



Maslen, R.W. (2008) *Fantasies of war in Peake's uncollected verse*.
Peake Studies, 10 (4). pp. 5-23. ISSN 1013-1191.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/24777>

Deposited on: 24 August 2011

Fantasies of War in Peake's Uncollected Verse

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MERVYN PEAKE WAS PRE-EMINENTLY A WAR POET. Of course, not all his poems concern themselves directly with armed conflict, but the condition of warfare infects the tissue of his major verse, shaping and distorting it whatever its primary subject. He began to publish poems in 1937, during the long approach to the Second World War, each step of which they record, from the bombing of Guernica to the September Crisis; and he wrote the bulk of his verse between 1939 and 1945.¹ Even his post-war poems continue to worry away at the themes and traumas of his wartime experiences. How could it be otherwise, when he suffered a nervous breakdown in 1942 after two fruitless years in the army, and later witnessed the aftermath of war in Germany, above all at Bergen-Belsen? Like many who lived through it he internalized the global crisis, making it part of his inward landscape. He may even have laboured at times under the horrible illusion that the war had sprung fully-fledged from his imagination, like a monstrous version of the winged horse that springs from the floor of Victoria Station in his poem 'Victoria 6.58 p.m.'² It is this possibility I would like to look at here, with the help of a few fragments of poetry I was not able to include in my forthcoming edition of his *Collected Poems*.

Peake's imagination, after all, could be a fearsome place. From the beginning to the end of his writing career it preoccupied itself with violence, to the extent that artistic creation and physical aggression seem at times to be locked together in an intimate symbiotic relationship inside his head. The relationship may be encapsulated in the duel scene between two rival lovers in *Titus Groan*, where the men, both sculptors, hack away at each other's naked bodies in a knife-fight that parodies the process of carving a work of art from a block of wood.³ Peake wrote this fight during the war, when it might be thought his

imagination was unusually concerned with bloodshed. But one of Peake's earliest surviving poems, a long Masefield-inspired narrative called 'The Touch o' the Ash' (1929), constructs a story from an act of still more horrible brutality.⁴ In it, a tyrannical ship's captain flings an old sailor into the furnace of his vessel, in grotesque anticipation of the Nazi atrocities. The old sailor has his revenge; through a titanic act of posthumous will-power he makes a new body from the ashes of his old one, and visits the captain three times at night, killing him on the third visit after driving him insane. Clearly then, from the start of his career Peake was willing to make poetry from violence; aggression was part of his imaginative make-up. One wonders whether this had anything to do with his childhood experiences in China. He was born in 1911 during a savage civil war, which his father recorded in a series of graphic photographs; and as he grew up, his father's work as a missionary doctor brought Peake into close proximity with pain and death. From an early age he watched him perform surgery, including amputations, and saw long lines of maimed or diseased patients entering and emerging from his clinic.⁵ Did these youthful encounters with dismemberment and debility haunt his dreams, reconstituting themselves from the material made available by war, as the old dead sailor in 'The Touch o' the Ash' repeatedly reconstitutes his body from the grey dust which is all that remains of him after his death?

Certainly hauntings of one kind or another are a recurrent motif in Peake's writing. A poem of 1939, 'We Are the Haunted People', figures the helpless lookers-on at the outbreak of war as visited by the shadows of 'dark deeds' on the continent – deeds that sow the horribly fertile seeds of propaganda and destruction. Then in *Titus Groan* (1946), the young earl's father Lord Sepulchrave is a perpetually haunted soul, his brain thronged with imaginary owls, which eventually merge with the real owls in the Tower of Flints who tear him apart when he brings them Swelter's corpse to feed on. And towards the end of his working life, Peake represents *himself* as troubled with apparitions just as terrible as the ones that killed Sepulchrave and the tyrannical captain. A manuscript of *Titus Alone* from the early 50s contains this fragment:⁶

Out of cloud the face emerges
Every night before I sleep
It is pale as when cold surges
Burn like frost upon the deep

It is pale this head of horror
Save for where its chin shines red
With the blood [...]

