



University
of Glasgow

Maslen, R.W. (2010) *Peake at Southport: published and unpublished verses from the seafront, 1942.* Peake Studies, 12 (1). pp. 3-24. ISSN 1013-1191

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/43243/>

Deposited on: 1 February 2011

Peake at Southport: published and unpublished verses from the seafront, 1942

R. W. Maslen

Mervyn Peake lived his life surrounded by eerie foreshadowings and replicas of Gormenghast castle. The hospital compound where he spent his early childhood in Tientsin was ‘a world surrounded by a wall with China on the other side; as in Gormenghast, the emphasis is on enclosure’.¹ Not many miles away was the Forbidden City where the Boy-Emperor lived in seclusion as Peake grew up nearby; and the city inspired the setting of the BBC *Gormenghast* series along with a ‘Tibetan-style monastery in Ladakh’.² In the 1930s Peake joined an artists’ colony on the tiny Channel Island of Sark, whose geography has often been compared to that of his imaginary castle;³ and in the 1940s he moved back to the island with his family. When he developed Parkinson’s disease in the late 1950s, he was treated in the Holloway Sanatorium, Virginia Water: a spectacular palatial building decorated with astonishing grotesques, hailed by Pevsner as one of the crowning achievements of late Victorian architecture. As with all great literary creations, once Gormenghast castle was summoned up it proceeded to generate doubles of itself through time and space, and Peake himself inhabited more than a few of these topographical echoes of the imaginary fastness.

One of the Gormenghasts he occupied has remained unnoticed. This is the neo-Gothic building where he lived for one summer in the middle of the Second World War: the Convalescent and Sea-Bathing Hospital (later known as the Promenade Hospital) at Southport, Lancashire.⁴ A bustling miniature city with high-ceilinged Nightingale wards and an enormous dining room, within an imposing red

brick Victorian structure a few miles up the coast from Liverpool, it was administered after the outbreak of war as an emergency hospital, with beds for 600 patients. To this place Peake came as a patient in the spring of 1942, after suffering a breakdown while on military service at a camp near Clitheroe, Lancashire.⁵ The windows at the front of the building looked out on the promenade, which ran alongside a large artificial lake where you could go boating in peacetime. Beyond the lake lay the vast expanse of the Southport sands. Spanning the lake and stretching out across the sands was the Southport pier, one of the longest in the British Isles. In the other direction, behind the hospital, you could stroll along Lord Street: a magnificent tree-lined shopping avenue once frequented by the future Emperor Napoleon III, who is said to have been inspired by it to fill the centre of Paris with spacious boulevards.⁶ At any other time Peake might have liked Southport; but its brightness came to him at a time of emotional and intellectual crisis, and the works of art he produced there are as anguished as they are beautiful.

Till now, most of what we have known about Peake's time at Southport has come from his letters, the most informative of which was addressed to his old school friend Gordon Smith shortly before he left. In this letter he lists some of the symptoms that landed him in a sickbed: 'sleeplessness at night and tired all day (ironically) – irritable as a bereaved rattle-snake and apt to weep on breaking a boot-lace'.⁷ He found himself unable to work on the various illustrations he had been commissioned to produce because he was so 'jittery' – a word that might imply (Peter Winnington suggests) that his hands were shaking as they would do again in the 1950s, in the early stages of the Parkinson's disease that ultimately killed him.⁸ In a letter to Sir Kenneth Clark, Peake attributes these symptoms to the 'perpetual frustration and . . . wastefulness' of army life: 'two years of trivial routine' during which he was perversely refused all opportunity to deploy his talents in the service of the war effort, condemned instead to fritter away his time at a succession of tasks and training exercises for which he had no aptitude.⁹ 'I am sick, sick, sick of it,' he told Smith, 'the perpetual littleness of the life – the monotonous conversation of what I suppose are my comrades who are with me polish-

ing buttons and blanccoing the webbing in our fight against world tyranny ... I just want to cry when I think of the stupidity of the whole bloody, ghastly, sordid business.¹⁰ Isolation, boredom, a sense of wasted time and the ‘sordid business of war’ plunged him into a state of acute emotional vulnerability, unable to sustain the farce of pretending to participate in what were for him the senseless rituals of the army – a mood comparable to that of Titus Groan as he rebels against the meaningless rituals of Gormenghast castle.

This mood was intensified when Peake’s second son Fabian was born in April 1942 and he was refused permission to visit his wife Maeve in Sussex. He promptly went absent without leave and headed south; but when he arrived at the nursing home she found him strangely distant and distracted, a condition he describes from within, as it were, in several powerful poems (*‘O, This Estrangement’*; *‘Absent From You’*, etc.). Returning to Clitheroe, he accepted the routine punishment dished out to him by his regiment – he never said what it was – and continued his descent into depression. The breaking point came at the end of May, when he found himself struck down by an attack of involuntary insubordination: ‘I bent down to do up my boot-lace, when I suddenly realized that I could never obey another order again, not ever in my whole life.’¹¹ He reported to the Medical Officer, and was admitted to Southport Hospital on 27 May, suffering from what he called a ‘nervous collapse’.¹²

