

# **Postmodern Existentialism in Mervyn Peake's Titus Books**

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## Introduction

In spite of the initial favorable reaction of critics to *Titus Groan* when it was published in 1946, it is only in recent years that Mervyn Peake's Titus Books have begun to receive serious attention from literary scholars. Ronald Binns suggests this lack of attention stems from the fact that Peake's trilogy 'belongs to no obvious tradition, lacks an ordered structure,' and 'is occasionally careless in detail.'<sup>1</sup> These are the very qualities that make Peake's novels so unique and which set him apart from his contemporaries; today scholarly interest continues to grow in Peake's work as a new generation of readers discovers the Titus Books.

Much of the discussion about Peake's Titus Books has been about how to place them in the lexicon of English literature. It is the aim of this paper to attempt to situate the Titus Books within the province of Postmodern Existential literature, focusing particularly on how the expression of existentialist theory permeates the novels. To do this requires an examination of what the terms postmodernism and existentialism mean by taking a look at the basic themes and questions that are associated with both movements.

The term postmodern is a problematic one. As Ihab Hassan points out in his *Toward a Concept of Postmodernism* there is no clear consensus among scholars about what postmodernism is. As Louis Hoffman suggest in *Existentialism and Postmodernism*, though postmodernists cannot always agree on a definition of the term 'postmodern' they do all tend to be interested in the same issues and questions; it is in how they approach these issues that they differ. The same can be said of existentialists; though they too are apt to disagree on the subject of existentialism, their disagreement is founded in an interest in the same questions and themes.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Binns, 'Situating Gormenghast', in *The Gormenghast Novels: Titus Groan, Gormenghast, Titus Alone* (Woodstock and New York, 1995), p. 1056

(In my analysis of the existentialism found within Peake's texts I will draw primarily from the works of Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, considered the fathers of existentialism, as the tradition of existentialism as we know it today has its roots in the philosophies they put forth.)

In *The Postmodern Condition* Jean-Francois Lyotard writes

I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences . . . the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal.<sup>2</sup>

There is in fact a great deal of overlap between both the existential and postmodern movements in the issues they choose to address, and the belief in the loss of grand narratives is but one example. With political upheaval and fragmentation on the rise throughout the world and with science and technology taking huge leaps forward and seeming to make the world itself a much smaller place, it became increasingly difficult to view the world as rational or to believe in the grand destiny of a people or nation. Lyotard went on to describe postmodernity as being defined by 'smaller and multiple narratives which seek no universalizing stabilization or legitimation.'<sup>3</sup> In this statement we hear echoes of existentialist philosophy which is concerned with the individual and his personal, subjective experience of the world and rejects Hegel's totalizing theory of the Absolute, which suggests the world is ordered and rational and that the truth of the human condition is objective and universal. In Christopher Nash's *World Postmodern Fiction* he draws further comparison between postmodernism and existentialism claiming that both 'often show an intimate concern with the idea of the force of volition in the shaping of reality,'<sup>4</sup> referring here to the arguments found in both Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's writings that the only reality that matters is the reality the individual creates for himself.

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Art and Popular Culture, [http://www.artandpopularculture.com/The\\_Postmodern\\_Condition](http://www.artandpopularculture.com/The_Postmodern_Condition) (August 6, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, (New York, 1989), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction: A Guide*, (Essex, 1987), p. 69.

Postmodernism has been described as destabilizing by nature, a ‘threat to the preservation of tradition and the status quo.’<sup>5</sup> It calls into question our faith in institutions and in literature explores ‘the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past.’<sup>6</sup> This too can be said of existentialism. In *Mirrors of Man in Existentialism* Nathan Scott describes existentialists as ‘troublers of our peace,’<sup>7</sup> due to their constant questioning of the world around us and of the institutions we have come to rely on so heavily. Hassan describes postmodernism as a ‘phenomenon of ironic cultural awareness, a mode of historical reflexivity, a perpetually anxious exercise in self-definition,’<sup>8</sup> which again shares a close affinity with existentialism. In fact, Nietzsche, considered one of the father’s of existentialism, is often cited by postmodernists as a key influence in postmodern theory. All of these descriptions of what the term ‘postmodern’ means share one distinct feature: they all suggest feelings of suspicion of and alienation from the world at large as well as doubt and fear as to the stability of mankind’s place and purpose in that world. These fears and suspicions were first voiced by existentialist philosophers in the mid to late nineteenth century, but it was not until the early twentieth century that their discussions took on a new sense of urgency and relevance. In the wake of two world wars these ‘postmodern’ forces were becoming more keenly felt in the literature of the time, and Peake’s Titus Books are no exception.

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<sup>5</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Nathan A. Scott, Jr., *Mirrors of Man in Existentialism*, (Cleveland, 1978), p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> Ihab Hassan, ‘Postmodernism: A Self-Interview’, *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 30, number 1, April 2006, pp. 223-228.