The ghostly head, like the ashen body of the old sailor in ‘The Touch o’ the Ash’, is linked with the ‘cold surges’ of the sea; and it would seem that the nightmare recurred with increasing frequency as Peake’s final illness took a grip of him. After his hospitalization in 1958 he wrote the poem ‘Heads Float About Me’, in which phantoms float about the corridors of Holloway hospital terrifying Peake, while being ‘haunted’ themselves by ‘solitary sorrows’.⁷ And the most frightening thing about these disembodied heads is that they ‘deny the nightmare / That they should be’. They are real, not just a nightmare; or else they embody something real, ‘the horror / Of truth, of this intrinsic truth / Drifting, ah God, along the corridors / Of the world.’ Since childhood Peake had known the worst of nightmares to be true, not merely fiction; and his experiences in the Second World War drove home ‘this intrinsic truth’ with terrible force.

Two previously unknown drafts of poems he wrote about the Blitz during or shortly after the War give powerful, though quite different insights into the interaction between Peake’s fantastic imagination and the fantastic works of art being shockingly produced by global conflict. The first reminds us of something that Peake was intensely aware of: until he visited Belsen in 1945, war’s atrocities were something he could only imagine, as he studied the astonishing shapes it left in the urban landscape – the visible marks both of its terrible impact and of its absence, the fact that he has missed the moment when that impact took place. His poems ‘The Shapes’, ‘London 1941’ and ‘The Craters’ (all published in his first collection, *Shapes and Sounds* (1941)) scrutinize the contours war leaves behind – the mournful beauty of shattered buildings, the emotional impact of the gaping pits and quarries dug by bombs; but for the events that pro-

duced them he had to turn to black-and-white newsreels and the colourful pictures furnished by his own imagination. And finding a way to imagine these events responsibly – to disengage them from what might be seen as his predisposition to glamorize violence, to revel in horror, and to delight in extremes of physical suffering for their own sake – was something, I suggest, that he found difficult. The two new drafts offer an insight into his difficulties.

The first of the drafts, ‘I was not there’, is a sketch for a poem first published in his 1950 collection *The Glassblowers* and reprinted in *Selected Poems* (1975) and *Peake’s Progress* (1980). In all its published forms the title is ‘When Tiger-Men Sat their Mercurial Coursers’. And it was always printed without its final verse, so that nobody till now has known it had anything to do with the war. Indeed in *Peake’s Progress* it appears in a section called ‘Other Worlds’, as if to reinforce its nostalgic escapism. In one of his poetry notebooks, however – tentatively dated to around 1946, though many of the verses it contains were written earlier⁸ – the poem is given a different title, and a fourth stanza, which fuses the other-worldly with the experiences of the Blitz which Peake never lived at first hand:

I Was not There

When Tiger-men sat their mercurial coursers,
 Hauled into granite arches the proud fibre
 Of head and throat, sank spurs, and trod on air
 I was not there.

When clamorous Centaurs thundered to the rain-pools,
 Shattered with their fierce hooves the silent mirrors,
 When glittering drops clung to their beards and hair,
 I was not there.

When through a blood-dark dawn a man with antlers
 Cried and throughout the day the echoes suffered
 His agony, and died in evening air
 I was not there.

Even when Paul's voluminous dome reflected
The apple-green and lilac fires; or swelling
Like an enormous Ethiopian breast, raw crimson
Weltered behind its rare
Sweep of plumbed midnight – when the air was madness,
When water shot like blood from serpent hoses,
And excellence was wrested from a nightmare
I was not there.

