁷

This sense of purpose was shared by Peake, despite his dislike of the army. He had, back in 1939, applied (albeit unsuccessfully) for a commission as a war artist, securing the support of the artist Augustus John. Much of his poetry of this period, although emphasising his horror at the idea of war, also supports the assertion that, though confused, he was aware of the role he must strive to undertake: “I am, no less than Albion, at war - / For while she struggles I must force my way / Into a land where sharper shadows are.”⁸ The “land” of “sharper shadows” is

Gormenghast, at once an arcane, alien place and an amalgam of Peake's experience, memories and understanding of "Albion".

This would suggest that Titus Groan was created out of a need to escape the pressures of reality. However, while it is undoubted that Gormenghast was to loom large in Peake's imagination for many years, I do not believe it was simply an attempt to evade the reality of events. When a writer is indulging in nostalgia, he is not avoiding the present: he is commenting on the fact that he finds present developments unpalatable. Peake is not primarily nostalgic - he is rather too ironic; but his concentration on the stability and certainty of the past emphasises the comparative instability of the period he was living through.

Peake, then, chooses to emphasise the stability of the past (despite its degenerated and somewhat absurd state) so as to underline the sense of confusion and uncertainty that prevailed during the war. Published in 1946, Titus Groan was part of a development in English fiction that was to continue to be prominent for a considerable number of years. Bernard Bergonzi sees this trend as a "desire to escape the present by looking back to the era before the First World War" - and not only as an attempt to avoid the present, but also in order to try to determine the way which society was going.⁹ This, in fact, is not only the focus of the first novel, but of all three. The first two novels present an oblique image of the past; and the third, Titus Alone, provides a dystopian vision of the darker possibilities for civilisation in the future, seen in what we might consider as cosmic (or as I have suggested in chapter 12 above, mythic) terms. The effect of the war on Peake's imagination, far from being the eccentric response many readers of his work may conclude, can therefore be seen as reflecting the prevalent mood of English writers both during and after the war. If we consider the stark message of Golding's Lord of the Flies (1954), in which "Ralph wept for the end of innocence" and "the darkness of man's heart"¹⁰, or the deep concerns for society explored in Anthony Burgess's novels of the 1960s, it is clear that Peake's

profound unease was shared as well as intensely private.

I have asserted that Peake is not fundamentally a nostalgic writer - that he is too ironic. The novels also resist a nostalgic interpretation in that, from the beginning, he is not solely concerned with presenting a vision of the past. Titus Groan is suffused with a sense of foreboding - as one would expect in a fundamentally tragic work (see pp.232ff. above); and this portentous mood is given intense dramatic power if interpreted as a representation of conflict. I shall now examine a number of aspects of Titus Groan which I believe represent both individual and general responses to, and effects of, the Second World War.

For British society, the Second World War was an unprecedented calamity. The Great War that many people recollected had seen atrocity on a massive and wholly unexpected scale; yet, for all its horrors, it was still kept largely at a distance. Every family was touched by the huge scale of casualties; but the nation itself, separated from the theatre of conflict by twenty miles of sea (which Bleriot had crossed only a few years earlier), was relatively safe, as it had been for many hundreds of years, from the threat of invasion. In the twenty years since then, however, things had changed. Technology had advanced rapidly: looking on as the German Luftwaffe bombed Guernica in 1937, British observers were forced to acknowledge that the Channel was no longer a sufficient deterrent to hostile forces. When the war broke out, and the German divisions swept through the Low Countries and into France, the feeling of insecurity grew: London, in particular, braced itself for the attack that was surely to come.

Gormenghast, for centuries secure in its perpetual isolation, is also, and suddenly, under threat. Steerpike, an upstart kitchen hand, has slipped into the shadows and disappeared. In such a vast and shadowy edifice, this event seems unimportant (which is why it is allowed to happen); but Mr Flay, guardian of the old order, is nevertheless uneasy. Lying awake outside his master's door, his thoughts are filled, not only with the loathing for his enemy Swelter, but

also with a vague sense of foreboding about the boy:

[H]is mind would lure him into the empty room where he had last seen Steerpike and in his imagination he would make a circuit of the walls, feeling the panels with his hands and come at last to the window, where he would stare down the hundreds of feet of sheer wall to the yard below. (TG, 126)

Steerpike's ingenuity in escaping his confinement, by climbing up to the vast roofscape of Gormenghast, and thence to Fuchsia's window, is clearly a threat to the collective, moribund consciousness of the castle and its society; and in his entry into Fuchsia's world, we are witnessing the first claim of an impostor to the power of the state.

Throughout these scenes, Steerpike is presented as an aggressive intruder. Though physically debilitated by his climb, his future dominance of Fuchsia is foreshadowed (as I have suggested above) in the symbolic biting of the pear she has left in the attic:

He put out his hand and secured one of the wrinkled pears. Lifting it to his mouth he noticed that a bite had already been taken from its side.

Making use of the miniature and fluted precipice of hard, white discoloured flesh, where Fuchsia's teeth had left their grooves, he bit greedily, his top teeth severing the wrinkled skin of the pear, and the teeth of his lower jaw entering the pale cliff about halfway up its face; they met in the secret and dark centre of the fruit - in that abactinal region where, since the petals of the pear flower had been scattered in some far June breeze, a stealthy and profound maturing had progressed by day and night. (TG, 150-1)

This overtly sexual image, with its connotations of aggressive dominance, as well as allusion to Biblical symbolism, anticipates the profound sense of shock, tantamount in fact to rape, that is experienced by Fuchsia when she discovers the intruder in her most secret sanctuary:

For the first few moments Fuchsia had remained inert, her spirit dead to what she saw before her. As with those who on hearing of the death of their lover are numb to the agony that must later wrack them, so she for those first few moments stood incomprehensive and stared with empty eyes.