## Chapter One

Existentialism began as a rejection of the Hegelian system of the Absolute which approaches the study of man's experience in the universe through the practice and procedure of empirical science.<sup>9</sup> Hegel believed that the world was intrinsically rational, so much so that he supposed that every finite reality was simply a fragment of 'one all-inclusive experience forming the content of the Absolute Mind.'<sup>10</sup> He contended that an attempt to understand any single thing 'whether stone or flower or man,' would lead one to be

driven toward an inquiry into all the manifold relations that constitute the matrix of its existence: the quest for understanding drives us [...] from the part to the whole – because the world is rational through and through [...] In short, the world is, slowly but surely, moving toward what it ought to be.<sup>11</sup>

This theory led to feelings of discontent among the great thinkers of the late nineteenth century who began to feel that the world 'was not quite so tidy as Hegel made it out to be.'<sup>12</sup> There were many events that caused this skepticism toward the Hegelian world view; the great political upheavals taking place in America and in Europe, the rise of modern technology brought about by the Industrial Revolution, the rise of the middle class, the societal shift that resulted from the growth of major cities, and advances in scientific research all worked to undercut the theory of the Absolute, suggesting instead that human society was 'something not fixed and closed but open, in all sorts of startling new ways, to change and reconstruction.'<sup>13</sup> The world could no longer be seen as fixed and rational; instead it seemed to be something alive, a process, in a constant state of change and development. Existentialism also focuses on the individual and the subjective nature of existence as well as how one can function and live a meaningful, authentic life in the face of a chaotic world that seems to be completely arbitrary and meaningless; all of these themes can be found in any discussion of postmodern literature as well, which, like

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<sup>9</sup> Scott, *Mirrors of Man*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

existentialist philosophy, was born out of the same uneasy fear and suspicion about the nature of modern man's existence in an increasingly incomprehensible world.

For Kierkegaard the Hegelian world view simply didn't work; it was not possible to understand the nature of man's existence in the universe through any theory of the Absolute. Kierkegaard observed that 'every glimpse, every intuition of himself that he experienced told him, in effect that he – and not only he but every man – was lost in a strange world with which one could not easily achieve any intimate relationship,' leading him to conclude that man's condition 'is one of homelessness and exile and abandonment'<sup>14</sup>; he was *not*, as Hegel would have him believe, an integral part of a logical and ordered universe. This is a sentiment expressed throughout the Titus Books, a sentiment most profoundly felt in the extreme isolation that exists between the characters. In Peake's Titus Books one can view the primary struggle at the heart of Titus's existence as an attempt to break out of the Hegelian system of the Absolute which is found at the core of the belief system of Gormenghast as represented in its rituals and traditions, and to enter into the existentialist's more authentic mode of life in which the only reality that matters is the one the individual creates for himself. Hegel's system of the Absolute sees the universe as 'one great all-encompassing whole in which every single finite reality has its allotted and logical place,' a system which overwhelms the individual, making it nothing more than 'a paragraph in a system.'<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard's own experiences are what informed his theories on existentialism and his rejection of the Hegelian system. After his break with his fiancée Kierkegaard realized,

[I]n its disclosure of how terrible is the solitude in which a man stands when he dares absolutely to choose one thing rather than another, it had the effect of bearing in upon him the realization that what is radically significant for any human being is not [...] some cosmic principle of universal reason, but rather the immediate reality in which he is

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.



passionately involved: namely, his own existence which cannot be submerged in anything like Hegel's system of Absolute Being.<sup>16</sup>

It was his own personal experience which led Kierkegaard to view the nature of existence as a subjective ordeal unique to every individual, and that the only reality that truly mattered was one's own *immediate* reality.

During the course of the narrative of *Gormenghast* Titus becomes increasingly aware of this strange separation between himself and the other figures of the castle. When contemplating his mother Peake reveals that Titus 'was fascinated by her but he had no point of contact.'<sup>17</sup> The reader learns that growing up Titus has had very little contact with his mother in spite of the fact that they live in the same castle. Though she is always there, she has essentially abandoned him. The size of Gormenghast Castle itself has played a part in this, but so too has Gertrude's innate personality; she rarely seeks Titus out and has very little in the way of people skills, making their few encounters seem like the meeting of two different species, each completely incapable of relating to the other. It is hard to believe that they are in fact mother and son, the lack of intimacy between them is so profound.

It is on the individual that Kierkegaard focuses in his attempts to make sense of the nature of human experience. He believed that the 'principal fact of human experience concerns the finality with which the individual, lost as he is amidst the implacable silence of this strange world, is locked up within his own loneliness and solitude;' therefore, man cannot find any objective truth, as Hegel would have one believe, but will instead find truth in his own subjective experience of the world, 'a truth wrested from the vital actualities of a man's own personal existence.'<sup>18</sup> This too is reflected in Peake's work. It is when his characters are alone that they seem to find the most contentment. The remoteness that exists between the figures of

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Peake, *Gormenghast*, p. 649.