In this version, the notion of absence – of missing things – is enshrined in the title, whereas the title of the printed version laid emphasis on the visions Peake could conjure up so vividly despite never having seen them. And in 'I Was Not There', the central lack or loss is transformed from a simple threnody for unwitnessed moments to a complex meditation on the relationship between the imaginary and the imagined, two spheres that get fused in Peake's dreamscapes (and dreams are specifically evoked in the penultimate line). It's worth reminding oneself here that much of Peake's war was a time of frustration, as the young conscript was shunted from one army training camp to another in a quest to find some military role for him, while his appeals to have his real talents turned to good use through employment as a war artist were repeatedly turned down. Exclusion from the centre of things here extends from the source of his imaginative energy – the horses and man-horses which figure everywhere in his poems and pictures, and from which his conscription diverted him so fruitlessly – to the dazzling vision of St Paul's Cathedral under bombardment, miraculously intact among the ruins of the City of London. The poet's absence becomes an exclusion from ecstasy, both homoerotic and heterosexual, and one might detect in the poem at once the rage of the artist denied access to his art, the intense sexual frustration which is an integral component of military service, and the psychological disturbance generated by war's perverse conversion of erotic fantasies and male bonding rituals into integral components of the military machine.

The first three stanzas record scenes of gigantic masculine energy. Each is marked by violence: the restraining of a horse as the rider

hauls its head and throat into a semblance of architectural rigidity; the shattering of the peace of a mirror-like pool; the death (as it seems) of an antlered man, whose agony gives new voice and feeling to the old metaphor of the 'blood-dark dawn'. Each stanza records the encounter between disparate elements: in the first, man and horse, concrete and air; in the second, centaur and water, clamorous thunder and silence; in the third, the antlered man and the air to which his suffering transmits itself. But the previously unknown fourth stanza is much more shocking. The disparate elements – the lights of the blazing city and the cathedral's racialized darkness; the breast-like dome and the phallic hoses – are fused with more drastic violence than in any of the first three verses. The 'raw crimson' of the sky sounds like a wound, and the hoses like severed arteries, hideous pastiches of male and female genitalia. The *wresting* of excellence from a nightmare makes the agonized sexual act recorded here sound as though it has been forced on its participants, so that the work of art Peake imagines being created by the Blitz is also an act of violation, a dual rape. The stanza makes explicit what is only implicit in the first three stanzas – that the male energies being described there are erotic ones, which culminate in the orgasmic roar of a rutting stag, and that the sexual acts they describe are aggressive. The extent of that aggression is intensified by that fourth stanza, and rendered unnerving by the introduction both of an implied woman and of a racial dimension into the picture. The myth or legend of the first three stanzas thus becomes contaminated, forced to align itself with the abominable motives behind aerial bombardment.

Many works of art produced in wartime, perhaps, have this sense of being the products of force or compulsion. One thinks of Peake's well known poem about a Belsen inmate, which is filled with guilt about the cold artist's eye he brings to the business of sketching the death agonies of a young girl, with a view to working it up into a great finished painting at some future date.⁹ The fourth stanza of 'I Was Not There' is in some ways worse than this, in that its celebration of the 'excellence' of the fire-surrounded dome seems guilt-free. The fact that three clearly fantastical scenes have preceded it liberates the poet from the severe judgement to which he subjected him-

self at Belsen. Regretting that one was not present at the death of a legendary stag-man is unproblematic; regretting one's absence from a real-life inferno is not; and it's not clear from that fourth stanza whether the poet is ready to acknowledge the difference. It would be interesting to know if it was Peake himself or someone else who decided he should cut it when the poem went to press.

