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Nonsense and Trauma in the Works of Mervyn Peake

Often seen as the heir to the English tradition of nonsense poetry, Mervyn Peake picks up where Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, and Walter de la Mare left off. Although Peake illustrated works by Carroll and de la Mare, his own nonsense poetry and the corpus of illustrated children's books he produced, including *Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor* and *Letters from a Lost Uncle*, do not conform to the generic expectations evoked by classifications like “nonsense poetry” or “children's literature.” *Rhymes Without Reason* and the nonsense poems interpolated throughout Peake's four novels are not merely absurd, but also violent, sexual, bleak, and macabre. In contrast to Alice's Wonderland, Peake's nonsense writing takes place in “a pointless sea” (*Titus Groan* 64), or “an old and crumbling parapet” (*A Book of Nonsense* 30), or “a place of hollow and decay” (*A Book of Nonsense* 49). In Peake's estimation, life is but a melancholy procession towards death (*Titus Groan* 116). Peake's experience of disaster was both literary and personal: he witnessed civil war in China, the bombing of London during World War II, and the liberation of Belsen concentration camp. Suffering from Parkinson's disease, he also bore witness to his own mental and physical deterioration. His nonsense is not an escapist frolic, but rather a serious – if oblique – commentary on the human condition, a commentary that acknowledges and confronts the personal and cultural traumas to which he bore witness.

Images are integral to Peake's nonsense. *Rhymes Without Reason* features surrealist, full-page illustrations by Peake. Alongside the text, these illustrations exemplify his affinities

with and differences from traditional English nonsense. Ostensibly addressed to a juvenile audience, the book dwells on mortality; the images are, to say the least, disturbing. Indeed, Peake's illustrated children's books quickly turn into dark symbolic fables for an adult audience. In its repurposing of nonsense techniques to reflect a mid-century existential crisis and explore psychological trauma, *Rhymes Without Reason* can be compared to the books of Edward Gorey. Both artists employ anachronistic, gothic *mises-en-scène* in word and image; both imply that Victorian cultural norms haunt contemporary life.

Peake's nonsense attests to a crisis in identity, or more precisely a crisis in masculinity. These crises play out in acts of violence. In "Mr Slaughterboard," the eponymous character murders his entire crew. This violence is not entirely removed in Peake's revision of the story in an extravagant picture-book, *Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor*, intended for young readers. The sexual innuendo about cross-species and homoerotic attraction — Slaughterboard's relationship with the yellow creature remains ambiguous — is no less overt than the satire of British colonialism. The narrator of *Letters from a Lost Uncle* is, like Slaughterboard, uneasy in the company of women; when he leaves his wife to go adventuring in polar regions, he confides, "we never had anything in common" (n.p.) Pictures of the uncle show him wielding harpoons and impaling an "Arctic wolf" on his prosthetic "leg-spike"; his self-imposed exile from society is a consequence of his own invented cult of masculinity.

Idiosyncratic and flawed, the uncle presents a bizarre, implausible figure; he embodies an over-the-top conception of masculinity, which, like Slaughterboard's, can only be viewed with ambivalence. However, viewed as expressions of Peake's internal trauma,

both works become intelligible as symbolic commentaries on the violent, male-dominated milieu in which Peake was raised. On his first day at Eltham College boys' school, for example, Peake was caned by his older brother (Watney 34).

Peake's work affirms the inseparability of trauma and nonsense. Trauma remains “unassimilated” by the psyche (Caruth 4), and nonsense provides a mode of expression that allows trauma to remain whole, even when represented symbolically. The literary text which expresses traumatic experience uses “language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Caruth 5). Nonsense is, likewise, language that defies understanding. In this sense, Peake's language exceeds expression; the impossibility of rendering experience comprehensible reflects the unassimilable psychic trauma at which Peake's nonsense hints. Nevertheless, an underlying symbolic logic may be exposed in nonsensical utterances. In *The Voice of the Heart*, Peter Winnington identifies a symbolic language of recurring motifs throughout Peake's oeuvre. By drawing on this schema in tandem with trauma theory, I hope to provide insight into the origin and nature of symbols and motifs identified by Winnington.

This diverse collection of nonsense poetry and so-called “children's literature” initially appears eclectic and wilfully obscure as the towers and turrets of Gormenghast, but I intend to prove that Peake's nonsense and illustrated short works are his most effective attempts to confront lived reality and psychic trauma. In this endeavor, he both affirms and breaks with previous traditions of English literary nonsense, while obliquely representing the wounds of personal and cultural trauma.

Peake's Poetry: Trauma as the Precondition for a Nonsense Aesthetic

In both prose and poetry, Mervyn Peake makes frequent reference to the unusual events of his life; he invites readers to view his work as an expression of personal and cultural history. At times, the focus is more explicitly autobiographical, as in his fragmentary, fictionalized autobiography, "Chinese Puzzle." Peake recalls: "It is over thirty years" since his departure from China, but, he writes, "had I the chance I would not wish to see it again" (PP 472-473). Similarly, in *Titus Alone*, Titus' decision never to return to Gormenghast provides an emphatic conclusion to the series: in leaving behind the site of his childhood memories, Titus mirrors Peake's own attitudes. Peake's writing, however, is not mere solipsism: elsewhere, he seems eager to act as a voice of his time in chronicling the experience of the London Blitz. An overwhelming majority of the poems he wrote from 1941 to 1945 are about the war, and, though he was initially rejected, Peake was eventually commissioned as a war artist (Winnington, *Vast Alchemies* 161). Often, the speaker in Peake's wartime poetry conveys an ambiguous blend of private and collective experience, as when he writes of the disgust and boredom he feels during military training ("Fort Darland"):

The limbs my mother bore me know the wrench
That shapes them to the square machine of war.
My feet smash gravel and my hands abhor
The butt-plate of the rifle that I clench. (CP 80)

Understanding the extraordinary historical circumstances of Peake's life may enable an interpretation of his imaginative symbolic works as expressions of personal and cultural trauma. Peake was born in the midst of a bloody revolution in China. His father served as a

medic in WWI, and his childhood around his father's hospital in Tientsin meant that he saw death and grisly injuries firsthand (Winnington, *Vast Alchemies* 30, 35). On one occasion, he fainted as he clandestinely watched his father amputate a young boy's leg (*Vast Alchemies* 39). Surrounded by war, his observant eye recorded impressions of violent conflict from early childhood through his work as a war artist. In addition to these close encounters with humankind's potential for violence, the trauma Peake endured in losing his artistic abilities and his ability to communicate – due to early-onset Parkinson's disease – is reflected in later poems like “Heads float about me” (CP 214) and “When I was wounded” (CP 218).