<sup>18</sup> Scott, *Mirrors of Man*, p. 9.

Gormenghast heightens the sensations of loneliness and abandonment felt by so many of the characters, but it has also allowed each of them to develop a thoroughly unique selfhood. Their isolation has caused each inhabitant of the castle to have a completely separate and individual experience of life within Gormenghast and has allowed ‘their personalities [to] remain undiluted and their powers of self-expression almost absolute.’<sup>19</sup> Even when in the company of others this distinct individuality and sense of aloneness found in each of Peake’s characters permeates the scenes. In his rejection of the Hegelian system Kierkegaard also argued that the world ‘in the large’ is beyond the reach of man, so he ‘cannot find anything to steer [his] life by in any sort of objective truth. No, the truth which is a joy and a gladness to the heart – if it can be found at all – will be a radically *subjective* truth.’<sup>20</sup> In *Gormenghast* the significance of both the individual and the subjective quality of each individual’s experience in Peake’s work is illustrated nicely in Titus’s observation of his mother’s cats, who he sees as behaving ‘as though each one were utterly alone, utterly content to be alone, conscious only of its own behavior, its own leap into the air, its own agility, self-possessed, solitary, enviable and legendary in a beauty both heraldic and fluent as water.’<sup>21</sup> They are a living representation of Kierkegaard’s subjective and individual truth.

In *Mirrors of Man in Existentialism* Nathan Scott identifies and outlines five central themes of existentialism. The first of these themes is the notion of man’s estrangement from the world at large. For both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard the primary focus of philosophical discussion should be that of determining how an individual can achieve a truly authentic life. In a world which had come to be viewed as a place ‘inaccessible, unintelligible, absurd – and from which, therefore, man is estranged,’ they viewed the fundamental human experience as ‘one of exclusion, of being shut out, of being unable to find in the world into which one has been

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<sup>19</sup> Colin Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (London, 1975), p. 221.

<sup>20</sup> Scott, *Mirrors of Man*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>21</sup> Peake, *Gormenghast*, p. 650.

“thrown” any place of safety or principle of meaning.’<sup>22</sup> This theme is reflected throughout the Titus Books, but especially in the development of Titus himself. The lives of Gormenghast’s residents are dictated by the ancient ritual of the Groan’s, a ritual which Titus comes to view as meaningless and arbitrary. As he grows up in Gormenghast his sensation of being trapped within the hollow and absurd practices of the castle grows stronger and he feels increasingly alienated and lost within his own home. In *Gormenghast* Peake writes that Titus felt ‘a seditious fear that he was in reality of no consequence[...]That Gormenghast was of no consequence and that to be an earl and the son of Sepulchrove, a direct descendant of the blood line – was something of only local interest. The idea was appalling.’<sup>23</sup> It is this suspicion that life in Gormenghast is meaningless which eventually drives Titus to rebel against his birth right and abdicate as the seventy-seventh Earl of Groan.

The subjectivity of truth is the second major theme of existentialism. Scott explains that since the world is inaccessible to man it is pointless for man to seek any kind of ‘objective’ truth or ‘to aspire toward knowledge of that which is independent of human existence itself,’ for ‘reality is too slippery to be caught by such a net: no, the important thing is that which I find sustaining of *my* life – and the only sort of truth that really matters is a truth which is “existential”, which is “subjective”, a truth that *I* have earned and which is therefore *mine*.’<sup>24</sup> This is also a key point of issue in the Titus Books. This striving to make sense of one’s own existence and to find meaning in one’s own life in an absurd world is at the very heart of Titus himself and his struggle to break free of the confines of Gormenghast. His experience growing up within the castle and his excursions to Gormenghast Mountain lead him to believe that there must be more to life than the endless, empty ritual and that the only meaning he can hope to find is a meaning he actively seeks out for himself. It is in *Gormenghast* that Titus first begins to

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<sup>22</sup> Scot, *Mirrors of Man*, p. 20-21.

<sup>23</sup> Peake, *Gormenghast*, p. 719.

<sup>24</sup> Scott, *Mirrors of Man*, p. 21.

understand that what he is feeling is an increasing awareness of his own uniqueness, his own individuality, which separates him from the time-honored traditions of the Groan dynasty. Peake writes ‘For a moment so huge a sense of himself swam inside Titus as to make the figures in the castle like puppets in his imagination [...] He would not be their slave any more! [...] He was not only the seventy-seventh Earl of Gormenghast, he was Titus Groan in his own right.’<sup>25</sup> It is his own subjective reality, the reality that he does not share with the other residents of the castle, of which Titus is becoming aware; his isolation from those around him, due both to his position as Earl and the very nature of the castle itself, contribute to Titus’s growing ability to evaluate both the nature of his life as a member of the Groan dynasty and the potential for something new, something beyond the heavy weight of Gormenghast.