The second of our two drafts comes from an early version of Peake's long narrative poem, *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb*, a revision of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* written on Sark in about 1947.¹⁰ I suggest in my introduction to the *Collected Poems* that this is the work in which Peake finally laid what he called his 'war-ghosts' to rest, sloughing off his sense of complicity with the global atrocities being perpetrated as he laboured to produce his art.¹¹ He achieved this exorcism, I think, by having the beauty of the Blitz witnessed by two innocents: a new-born baby (albeit an infant possessed of astonishing powers and unexpected knowledge), and the sailor who finds it in a gutter after a bomb has killed its mother. The innocence of these two witnesses is reinforced by the fact that both are denizens of a different element from the one in which they find themselves. The sailor is a figure from the maritime adventure stories Peake loved as a boy; his language makes him sound like a combination of Jim Hawkins and Long John Silver, the teenager and the murderously avuncular pirate, both of whom are badly out of their depth in wartime London. Cut off by fire from his beloved water, the sailor is confronted by real scenes more savagely absurd than anything in Stevenson's fiction. And the baby, too, hails from the sea: the sailor calls it 'little fish', and when it suddenly gains a voice it reveals that it has shared many of his nautical experiences in previous lives. Together the pair reinvent the burning city as a scene from their seafaring past, turning blazing buildings into ships, flames into sea-flowers and red-hot ashes into the wide red mouths of figureheads. The baby's comradeship gives the sailor courage to face his death, and by the time the ballad ends the ghastly beauty of the ruined metropolis has been retrospectively brought under control, tamed, as it were, by being harnessed to children's fictions, without having its impact softened or diminished in the process.

Yet there is something missing from the poem: a specific absence at its core that becomes glaringly obvious once it's been pointed out. As the pair take shelter in a shattered church, the sailor mounts the pulpit and announces that he is going to tell the baby a story. 'Now listen to me while I sing you a tale,' he announces, and goes on:

For the things I've forgotten for many a year
Are shouldering into my mind,
Of the time when my heart was a wave that heaved
To the gale of my sea-mad mind.

The infant at first seems keen to hear the narrative, but soon afterwards remembers that it has got plenty of sea-memories of its own, and asks instead to join him in a song. The early draft of the poem held in the Bodleian Library, however, shows that the sailor did at one point begin to tell his tale; and it also shows why the full tale never got told. Here is the relevant section of the draft.

We had been at sea for a month or more
With the rich black coal below
But the storms had swept the bridge away
And the ship was a sheet of snow.

And the shining engines were red with rust
And the winter water lay
In mucky pools all over the coal
In the hold of our ship that day –

And there was no wind, and there was no warmth
And there was no water or food,
And our anchor was plunged in the freezing sea
As deep in the snow we stood.

The masts were gone and all was gone
But a thick white layer of snow
Like a poultice laid from end to end
With the two black dots to show

Where the last two men alive stood stiff
At the side of the ice-bound rail,

When out of the sea with a splash and a shout
Came a thing with a bright green tail.

Its cheeks were red as a sunset fierce,
And its hair streamed out behind
In a tangle of jet-black weed and its eyes
Were as yellow as lemon-rind.

Then up it lifted its great big head
From out of the murky sea
And opened the great salt merman curve
[Of] his mouth that was big as three.

‘And are you the crew of this ship of snow
That has so molested me
By dropping of your anchor at the door of my cave
At the bottom of the winter sea?’

‘You have dropped your anchor across my door
And my wife is trapped inside
With our five blue chicks that are crying out their hearts
For a taste of the morning tide.’

Then the two stiff men cried, ‘Sorry we are
To have so disturbed your home,
But our captain it was who ordered us
To lower our anchor down.’

‘And our captain is dead and the crew is dead
And we are the last to go,
And we have no strength for to work the crank
And to haul back the anchor now.’

‘We’re as frozen up as the engines are
And as cold as the ice on the rail.
But where O where did you get that hair
And that beautiful bright green tail?’

The merman he heaved himself aboard
And he swished the decks with his tail

And the white snow flew up into the air
And over the frozen rail.

‘Now I’ll answer you this and many things more,’
He said, ‘but I first must know,
With your arms so weak, what the deuce can be done
About the anchor that you’ve plunged below?’

His cheeks shone red and his yellow eyes
Were as bright as sovereigns in his head.
‘There’s only one thing can be done about this,
So listen to my words,’ he said.

‘You’ll never get home, and you’ll never find food
And you’ll have no strength to stir,
And you’ll freeze to death by the afternoon
If you go on standing here.

‘You must dive with me through the cold black sea
To my cave where your anchor stands,
And there you must marry a mermaid chill
With little white fins for hands.