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* offers an elucidating critical perspective for Peake's work. Caruth explores the intersection of personal and cultural trauma, and her examples pertain to the complex effects of World War II on the individual's psychology, for instance Freud's reaction to Nazi persecution of the Jews and the woman's basement incarceration in Duras' *Hiroshima mon amour*. Caruth's mode of analysis offers one possible explanation of the “vast alchemy” by which Peake “transmuted fantasy, autobiography and historical fact into fiction” (Winnington, *Vast Alchemies* 31): “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4). Trauma is thus encoded in Peake's creative work; it “haunts” his poetry and prose.

When applied to literary fiction, the implications of this theory of trauma complicate the relationship between a text and the life of its author. May all the author's biographical details that rematerialize in his fiction be read as indications of authorial trauma? Are

authors who rely on experiences or details from their own lives to form the fabric of their narratives – like Peake, Joyce, or Proust – successful in part because of an innate susceptibility to trauma? Winnington points out that Peake's fall from the operation room rafters as he spied on an amputation seems to have inspired Titus' fall from the roof in *Titus Alone* (*Vast Alchemies* 39). Not all such autobiographical transmogrifications, however, stem from such an obviously traumatic source. For instance, the awe and envy of freedom that Titus experiences when he first sees the Thing seem to parallel young Mervyn's reaction to the one-eyed Russian boy in “Chinese Puzzle”:

“Going out to polite tea party through unknown part of Tientsin see boy from my school (the Russian) three quarters way up an enormous Venetian blind hang out into the sun, and whooping. He is my God.” (PP 474)

Is this wonder nonetheless a form of trauma, in that it imprinted itself so emphatically on the memory of both author and character, and that it resurfaces throughout both their lives? For Caruth, trauma is “much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4). In Peake's work, that “story of a wound” may be either an extremely private narrative – as with this singular revelation of the one-eyed Russian boy, or his fall from the rafters – or a more public narrative, such as his memorable but impersonal portrayal of a bombed-out urban landscape in “London, 1941” (CP 88-89), which chronicles the everyday experience of millions during the London Blitz.

Peake's poetry bears witness to “the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another” (8), as Caruth puts it. In Peake's case, this other is often a female

figure. In one of his most iconic war poems, he portrays a girl dying of consumption after the liberation of Belsen. As a result, he questions the ethics of his position as a war artist: “If such can be a painter's ecstasy, / (Her limbs like pipes, her head a china skull) / Then where is mercy?” (CP 133). Peake meditates on his unease regarding the imperative to exploit instances of trauma for artistic purposes. Painting objectifies suffering, but Sara Wasson suggests that Peake actually “resists some of the ethical flaws in British discourse of the camp liberation”: his poetry “foregrounds the challenge of adequate emotional response” and “emphasizes the need to not grow numb to sights of suffering” (153). More generally, his wartime work “implies that rather than build war deaths into narrative, we should recognise that violence destroys human stories” (155). Part of this tendency can be ascribed to Peake's striking preference for individual portraiture (in text and image) over the portrayal of groups of people. Winnington notes Peake's apparent artistic “rejection of society” and his tendency to depict “the individual in isolation” (*Voice of the Heart* 36). Accordingly, “he does not take the usual route of depicting the dying in multitudes of heaped bodies” (Wasson 154). Poems like “The Consumptive” contribute a unique integrity to British war art in that they respect the reality of individual suffering, rather than memorializing legions of faceless dead.

Wasson describes Peake's war poetry as “paradigmatic of trauma” in that it attempts to convey “an experience so emotionally overwhelming it could not be fully absorbed at the moment of the experience itself” (154). Wasson ignores the fact that Peake continued to write poetry about the war many years after its end. This persistence further illustrates the status of the war in Peake's mind as unassimilated trauma. In “That lance of light that slid

across the dark” (1958), the instantaneous association conjured by a lightning strike is a “war-head.” Peake re-lived the Blitz through belated war poems like “Rhyme of the Flying Bomb” (1947), and through his critique of military technology and its tyranny over human lives in *Titus Alone* (1959), his last major work to be published before he became completely incapacitated. According to Caruth, “the history of the traumatized individual, is nothing other than the determined repetition of the event of destruction” (63). Peake embeds his traumatic past in his work, turning again and again to scenes of death and destruction. The anticipation and repetition of trauma are often uncanny (Caruth 111), as with Peake's mental disintegration bringing him to a state resembling that of Lord Sepulchre in *Titus Groan*: both attempt to communicate with family members, but their utterances become progressively less intelligible.

Peake voluntarily enlisted in WWII out of patriotic fervour; afterward, he felt he had had enough of war for a lifetime. When confronted with the prospect of another global conflict in the wake of WWII, he notoriously said, “the only Korea I'm interested in is my own,” a line often recounted as evidence of his weakness for puns and off-color humor (Yorke 221). However, when considered alongside his personal history and artistic interests, this quip isolates the essence of Peake's response to traumatic experience (thankfully, the Korean War remained a purely *potential* trauma for Peake): his personal brand of humor and wordplay flouts syntactic expectations and repurposes words for their sound effects. These are the linguistic techniques of nonsense. With this one seemingly innocuous statement, Peake restates his preoccupation with solitude and the individual (Winnington *Voice* 28), ironically employs the pathetic fallacy for comedic value by suggesting the weird image of

an internal bodily Korea, and evokes a favorite “serious” metaphor of the individual as an isolated geographic entity (Winnington *Voice* 56). His rejection of the Korean War – a social phenomenon – in favor of private concerns (his *career*) recalls similar statements, like “Fort Darland” (CP 80). Peake's apparently nonsensical utterances are thus often rich in meaning, though to uncover it may require more effort than analyzing his war poetry.

I would like to suggest that this substantial corpus of war poetry, though universally regarded as a powerful expression of the shock and horror that Peake and his compatriots felt when faced with the realities of war, is not the only avenue through which he probes the events of WWII and other traumas, although it may be his most deliberate. Truly traumatic experience must be expressed “in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Caruth 5). One might say that Peake's war poetry, popular for its lucid intention and powerful sense of relatability, claims our understanding much more than it defies it.