Kierkegaard believes man is a creature imbued with an innate need to find meaning in himself and the world around him, a need ‘to find that which offers him some assurance that he is accommodated, that he is accepted, that there is some place for *him*; this is his primary passion, to find at the basis of this existence a truth which is *his* as an individual.’<sup>26</sup> This is Titus’s quest throughout the novels. He feels trapped by the traditions and rituals of Gormenghast and wants desperately to escape into a world where he is free to make his own choices, something that he cannot achieve in Gormenghast as his responsibilities as Earl will come to dictate every second of his life. And so Titus must struggle to escape the fate of an Earl of Gormenghast and choose a life beyond the familiarity of his ancient home; he must create himself anew, as something separate and distinct from the castle and its people and in which he can find his own truth.

The ‘essential solitude of man, as he faces an alien universe’ leads us to the third major theme of existentialism which defines the primary task of the individual as that of achieving an

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<sup>25</sup> Peake, *Gormenghast*, p. 475.

<sup>26</sup> Scott, *Mirrors of Man*, p. 11.

authentic life.<sup>27</sup> In ‘Either/Or’ Kierkegaard argues that to live an authentic life one must be willing to commit themselves fully to one mode of existing over another and accept gladly the risks and consequences of making such a choice. Though his lifestyle may seem bizarre and unappealing to us, Rottcodd, who fully embraces the solitary nature of man and is able to accept the risks involved with submitting so fully to his isolation, is an example of how one can lead an authentic life within Gormenghast. He has made that essential commitment to one way of life over another and has found his own kind of contentment in the extreme nature of his reclusiveness. Achieving this level of authenticity is extremely difficult and Kierkegaard argues that man ‘is constantly tempted to try to escape the arduous solitariness of a truly authentic life by seeking refuge in the social collective, by submerging himself in the routines and customs of [...] “the public.”’<sup>28</sup> Peake addresses this issue in his novels as well, as seen in Professor Bellgrove’s relationship with Irma Prunesquallor. Once he is promoted, Bellgrove begins to feel lonely in his new position as Headmaster. Peake tells us ‘he had forfeited his room above the Professors’ Quadrangle which he had occupied for three quarters of his life. Alone among the professors it was for him to turn back [...] to return alone to his Headmaster’s bedroom above the Masters’ Hall.’<sup>29</sup> His new position, which he had always longed for in the past, has isolated Bellgrove from his colleagues who have been his only companions for most of his life, and this new sense of isolation compels him to seek comfort through marriage. Like Bellgrove, Irma Prunesquallor has also struggled with her own sense of isolation and so resolves to assuage her loneliness through the social convention of marriage. Peake devotes several chapters to Irma and Bellgrove and their desperate attempts to convince one another that they are in love. So acute is their desperation that they both choose to ignore one another’s many faults in their haste to get married and begin the lives they have each separately been dreaming of. However, once they are wed it quickly becomes apparent to them both that they are not a compatible couple. By seeking refuge in the

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>29</sup> Peake, *Gormenghast*, p. 491.

social convention of marriage they each find themselves even more lonely and isolated than before.

The fourth major theme of existentialism focuses on what the German philosopher Karl Jaspers called the ‘extreme situation’ and the role this plays in an individual’s quest to achieve a truly authentic existence. Scott points out that most existentialists seem to agree that:

[W]e do not begin to discover what it means to be human until we are brought up short against the great limiting realities of suffering and guilt, or sorrow and disappointment and death. For [...] it is only when we have felt the sting of some radical failure, of blighted hopes and foundered purposes, of some misfortune that is sheer, unmitigated woe – it is only then that we begin, in a deep way, to appreciate our human finitude, how frail and unsheltered and vulnerable we are before the vicissitudes of life. And to be without any experience of extremity is to lack a certain necessary equipment (of wisdom and maturity) apart from which no really authentic life can be achieved.<sup>30</sup>

For Titus the death of the Thing is his first ‘extreme situation’, the moment when he becomes aware of the fragility and finite nature of life. When he witnesses her death by lightning Peake tells us

It was finality. Titus knew in his bones that he could expect no more than this [...] and when Titus knew that the world was without her forever, then something fled in him – something fled away – or was burned away even as she had been burned away. Something had died as though it had never been. At seventeen he stepped into another country. It was his youth that had died away. His boyhood was something for remembrance only. He had become a man [...] He was himself. He was free for the first time. He had learned that there were other ways of life from the ways of his great home. He had completed an experience.<sup>31</sup>

This moment is a turning point for Titus, and this ‘completed experience’ gives him a new level of maturity, a new level of understanding that is necessary in any quest to live a more authentic life. The Thing represented for Titus a way of life that was separate from Gormenghast, a life of freedom in which one could embrace one’s individuality. Seeing her sudden death makes Titus aware of the absurd and arbitrary nature of life and creates a desire in him to grasp the reins of his

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<sup>30</sup> Scott, *Mirrors of Man*, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Peake, *Gormenghast*, p. 737.

own destiny and make the most of his life while he can. The Thing has shown him that another way of life is possible, and now he needs only take control and embrace life, to ‘leap into the void’, as it were, in order to achieve a new level of authenticity.