‘And there you must marry a mermaid sweet
With a tail as long as your arm.
O it’s then you’ll have the strength for to move away
Your anchor from

And the rest is missing. By this point Peake must have known very well that his readers will have forgotten the Blitz, the baby and the sailor, as they mull over the problem of the trap the sailors find themselves in, and meditate, perhaps, on the relationship between this story and the old song ‘O ’twas in the broad Atlantic’. Peake has written himself into a dead end, and he dealt with it in the most sensible way he could: by stopping and going back to take up his tale at the point where the false trail began.

This wasn’t the first time Peake had written himself into a hole, and on one occasion the hole had been very like this one. His early novel *Mr Slaughterboard* comes to a halt with another ship jammed in mid-

ocean, impaled this time on a needle of rock improbably rising to within a few feet of the surface miles from the nearest shore.¹² The most notable feature of this ship, the *Conger Eel*, is its magnificent library, the Room of Books, where the Captain pores over the volumes he loves in the company of his eyeless servant Smear, and wonders what it would be like to add his own name to the illustrious register of dead authors. The closest he comes to doing so is by casually butchering his men, killing them off singly and in batches in the name of what he calls 'art'. His brutality is unpleasant, but not especially disturbing, because it's so obviously divorced from the world beyond the pages of Peake's fiction. Smear's eyelessness confirms his own and the captain's determined self-segregation from the concerns and moral systems that govern other communities. As Peake puts it, 'They formed their own Universe. Untouched by the workings of other minds, solely dependent upon themselves, they formed a cosmos of existence, a reality that moved and thought between the sea and the sky.' The marooning of the ship enables them to achieve their highest ambition: to be disconnected for ever from all inhabited countries, free to dedicate themselves to the workings of their own mental cosmos without reference to anybody else's; and the Captain celebrates the moment with another bout of aesthetically-motivated slaughter. And this final orgy of killing again fails to disturb the reader because of the grotesqueness of the crew they slaughter, whose physical peculiarities mark them out as denizens of the Room of Books, like the Captain and Mr Smear.

But by the time he wrote *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb*, it was not so easy for Peake to justify casual slaughter in his writings, and the notion of aesthetically-motivated murder had become deeply disturbing. This shift in perspective was given visual expression in a series of pictures he drew in 1940, as a means of advertizing his skills to the War Artists' Advisory Committee.¹³ The series purports to be a portfolio of pictures by the artist Adolf Hitler, and has as its frontispiece Hitler's self-portrait, staring in horror out of the page at what was presumably once a mirror – but is now the reader, who seems to have been made complicit with the dictator's crimes by becoming the focus of his gaze. At the time Peake drew this series he

had not yet seen the horrors of war at first hand, and had to rely on reports and his own imagination to flesh them out. But he wrote *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb* after witnessing the aftermath of atrocities on French, German and British soil, and the relationship between his wild imaginings and the world they obliquely reflected had undergone a radical change. No longer motivated primarily by a yearning to be absorbed into the world of books, his habitual use of the fantastic possessed a new urgency that fills the later pages of his novel *Titus Groan*. The merman fragment offers an opportunity to consider the nature of that urgency.

Mr Slaughterboard's ship and its occupants are things of fiction, which get transfixed in the course of a sea story that moves with seeming inevitability towards this goal. The story of the merman, by contrast, is dredged up from the sailor's memory by what seems its polar opposite: the devastated London cityscape through which he wanders. The elements of fire and water have already become perversely fused for the sailor a few stanzas earlier, as the burning streets reassemble themselves into a bright pageant playing out his personal history: 'And the ships of brick and the ships of stone / And the charcoal ships lurched by / While his footsteps clashed on the frozen waves / That shone to the scarlet sky.' It is this pageant of fire and water, heat and cold that triggers his recollection of the merman incident, and he narrates it to the baby as a means of explaining the specific resonance that the London flames have struck in him, the particular 'frozen waves' he has in mind.