On the contrary, the colorful, heterogeneous and problematic body of work which we refer to as Peake's nonsense poetry is not so easily comprehensible on thematic or narrative levels. Moreover, it is less readily reconcilable to pre-existing notions of poetic form and style. While the existence of discrete publications like *A Book of Nonsense* implies a clean separation between Peake's nonsense and “non-nonsense” poetry, these arbitrary editorial divisions may be sharper than his stylistically varied poetry demonstrates. *A Book of Nonsense* is a posthumous publication which brings together an assortment of nonsense poems from diverse sources. In the introduction, Maeve Gilmore, Peake's widow, writes that her husband was keenly “aware of the foibles, the gentle and not so gentle absurdities, the

make-believe world of human beings” (9). She claims that Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll “were part of his heritage, literary and visual” (11), yet she also points out that these poems “bear traces of distant scenes” from the author's childhood (10). More than a collection of diverting absurdities, they comment on the author's individual experiences in playfully abstruse ways.

Rhymes Without Reason, published in 1944 as an illustrated children's book, dates from the same period as Peake's war poetry. Its imagery reflects everyday experience, but stretches it into the bizarre. Winnington inadvertently suggests an alternative definition to Peake's nonsense poetry in discussing those poems – namely “A Reverie of Bone,” ostensibly one of Peake's least deliberately silly – in which “sense has been sacrificed to sound” (*Voice of the Heart* 228). To separate the nonsense poetry from “serious” efforts, then, is to identify those instances in which Peake's wordplay or over-the-top catachresis obscures or counterpoints his actual affective intentions: the resulting idiom could be called nonsense poetry. Due to the importance Peake placed on sound over sense, such a generic classification would result in considerable overlap between the groups of poems which could be classified as lyrics, love poems, nonsense poems, war poems, etc. The relatively tidy, concise text of *Rhymes Without Reason*, in which Peake largely abstains from baroque diction, does not even quite conform to this model of literary nonsense. The images are extravagant, but the word usage is literal and straightforward: sound is not sacrificed to sense. The poems are conceptually nonsensical, but not verbally nonsensical like “A Reverie of Bone.”

Peake's most superficially orthodox nonsense poems, like “The Frivolous Cake” and

“The Hideous Root,” can and should be mined for their suggestive undertones addressing the nature of ideal love (Winnington *Voice* 44) and female sexuality (Winnington *Voice* 142). Meanwhile, other critics have argued that his allegedly serious poetry which bears the influence of the “New Apocalypse” movement (like “A Reverie of Bone”) is devoid of sense (Wasson 144). A number of poems occupy a difficult-to-classify middle ground between the fantastic imagery of nonsense poetry and the serious, melancholic tone that occurs elsewhere. “When Tiger-Men Sat their Mercurial Coursers” (1946) is a fine example of these poems, in which sound and sense blur:

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

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

When through a blood-dark dawn a man with antlers
Cried, and throughout the day the echoes
Suffered his agony and died in evening air -
I was not there. (CP 148)

Peake evokes three fantastical vignettes, each of which is both menacing and vaguely mythological. All involve bizarre anthropomorphized animal figures, but these figures are portrayed as dignified and heroic, not comical as they are in *Rhymes Without Reason*. The central premise is the speaker's absence from all three of the vignettes he narrates. Caruth claims that in *Hiroshima mon amour*, “the act of seeing... erases, like an empty grammar, the reality of an event” (29). Likewise, Peake offers a more faithful history of the events through “the very indirectness of this telling” (Caruth 27). Rather than claim full knowledge of these fantastic events, Peake merely presents “a voice that witnesses a truth that [he] himself cannot fully know” (Caruth 3). This witness is not the absent speaker, but rather the antlered man. The cry of the man with antlers is too fantastical to be taken as a symbolic representation of a particular historical trauma, but it is nonetheless a symbol of generalized trauma and the voice of the unknowable other.

Through a closer examination of Peake's nonsense work – including prose, children's literature, graphic work, and poetry – I hope to show how Peake affirms the inseparability of trauma and nonsense. It seems odd that so little criticism has addressed this portion of Peake's output, when the war poems have been discussed thoroughly, and the Titus books, though also fantastical and at times dealing in nonsense, have been mined for allegorical and symbolic content. That which critics have often taken at face value as merely diverting or odd, may in fact be Peake's most profound and original response to the personal and political traumas which marked his life. But in order to discuss Peake's nonsense, we must first mark a few boundaries, and establish Peake's relationship to a pre-existing lineage of nonsense literature.

“O'er seas that have no beaches”: Existential Despair in Peake's Nonsense

“To write about nonsense is like going to sea in a sieve,” writes Wim Tigges in his comprehensive study of literary nonsense (4). In Peake's nonsense poetry, the lone subject is often literally or figuratively adrift in a “pointless sea” (*Complete Nonsense* 44), but without the security of a real vessel (as in *CN* 78-79). In *Letters from a Lost Uncle*, the Uncle sets sail on a table. Peake is only alluded to occasionally by critics who have made literary nonsense their field of study, including Tigges and Parsons. Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that much of Peake's nonsense had been either out-of-print, or still unpublished. *Complete Nonsense*, a thorough compilation, appeared in 2011. Now that the full picture of Peake's investment in literary nonsense is available, it is easy to see him as an inheritor of the English nonsense tradition. Peake, however, both perpetuates and transcends this pre-existing tradition. His nonsense poetry resists straightforward symbolic interpretation, but also expresses existential angst. This unique body of work outlines the author's personal philosophies of both life and art.

Complete Nonsense includes everything Peake conceived that could *possibly* be considered nonsense. Thus, it respects the fact that much of Peake's best work falls into that classification, and the huge impact that the nonsense had on his output, as both a genre and an aesthetic. On the other hand, it segregates a portion of Peake's work from the rest and labels it “nonsense.” Maslen admits that such a distinction cannot truly be drawn, because all Peake's work is inflected with a nonsense sensibility (2); nonsense was an integral part of Peake's literary aesthetic and worldview. Conversely, poetry that flouts linguistic expectations, either in syntax or in diction, is not automatically nonsense: obviously, the

virtuosic use of language for experimental ends in poems by E.E. Cummings or Ezra Pound does not qualify as literary nonsense. *Complete Nonsense* shows how heterogeneous and multi-layered Peake's nonsense poetry can be: sometimes he is Lear's heir, and sometimes a contemporary mid-century modernist, but most frequently he is both. An exhaustive analysis of the many recurring themes and symbols in Peake's nonsense poetry must await further critical attention. The poems I will discuss highlight select themes running throughout Peake, to show how these poems resonate with the issues expressed in his more well-known works.