At the hospital, patients were dressed in a distinctive uniform that caused Peake extreme embarrassment when he wore it in public: ‘shapeless “suits” of peacock blue with crimson rag ties’, which made their wearers ‘very noticeable in this artificial town with its sea on the horizon’.¹³ The pyjama-like garments drew the unwelcome attention of the local women, who would look ‘very lovingly’ at Peake until they learned that he wasn’t wounded at Dunkirk. He mentions the clothes in several letters, and wrote a poem about them too, as we shall see. No doubt they contributed to his sense of being confined in an asylum, which was exacerbated by the behaviour of the other patients, who went about ‘gesticulating or grinning suddenly at nothing’, as Peake did not (at least, he didn’t think so).¹⁴ One of the pictures he sent to Maeve showed him ‘with his fellow sick-

men queuing up for their meals, in long nightshirts, huge army boots, and cropped hair'.¹⁵ After collecting their meals on trays they would take them back to their wards, to eat in bed after taking off the boots. It was the oddness of their physical appearance, as much as their eccentric actions, that marked out these men as distinct from the nattily uniformed 'healthy-men' of the British Army.

Other aspects of hospital life proved more congenial. As treatment for his condition Peake was prescribed the welcome task of getting on with his half-completed novel, *Titus Groan*; and some of the finest chapters in that book bear the inscription 'Occupational therapy, Southport Neurosis Centre' (a name for Southport Hospital which he seems to have invented). He learned to play a pipe – 'It's the most thrillly thing in the world', he told Smith¹⁶ – and made two for himself, one in A and one in D, from which he could produce simple tunes such as 'Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring'.¹⁷ Evidently the carving of the pipes gave him as much pleasure as playing them. 'I want to make one of black walnut,' he declared, 'brace-and-biting it right through (one inch diameter) and then cutting away, rasping, etc., until I have a perfect tube, very slender'.¹⁸ At other times he drew pictures of strange animals, cut them out and sent them home to Maeve and his sons.¹⁹ Meanwhile he was developing his interest in poetry, spurred on perhaps by the good sales of his first collection, *Shapes and Sounds*, the year before. He recommended to Smith a new anthology, *Poetry in Wartime*, singling out the Welsh poet Vernon Watkins – a friend of his friend Dylan Thomas – for special praise. One of the manuscript pages of *Titus Groan* carries the injunction 'Get Trahern' [sic], signalling his intention to familiarize himself with the seventeenth-century poet and mystic Thomas Traherne. He gave a copy of the *Selected Poems* of Louis MacNeice to a woman called Dora Street (was she a nurse at the hospital?).²⁰ And he was also writing poems himself. Until recently none of the verses he wrote at Southport have been identifiable; but now a number have come to light, and they offer intriguing insights into his existence on the Lancashire coast during his enforced four-month stay.²¹

One of these poems is a fragment which brings us right into the ward where the 'sick-men' ate their meals side by side in bed. Maeve

tells us that Peake's next-door neighbour in the ward was another sufferer from breakdown, a spiritualist who received regular visits from his dead mother. Because of the army timetable, the man's mother had been unable to find him while he was on military service; but since his hospitalization 'they had been able to re-establish their old routine, and she came to see her son every evening at six o'clock promptly'.²² The anecdote conjures up a vision of solidarity among patients who had been subjected to the intolerable pressure of conforming to the inflexible schedule of military life; Maeve reports it as if the mother's visits were a secret shared by the bedridden neighbours in defiance of the hospital officials, and in broader defiance of the notion of sanity imposed on them by a manifestly insane environment. This sense of conspiracy is consolidated in the fragment of verse, which has never before been published:

*We Are the Lifeless Gypsies*²³

We are the lifeless gypsies. The swashbucklers
Who have to be in bed by half past nine
These summer nights – we are the grievance crew
Of love and filth, of plot and secret sign,

The unconvincing pirates of the ward
Where nurses whisper of their own intended
In cubicles when the ward lights are out

These verses repeatedly juxtapose tremendous vigour with passivity, building up to a crescendo of specifically sexual frustration in which patients and nurses find themselves confined in an artificially sexless environment, their proximity to one another strictly regulated to prevent any fraternization beyond the 'plot and secret sign' exchanged between patients. The sick are represented as displaced persons in the disciplined hospital environment: gypsies and pirates, both groups associated with energetic wandering and often romanticized acts of courageous lawlessness, but here hobbled by adjectives that drain them of their traditional vitality: *lifeless*, *unconvincing*. The pirates' potential for swashbuckling has been buckled, as it were, to a strict routine (they 'have to be in bed by half past nine')

which pays no attention to their maturity or the changing of the seasons (in north-western ‘summer nights’ the light remains strong till late, accentuating the earliness of the swashbucklers’ bed-time). The sexual frustration of the patients, whose ‘grievance’ at their confinement manifests itself in outbreaks of ‘love and filth’ – abortive romance and furtive fantasy – leads them to listen intently to the conversation of the nurses after lights-out, as the women discuss their own love-lives in the seeming privacy of ‘cubicles’. There is something satisfying in the way this poetic fragment peters out, just as the whispers inevitably drift into the silence of sleep. There can be no satisfaction or closure for the hospital’s segregated inhabitants, and the form of the fragment as we have it mimics their inconclusive existence.