It's clear enough why he sees these two traumatic moments of his life as related. The extremes of physical suffering produced by both environments – the Arctic seas and the wartime conflagration – are the same. In both cases, the miraculous emergence of a living person from a dead world is the same (the talking baby and the merman), suggesting against all likelihood that extremes of temperature may provide a congenial habitat for intelligent beings. And in both cases the being in question offers the sailor an uncanny escape route from what's clearly an inescapable situation. In fact, both baby and merman can be read as the hallucinations of a dying mind, as it struggles to find an alternative to the intolerable inevitability of death. As the

cold or heat becomes too intense to bear, the sailor discovers in each forbidding zone a native inhabitant, whose physical attributes – nakedness in the baby’s case, brilliant hues in the merman’s – proclaim their indifference to the flame or frost that is killing the sailor. This is a very different use of fantasy from *Mr Slaughterboard*’s exuberant self-indulgence; its escapism is a psychological necessity rather than a piece of adolescent whimsy, and the quest to find some sort of moral explanation, or even absolution, for the unjustified torment to which its protagonists are subjected, starkly contrasts with Mr Slaughterboard’s tormenting and slaughtering of his crew, which invites no moral justification at all.

The merman story is sung in a church ‘To the tune of a bleeding hymn’; its impulse is religious, and marks religion in this context as a story that’s built from memory and fantasy, and from the desperation that fuses the two. The sailors in the narrative are frozen stiff until they are indistinguishable from the frozen vessel on which they’re stranded. There’s clearly no way out of their predicament except through death; and it’s in this extreme situation that a manifestation of the fantastic emerges godlike from the waves, adding the brilliance of oil colour – Peake’s painterly palette of greens, reds and yellows – to the whites, blacks and greys of the Arctic seascape. The merman also brings with him, godlike, both an accusation of guilt and a promise of forgiveness. Those who suffer invariably convince themselves that they deserve to suffer, so as to preserve some sense of the crude but safe moral coordinates with which they have been raised; and the merman brings a rationale for the sailors’ suffering in the form of a crime they have committed. The ship’s anchor has trapped his wife and children in their underwater cave, and the sailors will not be released from their torment until the anchor is raised again, the door of the cave opened and the family set free. Like Adam and Eve, or like conscripts accused of a crime against humanity, the sailors respond by transferring responsibility for their actions to a higher authority. It was the ship’s captain who ordered the anchor to be lowered, and the captain is now inaccessible, cut off from retribution, like most of his crew, by death. Like Adam and Eve and the rest of humanity, too, the sailors are incapable of atoning for their inadvertent crime under

their own steam, as it were; they lack the strength to raise the anchor. Having confessed and sought to exonerate themselves, the men wait for divine judgement.

The merman's judgement comes in the form of a solution to their impasse: they are to wed themselves to the elements that are killing them. First they must plunge into the inhospitable sea, then bind themselves by nuptial contract to an alien being: a 'mermaid chill / With little white fins for hands.' Having performed this dual act of self-negation they will, he claims, gain the strength to raise the anchor, as if sexual and contractual union with a hostile environment has made everything within it easy for them. The merman anticipates their naturalization in the Arctic wastes in the fragment's final stanza, where the once chilly mermaid is described as 'sweet', and her most alien feature – her tail – is measured against the familiar length of a sailor's upper limb. In this way the fusion with ice and steel that was killing the sailors at the beginning of the extract is replaced by a marriage with cold black water and fishiness, that will inject them by some undisclosed means with the merman's virile energy. Religion becomes the process of accepting – or rather of actively, passionately embracing – the causes of pain and destruction that you are too frail to fight. And it becomes, too, a fantasy, a dream born from desire, whose resistance to the remorselessness of wartime logic offers the only satisfactory solution to a problem insoluble by any other means.