Peake's wife, Maeve, interpreted his nonsense poetry as a critique of “the foibles, the gentle and not so gentle absurdities, the make-believe world of human beings” (Gilmore 9). This interpretation of his nonsense as satire is quite at odds with Peake's own, less clichéd words:

“Nonsense can be gentle or riotous. It can clank like a stone in the empty bucket of fatuity. It can take you by the hand, and lead you nowhere... *non-sense* is not the opposite of good sense. That would be 'Bad Sense.’” (quoted by Maslen, *CN* 4)

The critical element here is the ability of literary nonsense to “lead you nowhere”: by definition, nonsense defies attempts to conclusively identify its *raison d'être*. Tigges sees the essence of nonsense as its ability to maintain “a perfect tension between meaning and absence of meaning” (4); possible symbolic meanings can and must appear, but are always cancelled or muddied by an equal and opposite meaninglessness. Parsons is more liberal in her attribution of meaning to nonsense poetry, and asserts that “most critics isolate the

'sense' within the 'non'" (11-12). Cammaerts and Tigges both find it easier to isolate what nonsense is *not*, than to define it: satire, parody, absurdism, dadaism, nursery rhymes, and light verse are not nonsense. The clearest and most unanimous definition of literary nonsense thus seems to be: "Lear and Carroll."

Émile Cammaerts, whose *Poetry of Nonsense* is the first critical monograph on the subject, sees Lear and Carroll as exemplars of a "poetic phantasmagoria" which developed gradually "from the spirit of the nursery rhymes" whose forms they often imitate (46). Lear's poetry presents pure, abstract images for their own sake. The absence of a discernible moral or satirical aim necessitates the delineation of a new genre (6-7): this is nonsense. Cammaerts also suggests that the nonsense family tree diverges into the followers of Lear and those who create flashy, witty "punchlines" to their verse. Although he does not explicitly identify this latter school with Carroll, he claims that:

Lear's inspiration is perhaps bolder [than Carroll's]; he seems entirely free from satire and parody, and indulges without hesitation in the maddest pranks any poetical imagination may conceive (47).

This proposed bifurcation of nonsense into Learic and Carrollian modes is embraced by other critics, though their terms vary (Tigges 81, Parsons 20). Parsons suggests that Carroll's nonsense is less of a "lingual assault on the schizophrenic body" than the kind used by more linguistically audacious writers (21), and that Lear "creates the static world typical of Nonsense" by deliberately employing monotonous and self-reflexive forms. Another way to elucidate the Lear/Carroll split is that Lear's poetry expresses nonsensical emotions, and Carroll's, nonsensical logic (Tigges 83). Tigges also says that, when discussing later

nonsense writers, the critic should trace their lineage to one of these two “grandmasters” (83).

In Peake's case, such a task is not difficult. If nonsense poetry often deals with feelings of loneliness and with reconciling oneself to an absurd or hostile world, Peake is certainly a Learic poet. Tigges claims that the point of a Peake poem “is that there is no point” (96), but the pathos one often encounters in Peake's nonsense poetry is not an overinterpretation or a figment of the imagination: it is an integral and deliberate part of it. Of course, Peake's corpus of nonsense poetry is very broad indeed. My analysis will concentrate on examples which best display a coherent group of themes which represent larger Peake tropes: for example, an absurdist worldview, a focus on the individual, solitude and loneliness, and the problematic nature of love relationships.

At seven, Peake wrote his first poem:

“I saw a Puffin

In the Bay of Baffin

Sittin on Nuffin

And it was Laffin.” (*CN* 21)

This early foray into nonsense poetry, brief and silly as it may be, eerily prefigures many of the images and thematic fixations which would come to characterize the nonsense poetry he wrote throughout his life. The exotic animal subject is anthropomorphized and made relatable by his laughter, which is the hallmark of humanity and human response – certainly Peake's response – to adversity. The “Nuffin” upon which he sits is the vast frozen ocean between Greenland and the Canadian Arctic: confronted with this symbol of hopelessness

and desolation, the puffin can only laugh. This is merely a compact presentation of the archetypal situation upon which much of Peake's nonsense poetry is based: laughter negates the depressive effects of meaningless existence in an indifferent universe, and reaffirms the value of life. Thus, the puffin is thematically aligned with later figures, such as Mr. Pye (*CN* 167), the Lost Uncle, the solitary walrus crying on his iceberg (*CN* 98-99), or the “weary” Greenland whale who takes momentary refuge by the hearth, wearing Auntie Mabel's nightie (*CN* 88-89).

Peake's Puffin, however, provides more than a thematic blueprint for his later nonsense: it also demonstrates how, in Peake's poetry, “meaning arises from meaninglessness in unexpected but delightful configurations, surprising the artist as much as the reader” (Maslen, *CN* 5). *Form* creates meaning in Peake's nonsense, where spelling, morphology and syntax are malleable, but rhyme and meter reign supreme over reason. In the self-conscious wordplay of the puffin rhyme, there is a twisting of the conventional, intended use of language to create a new meaning – or possibly a new meaninglessness. This tendency towards verbal experimentation aligns Peake as much with high modernist poets, E.E. Cummings for instance, as with his literary-nonsensical predecessors, Lear and Carroll. Fragmented, distorted word forms draw our attention to “the physical experience of language” (Parsons 21), attacking rational meaning at its root in a manner which mirrors Artaud's audacious translation of “Jabberwocky” more closely than the original (Parsons 22). Fragmentation on the verbal level is even reflected in subject matter, as in Prunesquallor's brilliant nonsense song from *Gormenghast*, “The Osseous 'Orse” (*CN* 154). Peake's poetry delights in the fragmented, schizophrenic body, in evoking the same awkward

physicality one experiences in reading it aloud.

Many of Peake's mature nonsense poems support this interpretation of him as both modernist and heir to the nonsense tradition. Peake's nonsense addresses the human condition by depicting life as a struggle with an indifferent universe. This consistent worldview suggests that Peake's nonsense is thematically close to absurdism, but it ultimately avoids the kind of closure or directedness of purpose that one associates with classic absurdist texts. Short fiction by the likes of Kafka, Daniil Kharms, Istvan Örkény, or Félix Fénéon is far more likely to approach a "point," often a political one, than Peake's work, though they may share superficial similarities. Extravagant images and gestures free of any didactic purpose are integral to literary nonsense, but in absurdist works, such images or gestures often have veiled satirical or philosophical implications.