Then, indeed, was her mind split into differing passions, the paramount being agony that her secret had been discovered - her casket of wonder rifled - her soul, it seemed, thrown naked to a world that could never understand. (TG, 153-4)

Adam Piette, in his recent publication Imagination at War¹¹, describes how the central achievement of writers during the Second World War was to testify to “the war’s power to displace and unsettle”; and that their work was to document the conflict’s “violent dismantling of ordinary ideas of home and private life.”¹² Clearly, Fuchsia’s shock and sense of injustice in the face of Steerpike’s intrusion can be interpreted thus; though our “ordinary ideas of home and private life” may not instantly be identified within the strange world of Gormenghast, it is, to Fuchsia, home - and a home which she never conceived as being under any threat.

The fact that Steerpike is thenceforward allowed to make such rapid progress in his quest for power emphasises the psychological insecurity, indeed obsolescence, of the society of the castle. Such insecurity was a prominent effect of a war which threatened the lives, not only of those who fought, but also of the civilian population. For almost a year, this population waited nervously for invasion. Cyril Connolly described the psychological effects of this situation on the writing fraternity, in an article for the New Statesman in October 1939:

As human beings artists are less free now than they have ever been; it is difficult for them to make money and impossible for them to leave the country. Lock-up is earlier every day, and they are concentrated indefinitely on an island from which the sun is hourly receding. As human beings they are no longer emotionally free,

for the infection of war induces mental symptoms which indicate the discomforts and torments to follow.¹³

Within Gormenghast, a similar sense of growing uncertainty and mental anguish is witnessed. Though Titus Groan presents a static world, it is a world existing under great pressure. As David Punter remarks, “the whole fabric is so intricately knotted together, and has been for so long, that the minutest tremor would precipitate a landslide.”¹⁴

That “landslide”, instigated by Steerpike, is the fire in the Library. As the repository of Gormenghast’s history, it is the embodiment of the past, and the basis, in physical terms, of the perpetuation of tradition. Its destruction, therefore, is cataclysmic. Sourdust, the ancient Keeper of the Groan Lore, dies in the fire; Sepulchrove, whose natural environment is the library (see pp.56 and 71 above), witnesses the destruction of his world and is driven insane; Irma, despite her best intentions, loses control:

... at the final moment she forgot all she had learnt about decorum and about how to be a lady, and clenching her hands at her thighs she had stood on tiptoe and screamed from her swanlike throat with an effect calculated to freeze the blood of a macaw. (TG, 311)

Such reaction is inevitable in the acutely repressed psychological state of the inhabitants of Gormenghast; but it is also an indication of Peake’s concerns for his own society. One must conclude that, in Peake’s estimation, the psychological effects of the war were all the more traumatic for a society whose complacency had not equipped it to deal with the accelerating and far-reaching developments of modern life.

The obvious parallel to the fire in the Library of Gormenghast is the Blitz. On 7th September 1940, German planes appeared in the skies over London, and began to bomb the docks. There were almost 500 civilian casualties¹⁵; the attack on Britain, expected for so long, had finally

begun. Adam Piette asserts that the Blitz, directly experienced by Peake, was the source for the climactic event in Titus Groan: “Peake had himself witnessed the Blitz at first hand in his capacity as a gunner with a Light Anti-Aircraft regiment based on the Isle of Sheppey, in July and August 1940.”¹⁶ These raids, of course, pre-dated the “official” start to the Blitz of the city; but the same sense of personal as well as communal invasion, described in often apocalyptic terms by observers of the ‘main event’ (David Gascoyne’s poem ‘Inferno’ saw in it “Bottomless depths of roaring emptiness”¹⁷), is revealed in Peake’s writing - not only in Titus Groan, but also in his poetry.¹⁸

Piette suggests two interesting historical parallels to the burning of the Library which emphasise its symbolic relevance. The first is the allusion to the burning of Jewish and Marxist books in Berlin in June of 1933 - an event which had great significance in the minds of intellectuals at the time.¹⁹ The second, much more personal crisis was directly caused by the Blitz in 1940, when a fire destroyed the entire stock of Peake’s book, Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor.²⁰ Though Piette, in his subsequent analysis of Steerpike, goes further than I would wish to in associating him with the Nazi architect Albert Speer²¹, I believe the inspiration for the burning of the Library of the Groans is indeed founded on these two historical events.

In terms of the movement of the first two novels, the fire, despite its far reaching effects, is only a prelude to the cataclysm that lies ahead. At the end of Titus Groan, Peake looks forward to Gormenghast with great foreboding: “There would be tears and there would be strange laughter. Fierce births and deaths beneath umbrageous ceilings. And dreams, and violence, and disenchantment.” (TG, 505) The disastrous consequences of the fire are yet to be fully realised; but we are in no doubt that the old regime is crumbling, and the new one waiting to take its place. As the war drew on, people were becoming increasingly aware, not only of the possible consequences of defeat, but also of the wider implications for civilisation whatever the outcome.

