

Interrogating Gormenghast: Interrogating the Lost Mythopoeia

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Synopsis

This thesis examines Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast novels (and the novella, *Boy in Darkness*) and looks at why they evoke familiar narrative/mythic patterns only to defy them. The object is to understand Peake's vision of the modern world by recreating the forgotten mythopoeia of Gormenghast. This is primarily a Jungian reading, examining archetypal patterns, mythological symbols and fairytale devices used by Peake. Viewed from this perspective, the disparate locales become representational sites of a collective consciousness disconnected from its own unconscious.

In the first chapter of this thesis, titled 'The Origin and Nature of Gormenghast', we begin on familiar ground by looking at some of the influences that might have shaped Peake's eccentric Gormenghast, notably his early childhood spent in China— the stories and impressions he might have picked there, and his loneliness as a child of busy parents in an alien country. In this chapter I aim to show how Peake has used certain personal, historical and geographical experiences from his childhood as the starting point for his creation of Gormenghast, as well as the psychological nuances of such an isolated, displaced childhood that might have unconsciously shaped the course of events and patterns of behaviours depicted in his novels. Using this as a premise, I go on to examine the dream motifs in the Gormenghast novels to propose that in creating the space of Gormenghast and peopling it, Peake is essentially writing out his mind. However, in spite of the personal content, or because of it, Peake transcends his individual experience to create something archetypal that resonates along familiar mythical patterns.

In the next chapter, titled 'The Symbolic Content of Gormenghast', we delve into a deeper analysis of these patterns in order to further explore the symbols within the text. The primary focus in this section is on the Gormenghast Ritual and its meaning, and in examining the significance of the coded set of actions and observances, I borrow primarily from myths, religious symbols,

fairytale and folktale, interrogating interpersonal relationships in Gormenghast in terms of archetypal patterns. This is followed by a brief analysis of *Boy in Darkness* as a dream/fairytale set within the world of Gormenghast, leading to the conclusion that the chief ailment of Gormenghast lies in its repression of the feminine in all aspects of life. The result is a dull, divided, empty existence devoid of meaning. This lack also reflects in the novels' wise old men figures, who instead of being sources of wisdom and guidance to the hero remain stunted and ineffective due to the divorce from the Jungian anima.

This takes us to Chapter Three of the dissertation, 'The Repressed Feminine in the Titus Groan Novels' where I examine the role and treatment of the women in Gormenghast and show how their creative potential is stifled by the patriarchal rigidity of the Gormenghast Law. The crystallized patriarchy of Gormenghast affects not only the women but also the men who remain emotionally repressed, leading to a cycle of stunted, aloof adults and abused children. Yet, there are hints in the language and the liturgy of Gormenghast of a past in which the feminine as the Goddess was venerated. One of these is the recurring feminine symbol of the boat as a metaphor for emotional and artistic release. I also bring in a comparative analysis of "The Cave: Anima Mundi"¹, an unpublished play where Peake discusses the decline of the defiant woman from goddess to witch to enemy of the fascist state. This neglect of the feminine is also to be observed in the main female characters in the third novel, *Titus Alone* which unfolds in a city that is far removed from Gormenghast, both in terms of distance and technological advancement. Juno and Cheeta- who appear to be Calypso and Circe to Titus's Ulysses are empowered women with wealth, beauty and numerous admirers, yet the trajectories of their lives are ultimately determined

¹ Mervyn Peake, "The Cave or Anima Mundi" (Unpublished manuscript courtesy of Mr. G. Peter Winnington, June 25, 2018), PDF.

by the men they fall in love with, much like a Fuchsia or a Keda in Gormenghast with far lesser social or individual mobility.

Chapter Four, ‘The Quest for Identity in *Titus Alone*’ thus examines the hero’s journey in the unnamed City and his interactions with these women as well as with the ambiguous Muzzlehatch and the mythic pattern that they fit into. While the overarching myth in the first two novels— *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* is that of the diseased kingdom signified in the dereliction of Gormenghast castle, the pattern in the third novel is that of the heroic journey. Titus finds himself in an alien land, and having finally left Gormenghast after years of playing the truant schoolboy is now anxious to receive some proof of its existence. In this, and in his insistence on his title of the seventy-seventh Earl, Titus displays the nostalgia of the colonizer for his lost kingdom, a grown up Hugh Silver from Peake’s earliest written story, *The White Chief of the Umzibooboo Kaffirs*² who is no longer allowed to play at being the lord to lesser people. More than its predecessors, the third novel, *Titus Alone* is explicitly rooted in our contemporary society, drawing clearly from the author’s personal experience of being a war artist and his encounter with victims at the Belsen concentration camp, besides the ominous omnipresence of surveillance technology. But the work is at the same time mythical, with such familiar motifs as the journey to the underworld and battles of strength. Unlike the Greek Ulysses, however, and somewhat like the modern Prufrock or Leopold Bloom, Titus Groan is an unheroic hero who cannot adjust to the rules of a changing world where he is no longer at the centre, and thus he must be constantly rescued out of his battles by figures such as Muzzlehatch and Anchor. The rigid control that the