Finally, the fifth theme of existentialism focuses on what is for the existential thinker the most effective way of communicating their philosophies as opposed to focusing on the content of the message itself. Scott explains that the style of meaningful discussion stressed in the tradition of existentialism is that of ‘indirect communication.’ He goes on to explain that,

he who ‘thinks existentially’ – with the passion of personal immediacy – is attempting, at bottom, to make sense of his own life, to find a way of ordering his own experience of the world. But, one cannot contain the vital reality of one’s own existence within the simple syllogisms of logic [...] therefore, when the existentialist thinker undertakes to communicate with others, he will not undertake to build a system or to employ with any great consistency the methods of direct exposition: instead, his stratagem will be that of indirect communication [...] the purpose of this whole effort being not primarily that of setting forth a body of doctrine but of plunging us into the existentialist *experience*, of nostalgia and anguish, of alienation and extremity.<sup>32</sup>

Instead the existentialist thinker will ‘use pseudonyms, poetic devices, plays, novels, and stories’<sup>33</sup> to communicate his ideas, and it is in this way that Peake’s work can be viewed as existentialist in nature. In his *Titus Book* the reader is completely submerged in the world of Peake’s imagination and becomes enveloped in the themes and sensations that are closest to his heart, themes that are also found in the writing of existentialist philosophers. Kierkegaard believed that the only truth an individual could find was in the ‘concrete realities in which he is immediately and passionately implicated,’<sup>34</sup> and the *Titus Books* spring from the reality in which Peake was ‘immediately and passionately’ involved. He began writing *Titus Groan*, the first of the series, while in the army, and Peake’s widow Maeve Gilmore has described it as a book ‘that grew under duress.’<sup>35</sup> During the war Peake’s sensitive mind turned to the writing of *Titus Groan*

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<sup>32</sup> Scott, *Mirrors of Man*, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Manlove, *Modern Fantasy*, p. 208.

in an attempt to deal with his stress and discontent as a member of the home army as well as his profound unhappiness at being separated from his wife and child, and his first novel can be seen as his way of attempting ‘to make sense of his own life’ and of ‘ordering his own experience of the world.’ The immediacy of his feelings of isolation, confusion, and loneliness are all expressed in the book. Colin Manlove has suggested that it is when Peake is dealing with immediate experience that his writing is most powerful and most revealing.<sup>36</sup>

Many of the most powerful images found in Peake’s novels are similar to those images used by existentialist philosophers to express their ideas. In Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* he writes ‘my sorrow is my knight’s castle. It rests like an eagle’s nest upon the summit of a mountain and towers high above the clouds. None can storm it.’<sup>37</sup> This image of a man apart, standing atop a lonely summit or looking down at the world from a distance was a favorite of Kierkegaard’s and it is found throughout Peake’s novels, in Titus on Gormenghast Mountain, Steerpike traversing the roofs of the castle, and Fuchsia looking down from her attic window. In *Gormenghast* when Titus decides to go after Steerpike in the flooded castle Peake writes ‘He was the First – a man upon a crag with the torchlight of the world upon him!’<sup>38</sup>, explicitly linking Titus with Kierkegaard’s ‘man apart’ looking down on the world from his lonely summit. It is an image repeated again and again to drive home the feeling of essential loneliness and isolation that is the human condition. The strangeness of the world in which we find ourselves is reiterated in *Titus Alone* when Titus is observing the landscape around him:

Seen from above, it could also be realized how isolated in the wide world was the arena with its bright circumference of crystal buildings: how bizarre and ingenious it was, and how unrelated it was to the bone-white, cave-pocked, barren mountains, the fever-swamps and the jungles to the south, the thirsty lands, the hungry cities, and the tracts beyond of the wolf and the outlaw.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>37</sup> Scott, *Mirrors of Man*, p. 60.

<sup>38</sup> Peake, *Gormenghast*, p. 789.

<sup>39</sup> Peake, *Titus Alone*, p. 833.



Again Titus is lost in a world with no familiar landmarks and is incapable of relating to what he sees around him, looking down at the world from the heights of his isolation.

The image of the questing individual, seeking out their own meaning and reality in a dark and chaotic world is also popular in existentialist writing. In Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* he argued that the primary reality of the individual is:

[T]hat of the lonely, passionately questing individual who, as he faces the yawning abysses of the world, can save himself from utter despair only by a great leap of faith – by gambling in fear and trembling, and with his *whole* being [...] that on the other side of that leap he will find God.<sup>40</sup>

There is great risk for the questing individual who journeys forth to find meaning in the great abyss of existence. In *Gormenghast* Peake describes Fuchsia on her way to an illicit meeting with Steerpike and writes that 'in fear and trembling she lit the candle she carried in her hand – a rash and risky thing to do.'<sup>41</sup> The quest for Fuchsia in the novels is to find love and companionship to ease the extreme loneliness she feels due to her isolation and solitude, but she makes the mistake of trying to find this much needed intimacy with the evil Steerpike. She makes Kierkegaard's leap of faith 'in fear and trembling' but only finds the destructive Steerpike on the other side. The grief she feels when she realizes the truth about Steerpike is eventually responsible for her accidental death near the end of the novel.