In Gormenghast, the already oppressive atmosphere becomes ever more stifling, as Peake gives voice to this deep concern. As David Punter remarks, “the mental twistings of the more enlightened characters” can be seen as “... the twistings of Peake’s own consciousness as he wrestles with two simultaneous fears... the deadly embrace of the past, and... what progress might entail in a world which has accepted the possibility of total war.”²²

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In its tragic structure, the first novel has the effect of isolating individuals, putting them under great psychological strain. The ceremonies which bring them together serve only to highlight their situation as a dysfunctional social group. Yet the Blitz, and the whole immediacy of the dangers of war, also thrust people together. This upsurge in communal feeling was not only the sense of camaraderie that we have subsequently come to eulogise as ‘the spirit of the Blitz’; it was simply borne out of fear - as Elizabeth Bowen describes in her wartime novel The Heat of the Day, fear of dying anonymously:

[A]mong the crowds still eating, drinking, working, travelling, halting, there began to be an instinctive movement to break down indifference while there was still time. The wall between the living and the living became less solid as the wall between the living and the dead thinned. In that September transparency people became transparent, only to be located by the just darker flicker of their hearts. Strangers saying ‘Good night, good luck’, to each other at street corners as the sky first blanched then faded with evening, each hoped not to die that night, still more not to die unknown.²³

This dual sense of private fear and communal spirit is explored by Peake in the second novel,

Gormenghast. The dominance of the comic mode in Gormenghast is emphasised by the (albeit temporary) sense of unity engendered, ironically, by Steerpike. While his purposes remain concealed (as is the case in Titus Groan), he has a strong psychological advantage over his adversaries. However, from the beginning of the second novel, there is a shift in the balance of this opposition, initiated primarily by Countess Gertrude. After so many years of inaction and intellectual lassitude, she turns out to possess the sharpness, resourcefulness and, above all, moral determination of a war leader. One might posit a suggestion that she and her (now missing) husband recall the difference in character of Churchill and Chamberlain. What is undoubted, though, is the fact that, once roused, she has an unshakeable resolve and is determined to eliminate the threat to her society.

The reason for this sudden awakening of spirit is simply that, in Steerpike, she has something to focus on. Warfare polarizes values and emotions, so it becomes easier for individuals to identify what they are opposed to. Gertrude, who (like everyone else) was unaware of the true extent of the malaise that is afflicting the castle, is now able to perceive the existence of an heretic. Her simple remedy, therefore, for the castle's illness, is to kill the heretic. The effect of this is to bring the community of the castle together - which also serves to bring the disparate strands of the plot, in the first novel so apparently haphazard, into a single main plot (offset, of course, by the sub-plot of the Professors and Irma). Steerpike's increasingly murderous actions engender fear among the inhabitants; but they draw ever closer behind the solid purpose of the Countess, and are accordingly imbued with a common sense of purpose. Such accord in the face of crisis, Bernard Bergonzi point out, is the social effect most readily associated with a state of war. "Darkness, loneliness and displacement were only one aspect of the wartime condition... Isolation and the threat of violent death were to some extent balanced by a sense of community."²⁴ In Gormenghast, the castle's inhabitants must first endure a period of siege.

Given the shadowy and seemingly limitless extent of Gormenghast, and the psychological tensions that pervades its society, this is most effective; and it is made still more intense by the fact that the castle is entirely cut off by snow. It becomes a focus for the stricken wildlife of the region, “surrounded by the dead and the dying” (GG, 294); under Gertrude’s guidance, it becomes a refuge for the dead and injured animals - a semi-parodic military hospital.

Finally, Steerpike is forced to show his hand. The response is swift and determined:

Leaders were to be chosen. Weapons were to be served out. The castle was to be placed on a war footing. A curfew was to be imposed, and wherever he might be lurking, from vault to eyrie, the murderer was to have no respite from the sound of feet and the light of torches. (GG, 389)

With the thawing of the snow around the castle, Gormenghast is now subject to a great flood. As the water rises, the edifice is marooned; furthermore, as each level becomes uninhabitable, and people and belongings moved upwards, the size of the place is reduced. This device serves to force Steerpike into more and more desperate straits, restricting his movements and denying him access to large areas of the castle; but it also enhances the similarity between Gormenghast and the besieged London of the war. On their return to the castle after witnessing the death of the Thing, for example, Titus and Fuchsia find themselves in the middle of chaos:

As they climbed they became aware, even before they had reached the stairhead of the first of the spreading storeys, that a great change had come about. For looking up they saw, out-topping the stone banisters, high piles of books and furniture, of hangings and crockery, of crate on crate of smaller objects, of carpets and swords, so that the landing was like a great warehouse or emporium.

And lying across tables, or slouched over chairs, in every kind of attitude of fatigue were numbers of exhausted men. There were few lanterns still alight, but

no one seemed awake, and nothing moved. (GG, 428)

This clearly recalls the descriptions of London during the Blitz. Henry Moore, whose sketches of the 'Tube shelters' provide such dramatic and enduring images of the civilian war, made preliminary notes for his drawings, which are remarkably similar to the above:

Figures showing faces lit up - rest of bodies in silhouette.

Figures lying against platform with great bales of paper above also making beds.

Perambulators with bundles.

Dramatic, dismal lit, masses of reclining figures fading to perspective point

- scribbles and scratches, chaotic foreground. Chains hanging from old

crane. Sick woman in bathchair. Bearded Jews blanketed sleeping in deck

chairs...