The fragment is written in the five-stress line, iambic pentameter, which could be described as Peake’s default metre in his ‘serious’ poems (as opposed to his nonsense).²⁴ In the letter he wrote to Gordon Smith from Southport he shows himself uncomfortably aware of the extent to which this metre dominates the music of his verse. ‘My chief problem,’ he tells Smith,

is one of Form, and I find myself to be expressing things overmuch in the five-beat line, irrespective of the core of the notion. Not really quite as bad as that, but a lack of being able to leap instinctively into the *only* form that the mood must be externalised by. I want my poems to create this form in a *growth* way, out of the very nature of the thought, unfolding as they continue from line to line, from idea to idea, and then to close in gradually (or swiftly) like the petal of a flower at night . . .²⁵

Another poem to emerge from his Southport period is both a striking example of Peake’s weddedness to the ‘five-stress line’ and the extent to which he could make it seem to have grown quite naturally from the ‘very nature of the thought’ it embodies. Published for the first time in his *Collected Poems*,²⁶ the poem has since been found on the reverse of the manuscript leaf that contains ‘We Are the Lifeless Gypsies’, confirming them as products of the same period of convalescence:

Blue as the Indigo and Fabulous Storm

Blue as the indigo and fabulous storm
Of a picture book long lost where islands burst
Out of the page, exploding palm on palm,
Are we, whom the authorities have dressed.
For we are bluer than the fabulous waters
That lap the inner skull-walls of a boy
So that his head is filled with brimming summer's
Dazzling rollers which make dull the day
Surrounding him, like an un-focused twilight,
Such waters as uplift a rippling acre
Of naked jelly through the sunfire drifting
With at its centre a vermillion ember
Across whose fire the transparent eyelids rove
O fiercer than the azure lights that flare
At the lit core of fantasy. We move –
See how the sick kingfishers take the air! –
In brilliance past the Southport pier
Yet we are shapeless in our azure suits
Which hang in monstrous folds. Around our throats
The twisted snakes of fire burn all day long,
And tenderness recoils from our preposterous boots.

Read in the context of Peake's institutionalized summer at Southport the poem becomes a dazzling evocation of the sense of alienation imposed both by the condition of being a patient and by the state of being a visionary artist: a Blake or a John Clare with a distinctive perception of the world which he struggles to convey through word and image. This sense of alienation is present in many of Peake's poems, but is here exacerbated by the 'monstrous folds' of the vivid blue uniform that makes the hospital inmates stand out even from the blueness of sea and sky on a northern summer day. Their costumes transform the patients into grotesque parodies of a vision that was of intense and lifelong interest to Peake: the 'fabulous waters / That lap the inner skull-walls' of a young boy, an imaginative ocean which dims the brightness of the actual summer day to a mere 'un-

focused twilight', and which for Peake were specifically associated with the favourite book of his childhood, Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.²⁷

As the poem proceeds, its focus shifts repeatedly from the outward appearance of the patients in their blue suits and fiery neckties to the boy's interior landscape, whose brilliance is both challenged and alluded to by the 'brilliance' of the 'sick kingfishers' the patients have become. The fantastic energy of the boy's vision of a piratical picture book, where palm trees resemble explosions and 'brimming summer's / Dazzling rollers' reduce the daylight of the room in which he is reading to 'an un-focused twilight', is more than matched by the monstrous vitality of the patients' costumes, which are '*bluer* than the fabulous waters' imagined by the child reader. At the same time, the boy's imaginative world and the patients' real one seem to merge as the fabulous waters are described in greater detail, becoming the account of a vision which invalids and children share:

Such waters as uplift a rippling acre
Of naked jelly through the sunfire drifting
With at its centre a vermillion ember
Across whose fire the transparent eyelids rove
O fiercer than the azure lights that flare
At the lit core of fantasy.

At first hard to visualize, after rereading it becomes clear that these lines evoke with astonishing precision a breaker lifting its 'ripping acre of naked jelly' in front of a summer sun, so that the sun is seen through the advancing wave. Wonderfully, it is not made clear whether we're to think of the 'transparent eyelids' as a metaphorical description of the wave or as a reference to the actual eyelids of the spectator/poet, closed against the dazzling brilliance of the vision he has been granted. In the same way, it is not clear whether 'O fiercer than the azure lights that flare / At the lit core of fantasy' refers to the fierceness of the sunlight seen through water, or whether it refers back to the blueness of the patients' uniforms, which were 'bluer than the fabulous waters' of the boy's imagination, and perhaps fiercer than them too. The confusion is a productive one, because it

mimics the bedazzlement brought on by the vision of the wave against the sun. Spectator, wave, sun, and the imagined vision that the wave and the sun represent, become fused in a single scene where the explosive inward landscape of the child reading a picture book and the incongruous brightness of the patients at the sea front are equally at home, and equally alien to the ‘un-focused twilight’ of the ‘dull . . . day’ that surrounds them. Implicitly, child and patients share common access to the ‘lit core of fantasy’, and a common desire to turn away from the everyday world to face the searing brightness of the inward picture. The quasi-visionary nature of the experience described here may help to explain Peake’s interest, while he was at Southport, in getting hold of the work of the visionary poet Thomas Traherne.