Some of the examples which best illustrate these qualities are found embedded in Peake's novels (Maslen has included these poems in the *Complete Nonsense*). In "The Frivolous Cake" (CN 44), everything is implicitly or explicitly rendered pointless: the "pointless sea," the waves which "pointlessly threw fish to the lilac sky," and, of course, the titular cake itself. The topos, then, is recognizably absurd, but rendered with joy instead of confusion or frustration:

"A freckled and frivolous cake there was

That sailed on a pointless sea,

Or any lugubrious lake there was

In a manner emphatic and free.

How jointlessly, and how jointlessly

The frivolous cake sailed by
On the waves of the ocean which pointlessly
Threw fish to the lilac sky.” (CN 44)

It is as if Peake is at pains to maintain the tension between meaning and meaninglessness which Tigges uses to define nonsense: without this disclaimer, critics could glean plenty of possible meanings from the relationship between cake and knife which makes up the poem. Winnington suggests that this pair offers one possible solution to a recurring conundrum in Peake's work - how to preserve the solitude necessary for artistic creation, while also satisfying the need for companionship:

“...the knife is prepared to prolong its amorous pursuit of the cake indefinitely rather than close with it... by remaining apart they preserve both their solitude and their love for each other” (*Voice of the Heart* 44).

This relationship further implies that love and sexuality have sinister underpinnings, which proceed from an innate death-drive. “The Frivolous Cake” portrays femininity as intrinsically cake-like, and the fulfillment of male sexual urges as destructive. The poem has a discrete allegorical function (unnecessary to its success as a stand-alone piece of nonsense verse) in that it foreshadows the predatory nature of Steerpike's courtship and manipulation of Fuchsia. We are told that this poem is a favorite of Fuchsia's, and it appears shortly before Steerpike arrives on the scene (*TG* 64). Lines from “The Frivolous Cake” are also reused in a brief poem from *Rhymes Without Reason* (CN 78-79), whose respectable married couple may be seen as the pair to which the symbolic cake and knife refer. Perhaps the sea really is “the perfect medium for nonsense, permitting the imagination to unmoor itself and

drift at the behest of the little verbal breezes that fill its sails” (Maslen *CN* 7). But, in Peake's nonsense, the sea voyage is also nearly always the setting for an attempted reconciliation between individuality and the yearning for companionship.

One may also read “The Frivolous Cake” as an allegory for the very tension between point and pointlessness which defines literary nonsense. The knife has both a literal point and a clearly-defined linear objective – its conquest of the cake. On the other hand, the cake's motion is 'jointless' and “free,” its only purpose to be “filled to the brim / With the fun of her curranty crew.” Thus they may symbolize masculine and feminine lovers, or distinct approaches to literature: the literal-minded and deterministic, or a more enjoyment-oriented, aesthetic approach. The infinite symbolic flexibility of the cake/knife pairing is what preserves the poem's status as nonsense *par excellence*: one may suggest a framework of meaning, but none can be definitive.

“The Frivolous Cake,” like much of Peake's nonsense poetry, uses the “common meter” most familiar from hymn texts. Maslen implies that Peake, like his character Mr. Pye, found this meter “ideally suited to times when one feels powerless and tongue-tied” (*CN* 6); in other words, perhaps nonsense poetry had the same role in Peake's mind that religious dogma and hymn texts had in Mr. Pye's (and possibly also in the minds of Peake's Christian missionary parents). Peake's wife, Maeve, suggests that it was a short leap from the nonconformist Christianity of his parents to his own more broadly nonconformist worldview (Gilmore 24-25). In the worldview of an agnostic aesthete with a deeply ingrained sense of the absurd, spiritual solace can only be found in evocations of fantastic and beautiful imagery. Thus, Peake's poems can be read as hymns to meaninglessness, in

which striking images take the place of meaning. As Cammaerts puts it, “nonsense seems particularly conducive to rhythm and to rhyme, even more than the solemn themes of life and death” (39). But in Peake's work, nonsense and these “solemn themes” are not mutually exclusive.

Mr. Pye's spontaneous nonsense ballad is another common-meter meditation on the navigation of an existential sea. This time, however, the speaker addresses the “solitude vs. relationship” problem from the opposite perspective, that of loneliness:

“O'er seas that have no beaches
To end their waves upon,
I floated with twelve peaches,
A sofa, and a swan.” (CN 167)

Faced with this absurd situation, and equipped only with useless objects, he has “no one to love” him, “nor hope of being found.” Eventually, he sees “all of a sudden! / No sign... of any... ship,” and is forced to confront the fundamentally solitary nature of his own existence. Critics disagree when assessing the emotional impact of the poem. For Maslen, it is “an astonishingly eloquent evocation of loneliness, a lament for a naturally buoyant soul adrift on a shoreless ocean without hope of rescue” (CN 6). In one of his most impressive analyses of Peake's symbolic language, Winnington discusses islands, the ocean, and other geographical tropes throughout Peake's oeuvre. “Seas that have no beaches” present a guarantee of solitude, even if other islands are encountered: “An island without a beach is a particularly solitary place: if a visitor cannot land, there can be no meeting... Without a beach, people are condemned to separateness” (*Voice of the Heart* 64).

Tigges, discussing the same poem in some detail, concludes that “any emotion suggested in this poem... is enervated by the nonsensicality of the situation... The last two lines, in all their amazingness, are not a 'point'” (54). An acknowledgement of real pathos in a nonsense poem is tantamount to an allegorical reading, and this “sensical” type of interpretation is not called for by the original text (Tigges 59). “Nonsense, then, is never lyrical in the true sense of the word – it does not express the personal feelings of the author, nor a communal feeling through his mouth” (Tigges 53). This assessment, I believe, tries rather too hard to remain objective and to ignore the emotional power of the poem's surprising volta.

“When, on the blurred horizon,
(So endlessly a-drip),
I saw – all of a sudden!
No sign... of any... ship.” (CN 167)

It is not particularly important whether the feelings expressed in this and other Peake poems are, in that moment, Peake's own or simply ones which he manages to evoke – but they are definitely products of calculated effect, not of the reader's imagination. Pronounced pathos separates Peake from Lear and Carroll, and this extra dimension distinguishes him within the tradition of literary nonsense.