For Titus the quest is to escape the castle and the responsibilities of the Earl and find a new, more authentic mode of living in the vast and mysterious world beyond the borders of Gormenghast. He finally leaves Gormenghast at the end of the novel, taking his own leap of faith. Peake writes:

He ran as though to obey an order. And this was so, though he knew nothing of it. He ran in the acknowledgement of a law as old as the laws of his home. The law of flesh and

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<sup>40</sup> Scott, *Mirrors of Man*, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Peake, *Gormenghast*, p. 678.

blood. The law of longing. The law of change. The law of youth . . . And it was the law of quest. The law that few obey for lack of valor.<sup>42</sup>

When Titus finally makes the decision to leave, a decision that he has been contemplating for years, his reaction is immediate; he wastes no time but immediately runs to his mother to say he is leaving and then he runs out of the castle and into the unknown without ever looking back. By calling the urge Titus feels to leave the ‘law of quest’ Peake is suggesting that this need to search for meaning in the world at large is a natural part of the human condition. That this law is rarely obeyed ‘for lack of valor,’ echoes Nietzsche’s claim that few individuals have the moral courage and strength to make the leap of faith necessary on the journey toward a more authentic existence.

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 805.

## Chapter Two

Solitude and isolation are the central themes of Peake's work and are at the core of the existential struggle found within the text. The isolation found within Gormenghast is unique. First, it is completely cut off from the rest of the world. No one has ever ventured beyond the borders of Gormenghast, nor has anyone ever encountered some one from outside. To the residents of Gormenghast there is nowhere else. Second, the residents of Gormenghast are isolated from one another. This is in part due to the immense size of the castle and its surrounding territory; it is so vast that it is possible for the figures living within the castle to live completely separate from one another, going for long periods of time without seeing anyone else. The castle is so huge that large sections of it have been abandoned for centuries, leaving entire wings isolated from the main activity of the castle and turning them into dangerous, uncharted labyrinths in which one could easily become lost. It is as if the castle itself were designed to keep people apart. Even Flay, who is so much a part of the castle itself, knows how dangerous the countless halls of the castle are and how easily one can become lost within them. In *Gormenghast* he returns to the castle after being banished in order to discover what has gone wrong in his absence and to keep an eye on Steerpike who he suspects is somehow involved. To keep from losing his way through the abandoned sections of the castle Flay keeps a piece of chalk with him to mark his trail through the winding passages as he seeks to uncover Steerpike's treachery, evoking the image of Theseus marking his trail through the labyrinth in his quest to find the monster at its heart, the Minotaur.

It is only during certain rituals that all of the central figures of the castle are drawn together. These gatherings often only emphasize the characters' essential isolation from one another, as none seem to know how to act around other people and often spend the rituals lost in their own heads, waiting for the uncomfortable nearness to others to be over. During the many rites that must be carried out it is clear that the Master of Ritual, who has fully committed himself

to the immemorial traditions of Gormenghast, is the only one paying attention to what is happening. As Colin Manlove points out in *Modern Fantasy*, ‘in their islands of selfhood, they forget even the reason for their assembly in personal trains of thought, posture or action.’<sup>43</sup> During the ritual of the christening in *Titus Groan* tradition requires that those present must stand at certain positions around the christening bowl; however, during the course of the ceremony those who have gathered to participate end up spread out all over the room. Fuchsia leaves her assigned place to stand beside Nanny Slagg, Dr. Prune wanders off to examine a vase of flowers, and Cora and Clarice have left their places to re-join each other in the center of the room. Sourdust is shocked when he looks up from the book of ritual to find ‘a room of scattered individuals.’<sup>44</sup> It is their very individuality that causes the disruption to the ritual; their isolation from one another has made it nearly impossible for them to make a concerted effort at completing the ceremony uninterrupted. The solitude engendered by life in Gormenghast has made each character unique to the point where it has become impossible for them not to express that uniqueness in some subtle way. Perhaps the best example of this can be found in the image of those present for the christening walking on the lawn before the ceremony is completed:

They all came out and each choosing their parallel shades of the mown grass that converged in the distance in perfectly straight lines of green, walked abreast and silently thus, up and down, for forty minutes.

They took their pace from the slowest of them, which was Sourdust. The cedars spread over them from the northern side as they began their journey. Their figures dwindling as they moved away on the striped emerald of the shaven lawn. Like toys; detachable, painted toys, they moved each one on his mown stripe.