The link forged between hospital patients and a young boy in this poem brilliantly denotes the infantilization of the institutionalized – one of several kinds of infantilization to which Peake was subjected before ever he came to Southport. His first self-illustrated book had been a child’s picture story full of metaphorically exploding palms, *Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor*; but when he tried to interest Chatto & Windus in adding illustrations to his poetry collection *Shapes and Sounds*, they rejected the idea as too radical: illustrations were too closely associated with publications for the young to be admissible in a serious publication²⁸ – and besides, there was a shortage of paper (though this didn’t prevent Eyre & Spottiswoode from publishing his illustrated collection of nonsense verses, *Rhymes Without Reason*, in 1944). With the exception of the jacket drawing, the illustrations he sent to Chatto’s were not used; Peake sold them to private collectors, and two of them resurfaced decades later disconnected from the poems they were meant to accompany.²⁹ The same infantilizing view of his talents was shown by the army in wartime, who set him to painting signs for toilets as if this were the most suitable outlet for his artistic energies.³⁰ It’s hardly surprising, then, if the patients in ‘Blue as the Indigo and Fabulous Storm’ end up as the kind of half-terrifying clowns Peake loved to draw throughout his life, whose shapeless suits hang in ‘monstrous folds’ and whose throats are encircled by actual monsters, the ‘twisted

snakes of fire' which externalize their inner torments. Even the outsized boots which in clowns are comic have been transformed in this context to the kind of preposterous spectacle from which 'tenderness recoils', rendering their wearers bereft of emotional or sexual succour. These clowns, like the murderously clownish pirate Captain Slaughterboard in the opinion of some contemporary critics, are both the stuff of infantile fantasy and at the same time wholly unsuitable (in the eyes of squeamish adults) for consumption by the young.

Peake's use of iambic pentameter in the poem is masterful, as is his subtle use of rhyme or half-rhyme throughout. It's easy not to notice the rhyme scheme when you first read it (although the division of the text into stanzas in the recently-discovered ms accentuates the rhyme);³¹ and the repeated use of enjambment renders the five-stress line as fluid as its subject, the oceanic mental riot that the grotesque hospital suits both signal and seek to contain. This fluidity makes it easy for Peake to break the a-b-a-b rhyme scheme whenever he feels like it, or to add an extra metrical foot to the last line – an entirely appropriate gesture given that it refers to the outsized boots described by Maeve as an integral part of the 'sick-men' of Southport's uniform. Here, then, despite his self-doubts, Peake has shown himself 'able to leap instinctively into the *only* form that the mood must be externalised by' – even if that form happens to be the five-stress line he deploys so frequently.

Two more poems from his time at Southport make equally skilful use of iambic pentameter; and although each is only a sketch that survives in a single manuscript, scribbled in a hand that is sometimes hard to decipher, each shows a similar mastery of its chosen metre, and throws similar light on his mood at this troubled moment in his creative development. The first, scrawled on the marbled cover of an exercise book, describes a woman seated by a window, irresistibly conjuring up the many images of Maeve that her husband sketched throughout their marriage (though it's always unwise to make assumptions about the identity of women in Peake's poems). Because it is written in the second person, it reads like an act of mesmerism, whereby Peake seeks to affect Maeve's actions across the war-torn miles that separate them:

*Curl Up in the Great Window Seat*³²

Curl up in the great window seat, your heels
Beneath you in the cushions while you watch
The summer rain fall with unnatural darkness
Beyond the pane. Move your dim arm and touch

The glass that shields you from the violence
Of the primeval gods. Then turn your eyes
To the book upon your knees, and make pretence
To read, but do not see it. Then heave such sighs

As the melancholy drifts of water heave
As they draw back their salt drifts from a cove
Of clashing shingle – then, my darling, leave,
And suddenly, the room, and weep, my love.

Water and isolation dominate this poem, as they did ‘Blue as the Indigo and Fabulous Storm’; and once again a visual impairment is described – though in this case connected with premature darkness rather than excessive light. The first stanza sketches a comfortable homely scene with impressive economy. The detail of the woman’s ‘heels / Beneath you in the cushions’ implies a tender familiarity with her habits (going barefoot indoors, sitting in certain favourite spots and attitudes), while the ‘unnatural darkness’ of the rain beyond the window pane only accentuates the cosiness of her situation. But her touching of the glass, beyond which the ‘violence / Of the primeval gods’ is being visited upon the elements, abruptly changes the poem’s tone. Soft summer rain is suddenly transformed to a tempest from which the watcher needs to be ‘shielded’. The domestic calm is shattered. We never learn exactly what makes the woman unable to read while pretending to do so – while trying to keep up the *appearance*, at least, of the cosiness of the first stanza; but by the third stanza the chill and damp of the weather outside have definitely penetrated the room she occupies, as her sighs become those of the cold ‘salt drifts’ of some retreating tide, which are powerful enough to make the shingle clash as the waves heave backwards from a cove they once filled.