One can also understand the pathos which finds expression in Peake's nonsense poetry by reading each poem as the archetypal encounter with the other, which Caruth identifies as the root of trauma (8). In “An old and crumbling parapet” (CN 196), the speaker is stranded on a chunk of rock jutting straight from the sea. In Peake's symbolic

psychogeography, this kind of beach-less island represents the impossibility of social engagement (Winnington *Voice* 64). The speaker nonetheless takes the hand of a flea sitting at the top of the parapet, but when he asks if he might join this flea, it replies: "I cannot say... I'm studying the Alphabet." The only entity who offers any chance of social engagement is thus too preoccupied, too insular, too apathetic to consider the possibility of an emotional exchange. The final lines recontextualize the problem of loneliness by inserting emotional distance from a faraway memory:

"But that was long ago, and Saints
Have died since then – and Ogres bled.
And purple tigers flopped down dead
Among the pictures and the paints." (CN 196)

The speaker's unreliable memory recalls this seemingly insignificant exchange in great detail, even after a long time. Yet he confesses that he "quite forgets" how the flea came to be on the parapet in the first place.

This contradiction between a vivid memory of rejection and a mnemonic lapse surrounding its actual circumstances is a familiar Peake nonsense trope, from the crying walrus who cannot remember the cause of his distress (CN 98) to the miserable jailor and his friend the jaguar, who wander through the rain searching for their lost wives (CN 94). The speakers and main figures in Peake's nonsense often seem to have patchy memories due to the impact of an emotional trauma. Compare these past examples with their opposite, the speaker of "When tiger-men sat their mercurial coursers" (CP 148), who remembers a whole string of fantastic images, despite his repeated insistence that he "was not there." Like the

woman in *Hiroshima mon amour*, who repeatedly claims to have witnessed the bombing of Hiroshima, this speaker has a powerful recollection of events at which he was not actually present. As with the woman in Resnais' film, "false memories" retain their vividness for him because they reflect an unarticulated trauma.

Understanding Peake's nonsense on an ideological level is the key to understanding his entire oeuvre; Peake relied on nonsense poetry to voice his personal philosophical outlook through a system of recurring symbols and thematic concerns. To read "O'er seas that have no beaches" as mere nonsense, not to be taken seriously on an ideological or emotional level, is a major mistake. Nearly *every* Peake nonsense poem is about the experience of being alone: Peake used this medium to explore the tension between man's fundamental loneliness and his yearning for companionship, as well as to find ways of coping with spiritual desolation at mid-century. In emphasizing the similarity of Peake's early puffin poem to later ones, I do not mean to suggest that the juvenile Peake had already consciously articulated all these notions when he wrote his first nonsense poetry. The puffin is most significant because it strikingly illustrates the nonsense idea that form and spontaneous wordplay can give rise to unexpected meaning. In freeing himself from certain restraints such as conventional or literal word usage, while imposing others, such as common meter and recurring symbolism, Peake manages to convey existential meaning in a new way. The resulting poetry is certainly stylistically reminiscent of Lear, but to this style Peake adds a distinctly mid-century modernist flavor.

Gender and Sexuality in Peake's Nonsense-Inflected Graphic Narratives

I have attempted to draw attention to some neglected nooks and crannies of Peake's

oeuvre, the bizarre grey areas between nonsense and serious poetry which have received relatively little critical attention. This side of Peake has been overshadowed by the greater body of criticism which concerns only the popular Titus books. Yet, these odds and ends show Peake at his most brilliant, and also Peake at his most challenging. *Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor* and *Letters from a Lost Uncle from Polar Regions* are hard to classify in the context of Peake's work and are rarely addressed by critics. Though ostensibly for children, they contain violent or otherwise questionable content (Watney 62, 94; Mills 8); they are not pure nonsense prose, but they incorporate nonsense elements (Mills 9). They are showcases for Peake's graphic talents, and are therefore eschewed by purely text-based literary critics. As Mills notes, "Peake's illustrations complement his words, with much significant detail that the words do not express... it is thus not always possible to back up a reading of an illustration from the verbal text" (118). The critical grey areas to which these texts belong have probably contributed to the marginalization of Peake's nonsense-inflected graphic narratives. The problematic reception of *Captain Slaughterboard* is also partly a matter of sheer bad luck: its first printing was destroyed in a German air raid (Winnington, *Vast Alchemies* 115). Similarly, the publication of *Letters from a Lost Uncle* was marred by the blurry reproduction of Peake's illustrations (Yorke 182).

Nonetheless, they are visionary creations which proceed from the same imagination as allegedly more "serious" works: *Captain Slaughterboard* originated as a longer prose-only story ("Mr Slaughterboard"), and both *Slaughterboard* and the *Lost Uncle* are filled with the Peake tropes Winnington has identified in *The Voice of the Heart*. These graphic narratives engage with issues of trauma and cultural memory in a similar way to the nonsense poetry.

However, the bounteous innuendo just under the surface of both works also outlines an implicit, though ambiguous, discourse on gender and sexuality. In this they resemble the graphic narratives of Edward Gorey. My focus is on Peake, but I will also allude to Gorey in order to show how these two multimedia artists – both frequently regarded as maverick cult figures – used similar methods to satirize and critique prevailing social norms.

Unlike Peake's other fiction, neither *Captain Slaughterboard* nor *Letters From a Lost Uncle* contains any significant female characters. Only in the context of a nonsense-inflected graphic narrative does Peake allow himself to draw on two of his favorite childhood books: *Moby-Dick* and *Treasure Island* (Smith 39). Nonetheless, he evokes these books not in direct homage, in a chauvinist or escapist vein, but as a satirist armed with parody. Slaughterboard and his crew are oafish, lazy, incompetent, and apparently unsuccessful in their search for treasure; the captain eventually reevaluates his priorities and settles for a comfortable domestic life. The Uncle's false leg and prolonged pursuit of a “White Lion” to the ends of the earth are reminiscent of Captain Ahab. The Uncle, however, is barely literate, cruel to his servant Jackson, and insecure in his own masculinity, which he constantly promotes by reference to adventures and sharp, pointy objects. In both works, Peake treads a fine line between the aggrandizement of traditional masculinity, and a satire of it. Peake's constant textual and graphic jokes ensure that any chauvinist or misogynistic interpretation of either book is undermined.