Lord Sepulchrove walked with slow strides, his head bowed. Fuchsia mouched. Doctor Prunesquallor minced. The twins propelled themselves forward vacantly. Flay spidered his path. Swelter wallowed his.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Manlove, *Modern Fantasy*, p. 222.

<sup>44</sup> Peake, *Titus Groan*, p. 91.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

Each character has their own particular way of moving that is a unique expression of themselves, and each wanders down the lawn ‘in a separate world, in a separate stripe and, in the last paragraph, in a separate sentence.’<sup>46</sup>

There seems to be no cohesive society within Gormenghast; with the boundless castle seeming so empty and secluded, it is often a shock to the reader when Peake occasionally gathers the vast number of people who inhabit Gormenghast into one location. It is usually only for one of the castle’s sacred rituals, such as the Earling, Titus’s tenth birthday celebration, or the Day of the Bright Carvings that the huge throngs of people are disgorged from the belly of the castle and are forced in the name of their time-honored traditions to interact with one another. The size of Gormenghast makes the extreme isolation of its characters possible, and for most solitude has become an essential part of their lives and their sense of well-being. Even when Titus is surrounded by people and yearns to ease his loneliness by joining them, his desire to be alone still seeps through his thoughts. During his tenth birthday celebration Titus watches a group of young boys playing beside the lake, and Peake writes:

Titus watching longed with his whole being to be anonymous – to be lost within the core of such a breed – to be able to live and run and fight and laugh and if need be, cry, on his own. For to be one of those wild children would have been to be *alone* among companions. As the Earl of Gormenghast he could never be alone. He could only be lonely.<sup>47</sup>

Even when he longs to join the group of children it is still solitude that Titus wants as seen in his desire to be ‘alone among companions.’ Titus struggles with the fact that his position as the Earl of Gormenghast sets him apart, prevents him from being able to *choose* to be alone or to be with companions. It is this lack of choice in how he lives his life that causes him to feel as though he is imprisoned within Gormenghast.

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<sup>46</sup> Manlove, *Modern Fantasy*, p. 222.

<sup>47</sup> Peake, *Gormenghast*, pp. 662-663.

As Peter Winnington points out in *The Voice of the Heart*, Peake often associates solitude with the consumption of food and drink, suggesting that ‘solitude is as necessary to the soul as food and drink is to the body.’<sup>48</sup> In *Titus Alone* Muzzlehatch explains that he left Juno ‘for the freedom of my limbs. For solitude which I eat as though it were food,’<sup>49</sup> and Slingshott tells his companions that he

used to dread the nights I spent alone: but after a while, when for various reasons I was forced to quit the house, and had to spend my evenings with others, I looked back upon those solitary evenings as times of excitement. It has always been my longing to be alone again and drink the silence.<sup>50</sup>

He also uses images of food and drink when describing the loneliness and homesickness Titus feels after leaving Gormenghast, claiming that for the restless wanderers of the world, ‘whatever they eat, whatever they drink, is never the bread of home or the corn of their own valleys. It is never the wine of their own vineyards. It is a foreign brew,’<sup>51</sup> In this instance the food and drink of solitude is not enough to sustain an individual in his loneliness. Solitude is necessary for one’s well-being, but it can also be problematic, as it can lead to loneliness. In Peake’s world the individual must find a balance between solitude and companionship in order to combat the loneliness that is occasioned by isolating one’s self from others.<sup>52</sup>

It is how an individual responds to being alone and isolated in the world that most interests Peake.<sup>53</sup> Solitude is not necessarily a bad thing in the Titus Books, and, having a rather solitary nature himself, Peake is able to show his readers many instances of positive isolation, moments when being truly alone allows his characters to thrive. For example, Fuchsia takes comfort in her private attic, a place that only she knows about. When we first see Fuchsia in her attic, Peake writes, ‘Looking down from her little window upon the roofs of the castle and its

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<sup>48</sup> Winnington, *Voices of the Heart*, p. 40.

<sup>49</sup> Peake, *Titus Alone*, p. 893.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 900.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 862.

<sup>52</sup> Winnington, *Voices of the Heart*, p. 39.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

adjacent buildings she tasted the pleasure of her isolation. “I am alone,” she said [...] “I am quite alone, like I enjoy it. Now I can think for there’s no one to provoke me here.”<sup>54</sup> It is only in her secret attic that Fuchsia feels completely free, only here that she feels most *herself*. Fuchsia experiences Steerpike’s discovery of her private attic as powerfully and profoundly as physical rape.<sup>55</sup> Once Steerpike has been in the attic, the place loses its power for Fuchsia and is no longer able to sustain her; it is no longer uniquely hers, no longer sacred, and Fuchsia is set adrift with no place to call her own. Peake’s primary concern is ‘finding a balance between enjoying solitude and coping with the feelings of loneliness that it engenders, and satisfying the need for companionship,’<sup>56</sup> and for Fuchsia the ability to maintain this balance is disturbed by the arrival of Steerpike.