At the end of the poem, the salt drifts have begun to vent them-

selves in the salt tears the woman weeps when she leaves the room. Meanwhile the brokenness of the last two lines, achieved by commas and awkward syntax, is accentuated by the tender phrases that occur in them: 'my darling', 'my love', each confirming our suspicions as to the cause of the woman's sudden melancholy (she is in some way separated from someone close to her). There's a violence about the last two lines, too, that is accentuated by these terms of affection. If the poem is indeed a conjuration or a set of instructions, what kind of 'love' on the part of the writer would be prepared to call down such suffering on his absent 'darling'? Coldness, an inability to touch or be touched, seems here to be as much a product of the alienated state of mind of the writer as it is of the long enforced separation of Maeve and Mervyn brought about by his hospitalization. Gothic creepiness replaces cosiness at the close, and we might well be reminded of the fact that Peake was writing some of the most powerful evocations of isolation in the Titus novels – the section he calls the 'reveries', in which guests at the baby earl's birthday breakfast each find themselves locked away in their own thoughts, unable to communicate their hopes and fears to the people sitting next to them – at about the time when he wrote this poem.

The other poem in iambic pentameter he wrote at Southport has a very similar topic and mood. Until now it has been known only in typescript, but I found a manuscript copy of the poem, in Peake's hand, while looking through the Peake Archives at Sotheby's, and the manuscript is written on the same paper, in the same ink, and with the same handwriting as the sole surviving manuscript of 'Blue as the Indigo and Fabulous Storm' (which was also in the Archives, and likewise not available to me when I edited the *Collected Poems*). Given the immense variations in Peake's handwriting at different times of his life (by turns confident, aggressive, shaky, sprawling, minuscule, painterly, and insectile), and in the paper and ink he used throughout his career, this makes it likely that the two were written in the same period; and although the grounds of the Southport Emergency Hospital do not seem to correspond with the landscape described in the poem, the state of mind Peake here articulates closely resembles his description to Gordon Smith of his state of mind at

Southport: exhausted, irritable, emotionally hypersensitive, and unable to engage with any consistency with his various creative projects (even his work on *Titus Groan* stalled while he was at Southport, after completion of the 'Reveries' section).

Here is the poem, transcribed for the first time from manuscript, and thus differing slightly from the version in *Collected Poems*:³³

For God's Sake Draw the Blind

For God's sake draw the blind and shut away
The beauty that is crowding through the window:
A score of rain drenched elms and four drenched
pastures,
All apple green against the leaden sky[.]
I do not want it – I am out of tune
With all this loveliness. To hell with it.
Draw the thick blinds, put on the light – I will
Not watch the green leaves fluttering in the dark,
I will not watch it. I am far too tired
For the responsibility for miracles[.]
O vulnerable when nature comes to me
And lifts the corner of her common veil.

The last two lines are particularly hard to read, which explains some of the differences between this transcription and that of the anonymous typist whose typescript I used for the version in the *Collected Poems*. It seems clear, however, that the poem is not complete – although once again its fragmentary status renders it curiously eloquent, enacting the lassitude it describes, the refusal to continue to 'take responsibility for miracles'. And the subject of the poem seems clear enough too. On a rainy day, the extraordinary beauty of a pastoral scene outside the window – the kind of scene Peake had been writing fine poems about only months or weeks before ('Leave Train', 'With People, So with Trees', 'An April Radiance of White Light Dances') – suddenly becomes oppressive, carrying with it the burden of 'responsibility'; presumably the artist's responsibility to capture scenes like these in verbal or visual form. That Peake is refer-

ring to a loss of artistic energy and confidence is suggested by another poem on the same subject, ‘Conscious that Greatness Has Its Tinder Here’,³⁴ which describes his loss of the ‘power’ to access the inner resources that might make him great as an artist or a writer, and perhaps specifically as a poet, since he tells us the power might manifest itself as the ‘high flame of an oracle’ (whose pronouncements traditionally take the form of verse). In that poem, his hope that the power of oracular speech has not been lost for ever is twice called ‘the hope of miracle’, a phrase recalled by the Southport poem’s reference to ‘responsibility for miracles’. But in the Southport poem the plural noun distances the speaker from the processes he is describing. The creative ‘miracle’ of ‘Conscious that Greatness Has Its Tinder Here’ takes place *inside* the writer; it is the sudden outbreak of ‘inner fire’ into artistic form. The ‘miracles’ of ‘For God’s Sake Draw the Blind’ take place *outside* not just the writer but the room he sits in, in a rain-washed space where ‘nature’ is attempting to seduce him into participating in her ‘loveliness’ – into being in tune with it, as if he were a well-made pipe – at a point when he finds himself too weak to respond to her advances. The tone of sexual alienation both accords well with the tone of ‘We Are the Lifeless Gypsies’, and recalls Peake’s account of his awkward encounters with the respectable women of Southport in his letter to Gordon Smith.