... Muck & rubbish and chaotic untidiness around.²⁵

This squalid scene is also similar to that of the Under-River in Titus Alone (see below); and clearly, such graphic representations of the disruption the war caused to civilian life had a great effect on Peake as an artist. In fact, the stark drawings for his long poem The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb, which dramatically illustrate the havoc caused by those weapons in the last two years of the war, were drawn in 1960, and constitute the last work he was able to complete. Obviously, the experience of the attacks on London was to stay with Peake for the rest of his life.²⁶

This disruption creates, in Gormenghast, just as in wartime Britain, a heightened sense of community. Under such psychological pressure, this social interaction is vital: the trauma engendered by such violence is, by necessity, delayed, suppressed. When a community is made aware that its survival is under threat, its communal urge to survive overrides the private needs of individuals. Though to suggest that the 'spirit of the Blitz' is what enabled Britain to succeed

is to oversimplify the argument, it is nevertheless undoubted that such tenacity and endurance was in large part due to this heightened communal awareness. Ironically, Steerpike's ambitions elicit an awakening of a shared consciousness, the continued dormancy of which was vital for those ambitions to be achieved.

One interesting effect of the flood is that even the Carvers are forced to move into the castle. Fiercely independent, they are resentful of this tacit acknowledgement of their dependency; yet their presence is important: though the degenerated society of Gormenghast seems to have forgotten the true significance of the Carvers as artists, it is understood that they are an integral part of the castle's civilisation. The Countess, hearing that they have taken to building boats, accepts their actions without question. She recognises that the Carvers' artistic endeavour has a symbolic significance: it represents the continuity of culture. As people realised the consequences that the Second World War could have for civilisation, the preservation of art was seen as vitally important; and, just as the Carvers, denied their natural medium, find an outlet for their creativity in carving ornate boats, so Britain's artists (Peake as much as Henry Moore) addressed themselves to the very conditions they found themselves in. As Bernard Bergonzi remarks of Joyce Cary's 1944 novel, The Horse's Mouth: "civilisation may be destroyed but the spirit that produces art endures in spite of everything."²⁷

Art endures; but Gormenghast cannot. Its society has risen up to defend itself; but its champion, Titus Groan, knows that such communal behaviour is no longer natural to this deeply divided, alienated world. The flood and the hunt for Steerpike has not reaffirmed the necessity of continuity; it has simply shown that an intransigent regime cannot exist in perpetuity. After a millenium of stasis it has, in a generation, produced a dangerous heretic and an unwilling heir. The battle now being won, the society of Gormenghast must now come to terms with the reasons why that battle occurred. Poets like Roy Fuller saw the new dangers:

'During a Bombardment by V-Weapons.'

The little noises of the house:

Drippings between the slates and ceiling;

From the electric fire's cooling

Tickings; the dry feet of a mouse:

These at the ending of a war

Have power to alarm me more

Than the ridiculous detonations

Outside the gently coughing curtains.

And, love, I see your pallor bears

A far more pointed threat than steel.

Now all the permanent and real

Furies are settling in upstairs.²⁸

Once Steerpike is dead, the delayed trauma descends on the inhabitants of the castle. A calm numbness spreads throughout Gormenghast: the struggle of the recent past contrasts with both the ancient order and a gentler future:

It was as though all that had happened over the last decade, all the violence, the intrigue, the passion, the love, the hate and the fear had need of rest and that now, with Steerpike dead, the castle was able at last to close its eyes for a while and

enjoy the listlessness of convalescence. (GG, 503)

The lessons of crisis appear to have been learned: the cleaning-up operation, a massive and appalling process, preserves the sense of community, at least in the immediate aftermath. The inhabitants of the castle work towards a shared goal: the restoration of their ancient home: “And there, while the work proceeded, ever towards one end, that part of Gormenghast that was made of flesh and blood lived cheek by jowl.” (GG, 504) This scene, which clearly recalls the austere post-war period, allows our attention, which has been concentrated on the dramatic immediacy of the hunt for Steerpike, to be refocused on the wider implications of the changes that have taken place - just as in the late 1940s commentators began to reflect on the significance of the Second World War. Gormenghast was written between 1946 and 1949, while Peake and his family were living on the island of Sark; and the isolated tranquillity of such circumstances, broken by infrequent visits to London, allowed both for a more considered reflection of the effects of the war, and for a distanced observation of the adjustments in society that were continuing in the ‘convalescence’ of peacetime.

In a telling comment on the role of the artist in this changing world, the Poet of Gormenghast becomes the Master of Ritual. The romantic sensibilities of Peake as an artist appear to inform this choice, as the Poet, gripped with nostalgic notions of the importance of heritage and continuity, grapples with the significance of the ancient laws “as though he were for ever turning over some fresh and absorbing variant of the problem of Ceremony and the human element.” (GG, 505) Yet, as always, there is a certain ambivalence here: the Poet’s dilemmas are based on a tacit understanding that the artistic tradition is only relevant to the present if it assimilates contemporary experience. Despite the Poet’s acknowledgement of this fact, however, Gormenghast is an intransigent world; and Titus’s immediate departure is testimony to its redundancy.

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The 1950s saw a period of reaction in English society. The Labour government which had won a landslide victory in 1945, and in which the country had invested so much hope for the future, had not satisfied demands. Continued domestic austerity allied with nervousness about the international situation bred nostalgia for the pre-war period. In 1951, the Conservatives, under Churchill's paternal leadership, returned to power.

Mervyn Peake's own life was taking an unfortunate turn at this time. He had written a stage-play, The Wit to Woo, and the difficulties he was experiencing in finding anyone to produce it were a source of great disappointment. Maeve Gilmore remarks that, between 1951 and 1956, "he illustrated only five books"²⁹ - in sharp contrast to the productive late 'forties. The growing signs of illness were also causing concern. Titus Alone, which he wrote, uncharacteristically in solitude³⁰, between 1954 and 1955, naturally reflects his fears for the future, and also suggests a nostalgic sense of loss, which was typical of English fiction of the period. Bernard Bergonzi sees this as a result of the cultural crisis faced by England after the war, as it struggled to accept its declining position as a world power.³¹ In Peake's case, it can also be suggested that he was trying to come to terms with his own situation.