But the merman isn't necessary to *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb*, as Peake recognized when he chose to stop writing about him. The sailor in wartime London has already found a god before he begins to tell this story – a miniature god which gently points out that it contains within itself all the sailor's memories, desires and dreams – and this is the baby. While the sailor is gearing up to tell the merman story in the ruined church, the baby suddenly manifests its superhuman powers for the first time, responding to the sailor's offer to narrate with a shrill cry of assent, then levitating in front of the pulpit, 'Where it hovered with its hands clenched tight at its breast' just next to an open Bible, like a latterday version of Robert Southwell's Burning Babe. The moment is a natural next stage in a process that began with the miracle of the baby's discovery – when the sound of its heart in

the midst of destruction astonished and awed the sailor. This miracle was reinforced by the sailor's perception that the child is absurdly, insanely out of place ('All bare and cold in that gutter of gold / You had no cause to be, / No more than it's right for the likes of you / To be born in this century'); and led at last to his decision, after entering the church, to 'worship' the child for its 'brand-new look', its 'fists like a brace of anemones', and the miraculous 'ticker' it keeps in its fragile chest. The baby, then, provides an emblem of war's absurdity, the incongruous juxtapositions it generates, and the fantasies that are the only apt response to these. And the comfort it dispenses is quite different from, and more imaginatively satisfying than, the strange sub-oceanic marriage offered by the sea-god as a solution to the sailor's woes.

For one thing, the child refuses to adopt a position of judgement over the sailor – or of superiority to him – as the merman does. It refers to him as 'sailor, saviour', as if sharing its divinity with the dying man. Despite his scepticism, it extends to him the promise that he will share its ability to regenerate after death; and it gives him the benefit of its awareness that appalling events like the Blitz are nothing new, that they have precedents in history, and that therefore the sailor need not be erased from the earth with the disintegration of his body under the impact of the last flying bomb; after all, the baby is proof of this, with its new wrinkled arms and its astonishing memory for adventures, seascapes and people it has encountered in previous lives. Its only advantage over him, in fact, is that it remembers having 'seen it all before', and can therefore give him words of counsel as he drifts bleeding and blistered, with lacerated feet and unrecognizable face, towards his own particular death.

More importantly, perhaps (and this is a comfort Peake needed as much as his Stevensonian seafarer) it reassures him that his fantasies – the visions of miracles which Peake always associated with his heart – have as much validity as a response to the world, and above all to the World War, as any historical, philosophical or political narrative lodged in the archives at the British Library or the Imperial War Museum. 'For, sailor,' it says, 'there's nothing that is not true, / If it's true to your heart and mine, / From a unicorn to a flying bomb, / From

a wound to a glass of wine.’ It’s the sailor’s imagination, after all, that first made the baby’s environment bearable for it, as he showed it ‘the coloured lights’ of the burning city, ‘And the golden shoals of the falling stones / And the scarlet of the streets’ – thus making loveliness out of horror. It’s the sailor’s imagination which permits him to conceive of a loving afterlife, and to believe in the love he has found in this one, despite the fact that ‘There is no proof’, rationally speaking, of either. And it’s his imagination that gives the sailor his final, joyful vision, which transmutes the urban devastation into a maritime adventure far more dazzling than the merman narrative:

‘The masts are bright with silver light,
The decks are black with grass
And the bay’s so smooth that I can see
The blood beneath the glass.

‘And here’s a child, and there’s a child
Running across the bay.
They laugh and shout, “Look out! look out!
We haven’t long to stay!”

‘And here’s a man who somersaults
Across the mid-mast air.
The long-shore flames leap out to sea
And drag him by the hair.

‘And the guns that shine with oil and wine
Are smothered in sea-flowers deep,
And in the throat of every gun
A mermaid lies asleep.

‘And the figurehead with mouth so red
Is drinking up the sea...
O little babe, why won’t you leap
Aboard, and sail with me?’