‘For God’s Sake Draw the Blind’ resembles ‘Curl Up in the Great Window Seat’ in that both take place at windows, beyond whose panes events are taking place which trigger a strong emotional reaction in those who are watching them: the seated woman, the hospital patient. Peake’s most well-known window poem, ‘Each Day We Live Is a Glass Room’,³⁵ describes the whole of human existence as framed by glass, implying that ‘we’ share a sense of separation both from our fellow human beings and from the ideal landscape we would like to inhabit, a place of ‘green pastures’ where ‘the birds and buds are breaking / Into fabulous song and hue /By the still waters’. In the version of this poem published in *Collected Poems*, the phrase ‘green pastures’ echoes Psalm 23 (‘He maketh me to lie down by green pastures’), and the biblical echo is confirmed by a later refer-

ence to the occupant of those pastures, ‘the Lord’. An unpublished earlier version of the poem, however, does not possess these religious connotations; and the isolation it describes is a personal one, not collectively experienced by ‘we’ or ‘us’ but encountered on a daily basis by a single first-person speaker. I give it here, not as a Southport poem – though for all we know it *could* have been written at Southport – but to throw light on what he may have felt his stay at Southport was doing to him:

*Each Day I Live Is a Glass Room*³⁶

Each day I live is a glass room
Unless I break it with the thrusting
Of my senses and pass through
The splintered walls to great landscapes
Where the birds and buds are bursting
Into Song and into Shape and Hue
Vivid and lasting.

Each day is a glass room until
I break it – but there’s many a day
I have no power to smash the walls
Of cloudy glass, and make my way
Into my own, into that vibrant country

The landscape here is not the psalm-inspired pastureland of the published version but a grander, wilder expanse which Peake dubs ‘*my own . . . vibrant country*’. This sounds very like the private inward space described as a person’s ‘world’ in the celebrated chapter of *Titus Groan* entitled ‘The Attic’. Here Peake speaks of the love ‘that equals in its power the love of man for woman and reaches inwards as deeply. It is the love of a man or of a woman for their world. For the world of their centre where their lives burn genuinely and with a free flame’.³⁷ In Fuchsia’s case, her ‘world’ is a suite of rooms in a hidden attic of Gormenghast castle; the one place where she can allow her imagination free rein, where it can burn with the brightness of the sea-refracted sun in ‘Blue as the Indigo and Fabulous Storm’. Fuchsia can access her suite of attic rooms with enviable

ease. In 'Each Day I live', by contrast – the early version of 'Each Day We Live' – 'my own country' may be visited only sporadically and with considerable effort, when the strenuous 'thrusting / Of my senses' smashes the glass cell to which the speaker is confined. Interestingly, however, both Fuchsia's 'world' and the poet's share a common concern with the fusion of shape and sound, word and image. Fuchsia's attic contains a 'big coloured book of verses and pictures', two of which ('The Frivolous Cake' and 'Simple, Seldom and Sad') we are privileged to read, the first through Fuchsia's, the second through Steerpike's eyes.³⁸ In 'Each Day I Live', the birds and buds of 'my own country' are always bursting 'Into Song and into *Shape* and *Hue* / Vivid and lasting' (my emphasis); a fusion of sound, shape and colour which gets lost in the published version, where the green pastures contain birds of 'fabulous song and hue' whose *shapes* are never mentioned. The combination of shape, sound and colour in the earlier draft recalls the title of Peake's first collection of poems, *Shapes and Sounds*, and seems to suggest that poetry's unique ability to combine shape with sound, on the page and in the writer's and reader's brain, makes it for Peake the imaginative space that most completely defines him as an artistic polymath – the ultimate expression of his 'world'. Presumably this poetic space would be even more defining of Peake if it were accompanied by illustrations, as *Shapes and Sounds* was meant to be – and as several poems by Peake were when they first appeared. His friend Lesley Hurry illustrated three of his poems in the 1930s, including 'September 1939', which Hurry framed in a surreal watercolour landscape, thus enclosing it in its own glass room.³⁹

It would seem, then, that the 'nervous collapse' that took Peake to Southport was particularly disturbing, like the war in which it occurred, because of the violence it did to his inner landscape – a violence given external expression in the damage that was also being done to the urban landscapes Peake knew so well (the link between outward and inward damage is well expressed in his poem 'The Craters'). Fuchsia's attic world is a place of tranquillity, where she can act out plays, tell herself stories, and read her illustrated poems without interference or regulation; and when Steerpike bursts vio-

lently into it from outside – reading her ‘book of verses and pictures’ to gain access to her mind – its magic is lost for ever. Peake’s own country in ‘Each Day I Live’ is an energetic but peaceful place where only buds and birds are bursting, not bodies or bombs. The visionary seascape he evokes in the Southport poem ‘Blue as the Indigo and Fabulous Storm’ is far more tempestuous, with palms exploding and islands bursting all over the place; but then it has been afflicted by the psychological condition of the patients it describes, whose privacy has been violated first by war and military service, then by parading them along the seafront in abominable suits. The landscape beyond the glass in ‘Curl Up in the Great Window Seat’ is more tempestuous still, ravaged by the ‘violence / Of the primeval gods’ like the embodiment of the woman reader’s inner turmoil. And though the four pastures in ‘For God’s Sake Draw the Blind’ are tranquil enough, the speaker cannot respond to their tranquillity, traumatized or nerve-wracked as he is into acute vulnerability – a word derived from the Latin *vulnus*, wound, whose ghostly presence returns the poem to the theatre of war from which it seems at first to be secluded. The Southport poems show Peake exiled from the ‘vibrant country’ of himself, having been brutally pressed into performing absurd and inappropriate services for his nation. The cloudy glass that surrounded him at Southport Hospital, separating him from his home and the people around him as well as from his creativity, must sometimes have seemed unbreakable during his prolonged confinement.