Alice Mills, reading both *Captain Slaughterboard* and *Letters From a Lost Uncle* from a psychoanalytic standpoint, details a treasure trove of homoerotic innuendo and phallic obsession. Mills connects both books to a larger Peake trope: Peake's male protagonists

become “physically or psychologically stuck” when “confronted with either the physical or symbolic mother” (4). Such episodes are always “signalled by imagery of flood and shipwreck,” and herald a literal or symbolic death (4). Mother figures – and by extension almost any female characters – are “viewed with repugnance or dread by the books' male characters; falling into their embrace is equivalent to dying” (7).

For Mills, “stuckness” is the essence of the Peakian male protagonist, and can be defined as “an inability to move forwards” that she equates with patterns of “compulsive repetition” (4). In this sense, Mills' “stuckness” is often a synonym for what I call trauma, and the hallmark of both is “the repetition at the heart of catastrophe... the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind” (Caruth 2). The stuckness of Titus Groan as he attempts to come to terms with his decision to leave Gormenghast is tormented and romantic, but the stuckness of Slaughterboard and the Uncle is comical. When a giant polar bear symbolizing the dreaded mother figure takes the Uncle in its deadly embrace, he escapes by tickling it into submission (Mills 127-128). The comedy of these illustrated works increases the ambiguity of their “message,” if such a thing exists. Whether the lifestyle of the solitary, woman-fleeing male adventurer is being ridiculed or romanticized is a matter of perspective.

While there are no women in *Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor*, the spectre of femininity hangs over the book. Slaughterboard's ship is feminized and subjected to male domination: “Her name was the Black Tiger and Captain Slaughterboard ruled her – every inch!” (N.P.) The Winningtonian equation of islands in Peake with human bodies (*The Voice of the Heart* 56) makes it possible to see Slaughterboard's conquest of the pink island as an

intrinsically sexual one: “‘Pink!’ shouted the Captain, leaping to his feet. ‘That’s just the sort I like. Sail me there and hurry up or I’ll chop you all up into mincemeat.’” The female body, then, does not materialize in a literal form, but is suggested by Slaughterboard’s conquest of both ship and island, as they are trampled over by a crew of hairy, shirtless pirates laden with aggressively phallic weapons.

The Pirate Charlie Choke has a tattoo of Peake’s wife, Maeve Gilmore, on his left arm (Watney 88), and Peake’s friend Gordon Smith has called the book’s Yellow Creature “an affectionate transmogrification of Maeve” (Smith 72). Smith points to Charlie Choke’s other tattoos (which include Peake’s father and Smith himself) and interprets the book as an inside joke, an all-in-the-family, grotesque rendering of Peake and Maeve’s own courtship, akin to the picture-only *Sunday Books* Peake made for his children (72). But if the Yellow Creature is a stand-in for Maeve, how does he account for its distinctly masculine facial stubble in all up-close illustrations? Batchelor seems to imply something untoward regarding the Yellow Creature when he says it “leans luxuriously on the brawny arm of the Captain and eats a banana, its eyes rolling suggestively” (26), but what exactly this eye-rolling suggests, he does not specify. Mills calls the book “a tale of polymorphous sexual satisfactions” (37), which is “not only quirky but queer, and abounds in sexual imagery of all kinds except the conventionally heterosexual” (38). At first, the Yellow Creature is “symbolically endowed with a gigantic penis” in a suggestive illustration where it stands behind a spire of rock, but later, “he is given a feminine appearance” (49).

These depictions of Slaughterboard and the Yellow Creature as a couple prompted *Punch* magazine to say that the book’s illustrations, “though brilliant, are quite unsuitable for

sensitive children” (Watney 94). (Fortunately for the nation's sensitive youth, reviewers with advance copies were the only ones to see the book until it was reprinted six years later.)

What is unsettling about the Yellow Creature is that it is – so to speak – neither fish nor fowl. Mills calls the book “queer,” not merely homoerotic (38): while homosexuality, bestiality, and even pederasty (Mills 47) are suggested, the Creature and its relationship with Slaughterboard are ultimately too ambiguous to be categorized one way or another. The Creature is partly an object for aesthetic appreciation, like Tadzio in *Death in Venice*:

“Every morning the Yellow Creature was placed in the front of the ship, where he looked lovely against the sparkling blue sea. Captain Slaughterboard would sit upon a barrel of rum, and watch the Yellow Creature for hours on end. His Pirates had to watch the Yellow Creature too, but they got rather tired of it sometimes...”

The Creature has feminine eyes and is later seen wearing a skirt, but this could just as easily be a kilt, like that of Billy Bottle the hyper-masculine bos'n. The Creature does the cooking in their relationship, and is clearly the “little spoon” when they cuddle, batting its long eyelashes and eating a banana. What do you see? Does it offend you? Like the obscene marginalia of a medieval manuscript, Peake's illustrations rely on anthropomorphism and suggestiveness: they do not depict beings or relationships which actually exist in our world, so that, depending on the perspective and experiences of the viewer, they may be interpreted as representing different phenomena.

Mills gives evidence of a queer subtext throughout the book. Captain Slaughterboard may be seen as a classic, Freudian homosexual, who flees the company of women and seeks

someone resembling himself to love in the manner of a mother (34-35). Slaughterboard can hardly be said to resemble the Yellow Creature, but his amiable crew members do overtly present their sexuality through a network of phallic symbols (Mills 48-49). Timothy Twitch's "elegant" left hand, with its limp wrist and crooked, raised pinkie finger, presents an obvious gay cliché which resurfaces later. The hands of Slaughterboard and the Yellow Creature are nearly identical as the former teaches the latter "some old pirate dances and they would practise together when the moon was full." In this illustration, we see Slaughterboard shirtless for the first time in the book, and he appears considerably trimmer than before. The couple make flirty eyes at each other while dancing. Has the Captain been working out, and is he now showing off for his partner? The same crooked pinkies can be seen on the previous page, as the pair dine together.