Undoubtedly, Titus Alone can be read as a post-holocaust warning of the degeneration of the human condition. The alienation of individuals is more complete, the emotions more deeply suppressed, the ability to harm or kill more refined, than was the case in Gormenghast. Steerpike's cunning seems, in retrospect, lacking in sophistication. His craving for power, however dangerous, was at least human. The oppressors in Titus Alone - Veil and Cheeta, in particular - are dehumanised, amoral. Furthermore, there hangs over this world the threat of total annihilation, the ultimate goal of the scientists who work "like drones, to the glory of

science and in praise of death.” (TA, 159) This sentiment recalls the late stages of the Second World War, when it became clear, according to Paul Fussell, that “the total wars of modern history gave the decision to the side with the biggest factories.”³²

The victims of this society look back wistfully to better times. The dwellers in the Under-River talk of their pasts - in Carrow’s case, an idyllic picture of home: “Home is a room dappled with firelight: there are pictures and books. And when the rain sighs, and the acorns fall, there are patterns of leaves against the drawn curtains. Home is where I was safe. Home is what I fled from.” (TA, 116)

That it was necessary to flee from this place of safety suggests a deep-seated sense of guilt. Interestingly, Adam Piette has made the same point about British culture, suggesting it harbours “some obscure guilt... about its own isolation from the real horrors of the war between 1939 and 1945.” He goes on to say: “That guilt complex is a force of intense power within present-day British thinking about its past.”³³ As I have suggested, the war at home had its own domestic horrors; but I feel that there is a degree of truth in Piette’s statement. This is emphasised in Titus Alone by the introduction of Black Rose, “the ghost of unbearable disillusion”. (TA, 128) Peake had visited the concentration camps at the end of the war, and his witnessing the death of one of the inmates of Belsen is the direct source for this most desperate of figures. One might assert that Peake (who, from 1943, had not been able to take an active part in the war), experiencing such horror, would have felt the burden of guilt that Piette refers to, in a very personal way. The poem ‘The Consumptive, Belsen 1945’ indeed illustrates Peake’s sense of helplessness:

If seeing her an hour before her last
 Weak cough into all blackness I could yet
 Be held by chalk-white walls, and by the great
 Ash-coloured bed,

And the pillows hardly creased
 By the tapping of her little cough-jerked head -
 If such can be a painter's ecstasy,
 (Her limbs like pipes, her head a china skull)
 Then where is mercy?
 And what
 Is this my traffic?³⁴

This sense of helplessness is transferred into Titus's inability to liberate Black Rose from her captor, Veil. The protagonist is, as I have suggested above, largely powerless once he leaves Gormenghast; and it is left to Muzzlehatch, Juno and others to defend him from the malign forces ranged against him.

The negative states that prevail in Titus Alone - anarchy, technocracy, displacement and alienation - emphasise the fact that Peake's artistic response to the uneasy international situation of the early and middle fifties was wholly in keeping with developments in British literature as a whole. From the experiences of the Second World War, he drew a dark picture of the worsening state of civilisation. The Under-River, in particular, represents a nightmarish vision, yet one which all who had lived through the conflict would undoubtedly recognise. Vera Brittain, for example, saw the same dehumanising effect of the war on the city of London:

Today it is raining, and wounded London looks shabby and sad. Her spirit is unbroken, but her elegance and comfort are gone. Some parts of the city have temporarily lost the ordinary facilities of civilized living; there are rumours of shelter epidemics... Far down the river, a broken sewer pours into the Thames; its putrid odour is blown by the wind as far west as the Strand... Soon, I reflect, London's poorer population, like melancholy troglodytes, will spend its whole

life in the Underground.³⁵

The implications for humanity of this image, and those even more catastrophic visions of the holocaust and Hiroshima that were yet to come, have cast a long shadow. In 1954 (the year Peake began writing Titus Alone), Golding hugged the conch to him as he peered into hell.³⁶ The threats both of the breakdown of society and of nuclear destruction continues to absorb the imagination of writers even now.

However, such dystopian visions have not yet been realised. Some may argue otherwise; but the fact that writers continue the debate is in itself proof that civilisation is not lost. At the end of Titus Alone, the veterans of the Under-River have escaped; Veil is destroyed; Juno has found salvation, in the form of Anchor, who enables her to consign the past to memory; Muzzlehatch has destroyed the Scientist's factory; and Titus has discovered the true value of Gormenghast. By the time the third novel was published, the world was a different place from that of the early 'forties, when Peake had begun writing Titus Alone. The pre-war period had receded into history; and the intervening years had allowed a fuller understanding of the nature and necessity of its passing. Titus has lived, as did his creator, through an age of change; his responsibility - and ultimately, his triumph - is to come to terms with that change.

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'Something of a holocaust, ain't it,' he whispered. 'God bless you and your Gormenghast, my boy.' (TA, 254)

Thus Muzzlehatch. Seemingly portentous though his dying words are, they also affirm the importance of Gormenghast. Titus's past, now assimilated into the present by the experiences that connect them, provides a clearer perspective. Peake's achievement, as I have suggested in

this thesis, is in presenting his vision of the world over two decades of radical change. The Second World War served to concentrate the imagination of writers on the most fundamental issues of human experience, informing their writing with archetypal, or cosmic, significance. The images of war that appear throughout the Titus novels give the sequence, despite its resistance to any directly allegorical interpretation, an undoubtedly contemporary relevance. Yet this resistance also allows for the superimposition of a more essential or mythical framework: one which reveals a much more unified analysis of the experience of change. The tragedy of Titus Groan stems from an inability to accept the fundamental change that had been made necessary by the degeneration of a civilisation. The siege mentality, with its enforced awakening of a communal consciousness, that delivers that society from extinction in Gormenghast, offers only a temporary reprieve; yet once the next generation, embodied by the protagonist, has accepted the challenge of responding to the changes thrust upon it, it is able to recognise within its past the values with which it can endure the strains of an uncertain future.