Perhaps the most extreme reaction to solitude and loneliness found within the Titus Books is that of the ancient philosopher in *Gormenghast* and his lapse into solipsism, the theory that only the self exists or can be proved to exist. The ancient philosopher has embraced this belief and proclaims ‘I don’t believe in anything! I don’t believe in being anything. If only people would stop trying to *be* things! What *can* they be, after all, beyond what they already are – or would be if I believed that they were anything?’<sup>57</sup> This form of solitude, however, the complete denial of the existence of anything beyond yourself is easily challenged. In an effort to prove his existence to the ancient philosopher a young man grabs a candle and lights the philosopher’s beard on fire, immediately forcing him to acknowledge not only the physical reality of his pain, but also the reality of another individual, a will outside of his own, which has succeeded in acting upon him.

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<sup>54</sup> Peake, *Titus Groan*, p. 62.

<sup>55</sup> Winington, *Voices of the Heart*, p. 45.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>57</sup> Peake, *Gormenghast*, p. 454.

An only slightly less extreme method for dealing with one's solitude and loneliness is found in the Countess who has embraced solitude as a way of life.<sup>58</sup> Gertrude does not deny the existence of others like the ancient philosopher; she simply chooses to ignore their existence as much as possible. Her interactions with the other figures of the castle are limited to those moments when the ritual or her duties as Countess require that she engage with the various members of her household. Her view of life is best illustrated in her reverie at the breakfast for Titus:

When he is older I will teach him how he can take care of himself and how to live his own life as far as it is possible for one who will find the grey stones across his heart from day to day and the secret is to be able to freeze the outsider off completely and then he will be able to live within himself [...] and how he can keep his head quite clear of the duties he must perform day after day until he dies here as his fathers have done [...] and he must learn the secret of silence and go his own way among the birds and the white cats and all the animals so that he is not aware of men [...]<sup>59</sup>

Gertrude completely disassociates herself from the world around her, choosing instead to immerse herself completely in a world of her own making, a world that exists primarily within her own head. Gertrude's only real interest is in her birds and her white cats; from them she gets the companionship she needs to combat the loneliness that may result from her desire for solitude. The Countess is a perfect example of Kierkegaard's argument that the world at large was beyond the reach of the individual making it impossible for them to use any kind of objective truth as a means of guiding them in life, and that, therefore, the only truth the individual can find is a subjective truth, a truth centered in the individual herself and the immediacy of her own reality. The Countess lives her life according to this principle. In this way she has created her own reality, the only reality that matters to her. Gertrude wants to pass on her world view to her son, but because of the inherent isolation that exists between them she is never able to do this successfully. Instead Titus chooses to abandon his life in Gormenghast and search out his own solution to the issues of solitude and loneliness.

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<sup>58</sup> Winnington, *Voices of the Heart*, p. 39.

<sup>59</sup> Peake, *Titus Groan*, pp. 312-313.



Like the Countess, Rottcodd has also embraced a life of solitude, but he is able to embrace it more completely than Gertrude as he does not have the same responsibilities as she does as a member of the ruling class. Peake describes Rottcodd's life in the Hall of the Bright Carvings as

an ideal existence, living alone day and night in a long loft... It is not easy to feel... that Rottcodd made any attempt to avail himself of his isolation, but rather that he was enjoying the solitude for its Own Sake, with, at the back of his mind, the dread of an intruder.<sup>60</sup>

Rottcodd has made a conscious decision to lead a completely solitary life and he has fully accepted the risks involved with choosing such a life style. At the end of *Titus Groan* Rottcodd looks out of the window of the Hall of Bright Carvings and sees the procession returning from the Earling and realizes that the castle has a new Earl and no one thought to tell him. He has lived in his hall for almost a year without seeing another human being. For a moment Rottcodd is stung by the realization that he has been forgotten and that no one thought to inform him of Sepulchrave's death and the succession of Titus, but only for a moment. Rottcodd realizes 'He had been forgotten. Yet he had always wished to be forgotten. He could not have it both ways.'<sup>61</sup> Winnington says of Rottcodd, 'He is unique among Peake's characters in enjoying extreme and lifelong solitude while fully assuming the risk it involves.'<sup>62</sup> Once he has felt the initial shock of the realization that he has been forgotten Rottcodd quickly accepts the fact that this is the inevitable cost of choosing to live a life of seclusion. And after considering this he determines that it is a cost he does not mind paying if it means he can live his life the way he chooses.

Though solitude is often shown as being a positive and even a necessary part of life in the Titus Books, Peake also illustrates the negative impact of solitude on the individual. Sepulchrave, who is isolated by both his personality and his social status, is the best example of the destructive

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<sup>60</sup> Peake, *Titus Groan*, p. 12.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393.

<sup>62</sup> Winnington, *Voices of the Heart*, p. 42.