One more unpublished Southport poem, though, shows how he fought to acclimatize himself to the physical and psychological landscape he inhabited in 1942. Unlike the others, it is not in iambic pentameter, but wends through various metres and rhyme-schemes, perhaps in an attempt to ‘create form in a *growth* way’, as Peake put it to Gordon Smith: that is, to discover a form of verse that grew organically, as it were, out of its subject, and out of the time and place of its composition. Such a form would have a better chance than the five-stress line, he thought, of flowering and producing fruit; in other words, of spawning future works of art, especially poetry. Certainly no other poem of his Southport period – not even ‘Blue as the Indigo and Fabulous Storm’ – more obviously grows out

of the specific location it was written in. Those who have visited the beach at Southport will remember its great expanse of sands which is bared at low tide: even from the end of the pier it is possible to lose sight of the sea altogether, or to see it only as a narrow strip of brightness on the horizon. Southport is a place of panoramas – as is the coastal part of Lancashire where it's located, whose wide flat fields look like a green extension of the beaches that lie beyond them. The 'distant tide', the 'far, portentous sea' in this poem, of which one remains acutely conscious despite its farness, is something that clearly springs from the land and seascapes of western Lancashire.

Here it is:

Gates Open and Love's Vistas Spread⁴⁰

Gates open and love's vistas spread
To the mournful barely heard
Tides that lap the bay of death
Where the wanderer through pastures
Wades and makes an end of breath
And the bodies thousand gestures
Many many years away.
But between the great gateway
Which has opened suddenly
And the far, portentous sea
Like a grey curtain filling up
The space where all the sky should be –
Spreads the dazzling woof and warp
Of the days and of the hours
And of the months and of the years
The rainbow and the diamond showers
And the tears
Of our love which are the river
That makes green the fields of lovers
When they wander through the world[.]
For what are tears but proof that we
Are alive to everything
That we hear and that we see

In each other's entity
Where the purple heart takes wing[?]

Unlike the other poems of the Southport period, these lines enact not confinement but liberation. Where the others are full of shut windows, this begins with an opening, rather like the generous opening of gates which Milton links with Heaven in *Paradise Lost* – or the gates of God's house in Psalm 24. The landscape revealed by this opening (we never find out in the poem *which* gates are being opened – perhaps they stand for the experience or recollection of falling in love) is a representation of the lover's life, reaching through 'many many years' to the far-distant 'Tides that lap the bay of death'. These tides provoke thoughts of suicide, since at the end of his or her life's journey the wanderer through love's vistas wades into them voluntarily, as if eager to put a stop to the act of breathing. They resemble a 'grey curtain' (covering another window?); but the panorama spread out in front of them is a dazzling confusion of shifting shapes and colours, reminiscent of the dazzling confusion of 'Blue as the Indigo and Fabulous Storm'.

But the reason for the confusion is here quite different. It arises from the tears that blur the speaker's eyes; tears that have little in common with the tears that occur in 'Curl Up in the Great Window Seat'. There they flow from the 'salt drifts' of the woman reader's melancholy. She leaves the room suddenly to shed them in private, and there is nothing in them capable of mitigating the gloomy condition either of the woman's mind or of the storm-surrounded room she has just left. In 'Gates Open and Love's Vistas Spread', by contrast, the tears utterly transform the landscape that is seen through them, giving it the 'dazzling warp and woof' of an exotic fabric, watering it with 'rainbow and . . . diamond showers', greening its fields with irrigating rivers. In Southport Hospital, tears were proof of disordered nerves: the symptoms of Peake's breakdown as he described them to Gordon Smith included being 'apt to weep on breaking a bootlace'. In the poem's transmuted Southport, tears are instead a proof of life; proof that those who shed them possess the most acute form of hearing and vision, the sensory acuteness of the

lover, which is capable of breaking through the isolation of the individual and experiencing the *whole* of another person's being ('entity' recalls the word 'entirety' or wholeness as well as being – health, then, instead of sickness). So acute is the lover's sight, in fact, that it can see the motions of the loved one's 'purple heart' as if it were the flight of a brightly coloured bird across wide-open spaces. The poem closes with a phrase, 'takes wing', which is the direct obverse of the entrapment articulated in the other Southport verses. Clearly, then, Peake had at times recourse to stratagems – born perhaps of his love for Maeve – capable of freeing him mentally from the confines of the Emergency Hospital. And we may count ourselves lucky to have been granted a glimpse of one, at least, of these liberating moments.