Notes.

1. From 'The Quest', 3: 'The Crossroads' (1940), in W.H. Auden: Selected Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1979) 100.
2. See, for example, Maeve Gilmore, A World Away: A Memoir of Mervyn Peake (London: ethuen, 1983); also John Watney, Mervyn Peake (London: Sphere 1976).
3. S.T. Coleridge, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943).
4. 'Fort Darland' and 'May 1940' are both reproduced in Gilmore and Johnson, 30.
5. The German bombardment of London began on September 7, 1940. Robert Hewison's book, Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939 - 45 (London: Quartet, 1979) gives an interesting account of responses and opinions of the period leading up to the siege (pp.6-52).
6. David Punter, 376.
7. John Lehmann, Penguin New Writing No.4, (March 1941), cited in Hewison, p.52.
8. 'The time has come for more than small decisions' (1940).
9. Bernard Bergonzi, The Situation of the Novel (1970), p.150. In the chapter 'Between Nostalgia and nightmare', from which this quotation is taken, Bergonzi suggests that, in the novels that were prominent in English fiction in the twenty years after the war, there existed "an intermittent fascination about the past, and a variety of fears about the future." (149).
10. William Golding, Lord of the Flies, 223.
11. (London:Macmillan, 1995).
12. Piette, 7.
13. Cyril Connolly, 'Ivory Shelter', New Statesman, October 1939, cited in Robert Hewison, p.11.
14. David Punter, 378.
15. Hewison, 27.
16. Piette, 51.
17. David Gascoyne, Poems 1937 - 42 (Nicholson and Watson (London Poetry Editions), London 1943), 10; cited in Piette, 46.
18. See, for example, 'London, 1941', in Shapes and Sounds (London:Chatto and Windus, 1941) and The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb (London: Dent, 1962).

19. Piette, 47.
20. *Ibid*, 51.
21. Piette's assertion (*Op. Cit.*, 50) is based on the similarity of names; but (as I have suggested (chapter 8), 'Steerpike' more readily recalls Dickens' Steerforth).
22. Punter, 377-8.
23. Elizabeth Bowen, The Heat of the Day (1948; London: Penguin, 1962) 92.
24. Wartime and Aftermath (Oxford: Uxford University Press, 1993) 19.
25. Cited in Hewison, 40.
26. The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb (London: Dent, 1962).
27. Wartime and Aftermath, 35.
28. From Collected Poems 1936 - 61 (Andre Deutsch, 1962).
29. Gilmore and Johnson, 91.
30. "He spent the Christmas of 1954 at an inn in Pedham writing *Titus Alone* and in 1955 returned to Sark to work on the book, leaving his wife and children in Wallington." (Gilmore and Johnson, 91).
31. The Situation of the Novel (London: Macmillan, 1970).
32. Paul Fussell, Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1989) 9.
33. Piette, 1.
34. 'The Consumptive, Belsen 1945', lines 1-11; in The Glassblowers (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London 1950).
35. From England's Hour (London: Macmillan, 1941); cited in Hewison, 40.
36. In Lord of the Flies, Piggy, witnessing the beginnings of chaos on the island 'glanced nervously into hell and cradled the conch.' (p.49) The conch is the symbol of civilisation.

Conclusion.

Dost thou love picking meat? Or would'st thou see

A man in the clouds, and have him speak to thee?

BUNYAN

(Epigraph to Titus Groan)

Mervyn Peake's enthusiasm for the grand idea and the heroic vision of the artist clearly provided the impetus of the Titus books, the vast, unfinished project that was to extend over twenty years of his creative life. His intention, as is evident from the epigraph above, was wholly in keeping with the romantic philosophy he expounded when describing the artistic process. When, in The Craft of the Lead Pencil, published the same year as Titus Groan, Peake describes the task of mastering the art of drawing, he is also defining the central motif of the Titus novels:

What does it matter how long or how slow you are in this traffic of lead and paper? The advance from virtual blindness to that state of perception - half rumination, half scrutiny - is all that matters. The end is hypothetical. It is the journey that counts.¹

The emphasis on the balance between internal cogitation and external observation reminds us, however, that Peake's romanticism² is tempered by an understanding of the necessity of a close and deliberate consideration of the physical world. This duality - the equivocal position "on a razor's edge between the passion and the intellect, between the compulsive and the architectonic" that Peake cites as the desired position of the artist³ - manifests itself throughout the novels.

As John Batchelor has asserted, Peake's enthusiasm generally tended to prevail over his vigilance, resulting in a certain lack of focus.⁴ Yet for Peake, such emotional indulgence is fundamentally a part of the artistic process: the artist must seek to become uninhibited in his expression as well as faithful to his subject. One illustration of this is in his attitude towards the use of exaggeration in drawing: "Understatement may be equally powerful but at the outset there is a lot to be said for exaggeration, which is at least a proof of having something worth exaggerating."⁵ According to Peake, such an approach confirms, rather than undermines, the artist's fidelity.