² Peake, *Peake’s Progress*, 35-44. Peake completed this story in 1923, when he was eleven years old. Its hero, Hugh Silver is, like the author himself, a young expat boy who is separated from his parents and becomes the leader of an African tribe.

state exercises invites comparisons with Orwell and Huxley, and a discussion of the idealized past in a dystopian setting.

The scientists in the factories also remind us of the depiction of the monstrous in contemporary fantasy and science fiction. But rather than depicting the hero's victory against the monsters as is the norm, Peake makes Titus and his readers confront their own innate evil. We find, after all, that the City is not so different from Gormenghast, suffering from the same malaise of meaningless order and exacting the same rigid conformity from its inhabitants most of whom, like the denizens of Gormenghast conform willingly, while those who do not are consigned to the dark, hellish Under-River. Titus, as an outsider is as much an anomaly in this world as Steerpike and Titus himself were heretics in Gormenghast, and thus he becomes relentlessly pursued by the authorities. *Titus Alone* ends with Peake's signature withholding of narrative closure with the failure of yet another mythical pattern. Unlike Ulysses, Titus fails to return to his Ithaca.

However, the journey of the hero, and his turning away from his home also recalls another mythical hero, Aeneas of Troy who sees his home being destroyed and experiences exile only to find his own independent destiny. This seems especially valid when we consider that the Titus Groan novels were not meant to be a trilogy but a series that never came to fruition due to Peake's struggle with dementia and Parkinson's disease. But had the series materialized, perhaps Titus too would have found a home beyond both the archaic ties of Gormenghast and the soullessness of the City, a meaningful existence ruled by passion rather than by compliance.

Titus Groan's suffering resonates with us, for it is born of the existential malaise of rootlessness and loss of meaning in the contemporary world: "There are no longer any gods whom we can invoke to help us. The great religions of the world suffer from increasing anemia, because the helpful numina have fled from the woods, rivers, and mountains, and from animals, and the

god-men have disappeared underground into the unconscious.”³ By refusing to submit to this world order, Titus becomes the questing hero journeying to bring back a sense of purpose and dignity to life: “The change must indeed begin with an individual; it might be any of us.”⁴

In my conclusion I examine Peake’s rudimentary notes on *Titus Awakes*, the fourth Titus Groan novel, as well as probe further the ambiguous end of the third and last novel he was able to complete. The end of a fairytale is meant to reaffirm faith in the collective order in which there are always neat divisions of right and wrong, good and evil. By refusing to submit to narrative expectations, Peake challenges the status quo defined by these simplistic binaries. At the end of *Titus Alone*, Titus is still alone and homeless because he is still striving for a meaningful world order that does not demand unquestioning obedience, something that cannot be said of either his ancient, ancestral home or the new-age technocratic City, both locales where people function more or less as mechanical units rather than as thinking, feeling beings. “In leaving behind Gormenghast, Titus Groan is initiating a shift from the past to the present— or even to the future.”⁵ The negation of interpersonal relationships in both Gormenghast and the City become conducive to the rise of a fascist hierarchy where all dissent or even queries are viewed as blasphemy and betrayal. What we witness is the superficial evolution of Western civilization from the medieval Gormenghast to the modern City without a corresponding transformation in the collective psyche.

Perhaps, if illness had not prevented Peake from carrying out his original plan of a series of novels about the journeys of Titus Groan, his hero would eventually reach the golden climes of a forgotten Atlantis that the author in his real life seemed to have found in the island of Sark, and

³ Carl G. Jung, “Approaching the Unconscious,” in *Man and His Symbols* by Carl G. Jung and M.-L. von Franz, Joseph L. Henderson, Jolande Jacobi and Aniela Jaffé (New York: Dell, 1968), 91.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rob Hindle, “Elysian Fields, Hadean Gloom: Titus Groan’s Mythical Quest,” *Peake Studies* 4, no. 4 (1996): 7.

that his wife, Maeve Gilmore transposed into the fictional life of Titus in the novel, *Titus Awakes*. In this thesis, I shall attempt to interrogate the lost mythopoeia of Gormenghast in an attempt to trace the path of Titus Groan's journey towards the truth of this lost past.