© R. W. Maslen 2010

R. W. Maslen is Senior Lecturer at the University of Glasgow. He edited Peake's *Collected Poems* for Carcanet, and is working with Peter Winnington on an edition of the *Complete Nonsense*, due to appear in 2011, to coincide with the centenary of Peake's birth. This is the second of his essays on unpublished poems, drafts and fragments to appear in *Peake Studies*; the first, 'Fantasies of War in Peake's Uncollected Verse', can be found in Vol. 10, No. 4 (April 2008).

Notes

- 1 G. Peter Winnington, *Vast Alchemies: The Life and Work of Mervyn Peake* (Peter Owen, 2000), p.34.
- 2 See Sebastian Peake, 'A Chinese Childhood', *Mervyn Peake: The Man and His Art*, ed. G. Peter Winnington, compiled by Sebastian Peake and Alison Eldred (Peter Owen, 2006), pp.21–8; and Estelle Daniel, 'Wrestling With the Unfilmable', *ibid*, p.189.
- 3 See for example Maeve Gilmore, *A World Away*, in *Mervyn Peake: Two Lives* (Vintage, 1999), p.76. John Batchelor also considers links between Sark and Gormenghast in *Mervyn Peake: A Biographical and Critical Exploration* (Duckworth, 1974), pp. 19–20.

- 4 Thanks to my wife Kirsty, and my children Bethany and Grace, for taking me on a trip to Southport in March 2010, where we visited the former Promenade Hospital in gorgeous weather.
- 5 See G. Peter Winnington, *Vast Alchemies*, chapters 12 and 13; and Malcolm Yorke, *Mervyn Peake: My Eyes Mint Gold* (John Murray, 2000), chapter 6.
- 6 See Robert McNeil, 'Napoleon III's Grand Ideas Linked to the Seaside Town of Southport', *The Scotsman*, April 25, 2000, at www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-18736217.html, accessed 30.8.10.
- 7 Gordon Smith, *Mervyn Peake: A Personal Memoir* (Victor Gollancz, 1984), p.86.
- 8 Smith, *Mervyn Peake*, p.88; Winnington, *Vast Alchemies*, p.157.
- 9 'Mervyn Peake's Correspondence with Sir Kenneth Clark', ed. G. Peter Winnington, *Peake Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (October 2009), p.33.
- 10 Smith, *Mervyn Peake*, pp. 82–5.
- 11 Smith, *Mervyn Peake*, p.77.
- 12 Smith, *Mervyn Peake*, p.86.
- 13 Smith, *Mervyn Peake*, p.86. To Kenneth Clark he describes himself as 'bedecked in an abominable sky-blue suit and a red rag tie', 'Correspondence with Sir Kenneth Clark', p.33.
- 14 Winnington, *Vast Alchemies*, p.155, from a letter written by Peake to Chatto & Windus.
- 15 Gilmore, *A World Away*, p.39.
- 16 Smith, *Mervyn Peake*, p.88.
- 17 Gilmore, *A World Away*, p.39.
- 18 Smith, *Mervyn Peake*, p.88.
- 19 Winnington, *Vast Alchemies*, p.157.
- 20 For this information I am grateful to Peter Winnington.
- 21 The poems that follow were transcribed during a visit to the Peake Archive while it was housed at Sotheby's in Bond Street during March 2010, prior to transportation to its new home in the British Library. I am deeply grateful to Sebastian Peake for giving me permission to visit the archive, and to Peter Selley and Philip Errington of Sotheby's for their invaluable assistance and stimulating conversation while I was taking up space in their office.

- 22 Gilmore, *A World Away*, p.39.
- 23 The title given here is my own.
- 24 See my introduction to Mervyn Peake, *Collected Poems*, Fyfield Books (Carcanet, 2008), p.10.
- 25 Smith, *Mervyn Peake*, p.88.
- 26 Peake, *Collected Poems*, p.120.
- 27 See Winnington, *Vast Alchemies*, pp. 37–8.
- 28 See Winnington, *Vast Alchemies*, pp. 142–3.
- 29 They are reproduced in Peake, *Collected Poems*, pp. 92 and 142. For the jacket drawing see p.98.
- 30 Gilmore, *A World Away*, p.33.
- 31 Unfortunately I did not have time to transcribe this ms during my visit to Sotheby's. An accurate transcription will be possible when the Peake Archive becomes available at the British Library.
- 32 This poem was first printed in Peake, *Collected Poems*, p.121.
- 33 Peake, *Collected Poems*, p.227.
- 34 Peake, *Collected Poems*, p.143.
- 35 Peake, *Collected Poems*, p.141.
- 36 The title is mine. The draft occurs on p.4 of the ms notebook I have called 'Notebook 2' (see Peake, *Collected Poems*, pp. 1–2 and 13).
- 37 Mervyn Peake, *Titus Groan* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1946), p.64.
- 38 Peake, *Titus Groan*, pp.70–1 and 128.
- 39 The other two poems were 'Watch, Here and Now' (*Collected Poems*, pp. 42–3) and ‘“Au Moulin Joyeux” September Crisis, 1938’, p.43. Hurry's illustration for 'September 1939' was reproduced in *Peake Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (October 2009), p.23.
- 40 Transcribed from the notebook containing chapters 57–59 of *Titus Groan*.