We have seen that Peake's writing evinces a modern, ironic awareness as well as a sensibility which is closer to the Romantic tradition. The ambivalent attitude of the observing, wondering artist, poised between personal impulse and the classical doctrine of faithful mimesis, that Peake sought to achieve in his visual art, also allows for this half-ironic position. In continually highlighting the artist's predicament, he is disengaging his personality from his art at the same time as responding to the heroic impulse that drives him into the centre of it.

These artistic tensions - between Romantic and classical attitudes, and between heroic and ironic modes of expression - tend to give the impression of an artist somewhat at odds with himself. Batchelor suggests that Peake cannot reconcile the vision of the heroic artist with the particular purpose of the individual craftsman.⁶ Yet, in the Titus novels, he has created a framework which allows this struggle, if not to resolve itself, then at least to manifest itself in a coherent way. Their central theme - the violent, but ultimately enlightening, effects of change on an introspective and fragmented society - incorporates a shift from a barren community to a rejuvenated individual. Titus Groan, the heir of a dying world, emerges from his protective, restrictive environment, at once the symbol and hope of his civilisation and its nemesis. Glimpsing among the fragments of this dysfunctional, fractured world, certain elemental truths

about the human condition, he abdicates, thereby enacting a process which is both to destroy Gormenghast and resurrect it within himself.

This heroic vision is developed against Peake's keen, enthusiastic sense of parody and irony. As we have seen, Gormenghast is a montage of English history; but it is also an agglomeration of literary models and motifs. Peake's eclecticism is such that he appears both carefully selective and determinedly ambiguous. We may interpret individual actions symbolically, and yet struggle to discover in the whole any enduring metaphor or allegory. The heroic narrative is presented in earnest; yet the structures that sustain it are constantly parodied, so that we are forced ourselves to maintain an ambivalent position with respect to it.

Indeed, the central movement allows for an ever-increasing awareness of the relative, and therefore ambiguous, condition of human experience. The emergence of Titus involves a realisation of the isolated subjectivity of the individual, and of the impassive externality of the universe that forms his environment. Ultimately, the heroic impulse that takes Titus beyond the confines of his home in a quest for understanding results only in the recognition that there can be no such final position; and yet this revelation also confirms the heroic nature of the quest.

We have seen that this heroic/ironic dynamic represents a modern reworking of the Bildungsroman, the growth of the hero from child to adult, in which Titus comes to realise the value of his experiences "when they have separately ceased to be vital"⁷ - when, in the alienation of his modern state, he recognises them as the only 'truths' he can hang onto. Furthermore, it has become clear that these truths, by virtue of their endurance, transcend their environment, conferring upon the whole progression a unifying, coherent framework. The cataclysmic changes suffered by Gormenghast are such that all is laid bare to scrutiny; and only those who are able to stand back and observe the implications of such change are able to profit by it.

Peake's dense narrative style and disorienting methods of presentation are such that we are

drawn into his milieu to the extent that we almost become lost within it - so much so that, when we follow Titus out of it, we lose our bearings as he does. Yet repeatedly, Peake's conscious use of parody, conceit, absurdity and pastiche reminds us of his, and our, external existence, by drawing attention to the artifice of Gormenghast. We are able, therefore, to remain at a slight remove from it, to consider those elements of it that will endure (as advocated by Eliot⁸) - and allow Titus to begin to make sense of his predicament.

As the Modernists asserted that the inclusiveness of myth conferred a profounder sense of unity on the complex and apparently unconnected experiences of the modern world, so the interpretation of the Titus novels in terms of the organic notions of progression that underlie mythic patterns of narrative, as we have seen, provides a useful and coherent framework against which the basic themes of change, loss and renewal can be considered. In particular, Northrop Frye's organic theory of progression as manifested through the four basic stages of literary organisation, which elicits a corresponding increase in the awareness and understanding of the human condition, suggests an approach by which we can understand the necessity and integrity of Peake's equivocal position. If his basic dynamic is heroic, then the way in which he presents this dynamic acknowledges the importance of both tragic and comic interpretations of experience. Change must involve loss and often pain; it must also involve a coming to terms with the necessity of such loss and pain. Furthermore, it must encourage the recognition that such understanding is not always achieved - that the individual cannot always stand back and observe the drama from a safe distance. This, for Peake, is the irony of the role of the artist: he must strive for a total and profound vision of that with which he must also be wholly concerned.

During the Second World War, British writers struggled to make sense of the conflict - in terms of its personal as well as communal significance. The psychological intensity of total war at once traumatised the individual mind and focused its energies on essentials. Writers of the

period felt themselves too closely involved with chaotic reality to be able to try to respond to it in their art and tended to concentrate on recording the minutiae of their experiences without recourse to a larger cultural context. There prevailed a sense of timelessness, in which the past seemed unreal and the future inconceivable: as Auden declared in 1940, “the ego is bewildered”⁹. In Titus Groan, therefore, written during the war, the same concerns are prominent. Gormenghast’s civilisation has reached what Rosemary Jackson terms its “zero condition”¹⁰: it has stopped progressing, and cannot therefore have any concept of a future that implies change. Its tragic structure is created, as it were, by the traumatised, disoriented circumstances in which it was written.

The war continued to dominate the imagination long after it had ended. In the late forties and early fifties, it was still too close for writers to make any enduring sense of it. In Gormenghast, therefore, violence and confusion continue to defy any attempts to understand the significance of events. What does emerge, however, is the realisation that, above all, it is necessary to acknowledge what has happened - and that, in order to achieve such acceptance, the ideals of the past must be reconsidered. If the concept of heresy is unthinkable to those that continue to hold with such ideals, then it becomes evident that, when heresy is committed, such ideals are no longer tenable. The tragic structure of Titus Groan, as we have seen, is undermined by a deferral of catharsis. This is, in fact, a denial: Sepulchrae has not died, merely disappeared. What he stands for lives on. Yet the harrowing events that take place in Gormenghast force the society to come to terms with the fact of what has happened - and also illuminate why they have happened. The hunt for Steerpike shows Gormenghast’s strength as a community - but it also emphasises the susceptibilities of its individuals. When Titus acts to destroy Steerpike, his mother is unable to realise that he is not acting to preserve the ancient regime, but struggling to assert his own personality - to break out from the stagnant condition of the environment that has

defined as well as confined him.