So the mer-people *do* find a place in *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb*, after all, nestled in the mouths of cannons in an imaginary warship. And Peake’s wayward imagination, too, finds a role for itself with

relation to the war. What may have made the War Artists' Advisory Committee so reluctant to employ him was a perception that his work was better suited to conveying the unreal than recording 'facts'.¹⁴ *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb*, including the unprinted fragment about the merman, demonstrates the vital relationship between the material conditions of war and the fantasies to which it gives rise. Peake's fantasies are composed of searing frost and scorching fire, of metal, stone, coal, glass, and all the matter that makes up a bomb or the destruction it causes. And they are anchored, above all, in the body, in its bones and internal organs, its flesh, skin, limbs and bowels. His position as artist can be summarized in one more unpublished fragment from the early 50s:¹⁵

Neither a sage nor plowboy dumb, I stand
A marvel and a clod in either hand
And in my breast a vacillating heart

Without Peake's solid clods and marvels, fused together by his vacillating heart, our picture of what it was like to live through the calamitous nineteen-forties would lack one vital and little-explored dimension. The fragments unearthed here, with the evidence they give of the extent to which even Peake's most extravagant fantasies are bound up with war and its aftermath, suggest that further exploration of fantastic writing in wartime would be well worth undertaking – no matter how inhospitable the land- and seascapes into which that exploration might take us.

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Notes

- 1 Approximate dates for Peake's poems are given in my *Collected Poems of Mervyn Peake*. Manchester: Carcanet (Fyfield Books), forthcoming in 2008.
- 2 See Peake, *Selected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1975, p.11.
- 3 See Peake, *Titus Groan*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, pp.281–85 ('Knives in the Moon').
- 4 For 'The Touch o' the Ash' see *Peake's Progress*, ed. Maeve Gilmore, corrected by G. Peter Winington. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981, pp.45–61.
- 5 See G. Peter Winington, *Vast Alchemies: The Life and Work of Mervyn Peake*. London: Peter Owen, 2000, pp.38–39, which gives an account of operations witnessed by Mervyn as a boy in China; also Malcolm Yorke, *A Life of Mervyn Peake: My Eyes Mint Gold*. London: John Murray, 2000, pp.24–26.
- 6 UCL MS Add. 234, Box 4 (iv), sig. 32^r. The manuscript is currently on loan to the library of University College London.
- 7 'Heads Float About Me' can be found in *Selected Poems*, p.27.
- 8 For details of the 1946 notebook – currently in the possession of the Peake family – see Peake's forthcoming *Collected Poems*, Introduction. 'I Was Not There' occurs on p.14 of Notebook 2 (as I call it in my notes), and is typed.
- 9 The Belsen poem is 'The Consumptive. Belsen 1945', *Peake's Progress*, pp.168–69.
- 10 The full text of *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb* is given in *Peake's Progress*, pp.445–68. The manuscript from which I have taken the text of the merman fragment is currently on loan to the Bodleian Library, Oxford (Bod. Dep. Peake 5, fol. 33^v–34^v). I have added some punctuation. The rest of *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb* is quoted from *Peake's Progress*.
- 11 See 'They Move with Me, My War-Ghosts', published in Peake's first poetry collection, *Shapes and Sounds* (1941).
- 12 *Mr Slaughterboard* can be found in *Peake's Progress*, pp.63–94.
- 13 Twelve of the 25 pictures are reproduced in *Mervyn Peake: The Man and His Art*. London and Chester Springs: Peter Owen, 2006, com-

We are the thoughtless people.



‘We are the thoughtless people’

- piled by Sebastian Peake and Alison Eldred, ed. G. Peter Winnington, pp.66–69. An account of the series can be found on p.65.
- 14 Writing to Peake about his prospects of becoming a war artist, Sir Kenneth Clark observed that on the whole he seemed to be ‘much better away from facts’ (18th October 1940). Peake’s attempts to adapt his ‘non-factual’ artistic talents to the needs of the War Artists’ Committee – first by painting surreal representations of the Blitz, then by offering his services for the production of propaganda – can be traced through his (as yet unpublished) correspondence with Clark.
- 15 The fragment comes from UCL MS Add. 234, Box 4 (ii), fol. 30^v. This contains an earlier draft of *Titus Alone* than the one in Box 4 (i), which gives as its earliest date December 1954.