Confirming the validity of this struggle is the comedic vision of humanity which, in Gormenghast, becomes more focused. As we have seen, comedy allows for a recognition of human frailty: it acknowledges that irrational behaviour threatens, but ultimately galvanises, our rationality - and conversely, that any attempt to suppress the irrational will result in a dangerous eruption of psychotic and destructive behaviour. Observing the effects of the war from the decade that followed it, writers naturally testified to its violent and destructive tragedy; but also, and most effectively, they relied on comic elements - on farce, absurdity, parody and ironic humour - in an attempt to initiate reconciliation. This is not only true of ostensibly comic writers such as Evelyn Waugh (in whose Sword of Honour Trilogy the rather ingenuous moral stance of its hero, Guy Crouchback, is put into perspective - and, oddly enough, given a certain credibility - by the comic revelation of its shortcomings) and Joyce Cary; it can also be seen in the equivocal stance of poets like Henry Reed, whose poem 'Lessons of the War' (1946) observes with terse irony the preparation for violence that enlisted soldiers undertook in their combat training:

1. *Naming of Parts.*

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
 We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,
 We shall have what to do after firing. But today,
 Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
 Glistens like coal in all of the neighbouring gardens.
 And today we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
 Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
 When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
 Which in your case you have not got. The branches
 Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
 Which in our case we have not got. ...¹¹

This is similar in tone to Peake. Sourdust's pedantic adherence to the Ritual is combined with his frailty, producing the opposite effect from that intended; the deadly duel between Flay and Swelter is suspended by the sudden appearance of the sleepwalking Sepulchrave; the courtship of Irma and Bellgrove is one of high parody - yet bears uneasy comparison with Steerpike's seduction of Fuchsia. His use of the comic allows for a more integrated contemplation of the human condition, and also admits of the heroic - just as Reed, in the final stanza of 'Lessons of the War', acknowledges the heroism of the absurd situation he has described:

Things may be the same again; and we must fight
 Not in the hope of winning but rather of keeping
 Something alive: so that when we meet our end,
 It may be said that we tackled wherever we could,
 That battle-fit we lived, and though defeated,
 Not without glory fought.¹²

Though comedy allows for an enduring understanding of human experience, it also perceives that the individual is necessarily egocentric - that his contemplation of the world must start and end with the contemplation of self that in fact obscures and distorts his vision. It is impossible in reality to leave the world completely, even if the comic revelation allows us to step back momentarily and acknowledge our own failings and absurdities. Yet such insight, however transient, as is conferred upon us by the comic vision of art, initiates a movement which simultaneously disengages us from the world, and reaffirms our relation to it. As we have seen, Titus's departure from Gormenghast both interrogates and confirms its enduring value: it is recognised as a fiction - a representation of the world - and also as a reality. Peake's conception of the artist as a feeling, observing individual, both "living at the core of drama" (GG, 493) and impassive, peripheral, informs this dichotomy: in drawing Titus out of his world, and thereby stressing its fictionality, he is refocusing our attention on the artist himself. This disengagement, therefore, encourages a consideration of the relationship between life and art - and by implication, between the war and Peake's attempt to come to terms with his experience of it.

The Titus novels were, in the conception of their author, unfinished. The organic nature of their evolution suggests that they never could be - and Peake, in fact, had no idea how they could be completed.¹³ Yet this is perfectly consistent with the heroic/ironic stance of the artist that Peake strove to affirm, both in his work and in his philosophy of the artistic vision. As we have seen, a mythic approach to the novels allows a recognition of the novels' organic, unending pattern. They grew out of the psychological confusion of the war, and achieved, if not the "equipoise" that was Peake's artistic synthesis, then at least a certain muddled clarity - an awareness of the need, and heroic futility, of the artist's quest to make some kind of sense of his experience.

Notes.

1. The Craft of the Lead Pencil (London: Wingate, 1946), cited in Gilmore and Johnson, 60.
2. Again, I make the distinction between “Romanticism”, signifying the English Romantic movement, and “romanticism”, which is developed from “romance”, and connotes a wider tradition - including those attitudes and perspectives towards the artistic vision we could equally term “Romantic”. See also p.245 and accompanying note.
3. The Drawings of Mervyn Peake (London: Grey Walls Press, 1949) 9.
4. Batchelor, 57.
5. The Craft of the Lead Pencil, cited in Gilmore and Johnson, 58.
6. Batchelor, 57.
7. T.S. Eliot, ‘Tradition’, cited in Selected Prose (ed. Hayward) 20.
8. In ‘*Ulysses*, order and myth’, Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, ed. Kermode.
9. W.H. Auden, ‘The Dark Years’, cited in Poetry of the Forties (ed. Skelton) 44, line 6.
10. Jackson, 80.
11. Henry Reed, ‘Lessons of the War’, ll.1-12, in The Norton Anthology of English Literature Volume II, 2322-3.
12. *Ibid*, ll.115-20, 2325-6.
13. See Batchelor, 124ff.

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Place of publication. Unless otherwise stated, please note that the place of publication for all texts is London.

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