My own perspective on *Captain Slaughterboard's* suggestive ending lies somewhere between Smith's cozy, Peake-family, inside-joke interpretation, and Mills' catalogue of Freudian perversities. Both interpretations are compelling, but neither is complete on its own. The book's ending is an unequivocally happy one: Slaughterboard has overcome his own urge toward compulsive repetition. In choosing to abandon his ship and the pirating lifestyle and settle down on a lush tropical island with a single partner, he has beaten his own "stuckness." True, he has not reconciled himself to living in a heterosexual society and conformed to its norms, but he has rehabilitated his own relationship to gender identity in some fashion. In abandoning a life of piracy, fighting, and adventure, he demonstrates that he no longer feels it necessary to perform his own extreme masculinity. "They are still on the island. The Captain would never dream of leaving and can't understand how he used to

enjoy killing people so much.” Meanwhile, in embracing life with the Yellow Creature, he has allowed some form of femininity back into his life. The other “queer creatures” who inhabit the island turn out to be “really very friendly,” so Slaughterboard and the Yellow Creature are not living in isolation, but rather as integrated members of an anthropomorphic village which accepts them. Slaughterboard has found himself capable of moving beyond his own fixation on performing a violent masculinity, and invents a new role for himself. In one of the final illustrations, Slaughterboard's cutlass finds a new use as a makeshift fishing rod.

In the last picture, the Captain and the Creature are shown together on a vertical crag sticking out of the shallow waters off-shore, large enough only for the two of them. In Peake's symbolic geography, the image conveys several ideas: that the relationship is as unbreachable by other parties as the crag, and that this relationship comprises the entire inner landscape of the two characters. The tableau presents an alternate, successful version of the relationship between speaker and flea in “An old and crumbling parapet” (CN 196). Of course, the crag is also the last of the book's many phalluses. In any case, Slaughterboard and the Creature have “the most satisfactory durable relationship... in all Peake's work” (Winnington *Voice* 86). In Peake's nonsense, even the unlikeliest couplings are sources of solace - Slaughterboard and the Yellow Creature, the flea and the speaker in “An old and crumbling parapet,” and the Jailor and the Jaguar (CN 94). Though the link is always tenuous and the sexual underpinnings vary from relationship to relationship, all these couplings are potential sources of moral support in a time of existential crisis. On the other hand, Peake's heterosexual, same-species couplings seem less likely to lead to happiness:

consider Titus' various relationships, as well as the Uncle's disastrous marriage in *Letters from a Lost Uncle*.

If *Captain Slaughterboard* depicts its protagonist's transcendence of his own invented cult of masculinity, *Letters From a Lost Uncle* shows how the same urge to perform masculinity can signify insurmountable trauma and result in permanent exile from society. In the first letter, the Uncle says: "My fingers (which are cold as icicles) were made for triggers and harpoons," not a typewriter. A drawing of a hand holding a harpoon occupies the entire page. The Uncle equates literacy with effeminacy: writing a letter makes him "feel like a woman." He compulsively asserts his masculinity by constant references to his "leg-spike," which Mills has identified as an assertion of phallic supremacy following the Uncle's symbolic castration in losing his leg to a swordfish (Mills 120). His careful "full-length self-portrait" in the first letter gives pride of place to totems of masculinity; pipe and leg-spike are displayed prominently, against the backdrop of a ludicrously vertical peak he claims to have ascended.

In moments like this, the Uncle undermines his own reliability as a narrator. It is not just that every feature of the landscape becomes a giant phallus (like the inexplicable pillar of snow in the eleventh letter), but also the Uncle's own admission that he hasn't seen himself in a mirror in twelve years (Letter 1). The Uncle lacks not only a physical mirror, but the psychological capacity for self-reflexivity. By extension, all of his perceptions become questionable. In attempting to express his thoughts and record the events of his life in these letters to a nephew he has never met, he may be trying to recuperate his abilities of perception and communication, or just to leave something for posterity:

“It looks as though the next few days of my life will be the most dangerous of my life. That is really why i have decided to write you this letter which will be a kind of diary I sUppose. If I get killed or anything, perhaps these pages may be found, although what ~~the~~ good they'll be to anyone, I cant imagine, unless I find the WHITE LION first.” (Letter 1)

The Uncle sees the potential future recognition of his geographical and zoological discoveries by the Natural History Museum in South Kensington as an opportunity for his symbolic reintegration into society (Letter 2). Unfortunately, since his camera was “swept up in the whirlwind” just before his climactic encounter with the White Lion (Last Letter), it seems unlikely that his account will be taken seriously.

The Uncle's autobiography in the fourth letter confirms that his compulsive repetition of the act of escape is a repetition of “his desire to escape maternal control soon after he is born” (Mills 110). He is “a psychologically stuck man who re-enacts his unresolved relationship with his mother” at the expense of his loyal follower, the turtle-dog Jackson (131), of whom the Uncle's sketches bear a more than passing resemblance to the Uncle's abandoned wife (Yorke 182-183). The Uncle's elliptical prose style is more than merely comical or a signifier of a dim wit; his prose exemplifies his psychological pattern of compulsive repetition.

“Yet after a bit I began to realize that this was just the sort of thing for which I had been craving in London. Why had I left England? For this sort of thing, of course.” (Letter 4)

This repetition is evident not only on the smaller, stylistic scale, but also in the fixations to

which he repeatedly turns:

“As you may have noticed I have a leg-spike and what with this and my experience of violent things I can deal with most emergencies. For instance, last Monday when an Arctic wolf sprang at me, skinny with hunger and his teeth shining, I had only to do this: and all was over.” (Letter 2)

The implication that the reader may have failed to notice the Uncle's leg-spike is laughable. The Uncle speaks of nothing but his leg-spike, which features prominently in every story he tells, and in most of his illustrations. He even ends several letters saying that he has to go “polish” it, or “sharpen” it. After reading Mills, the innuendo behind such references seems plain. For all his endearing ineptitude, the Uncle is not an appealing figure: he is an inveterate masturbator, a self-aggrandizing colonialist whose main modes of engagement with the world are “enslavement, eating and killing” (Mills 129). His sadistic and possibly sexual relationship with Jackson is apparently a reflection of his own unresolved relationship with his mother (Mills 124-125, 117). Unlike Slaughterboard, the Uncle gives little indication that the events of his narrative have opened up the possibility of becoming “un-stuck” and resolving his social issues. Rather, he seems doomed to perpetually roam the polar regions, fighting off wolves with his leg-spike (Letter 11); the termination of his epistolary social experiment seems to mark the failure of an attempt at rehabilitation.

Letters from a Lost Uncle's anti-climactic and psychologically bleak ending is highly reminiscent of Edward Gorey's style. Gorey did read and recommend Peake's fiction to a friend (Neumeyer 175), but their affinities are evidently not the result of conscious influence. Gorey provides an interesting counterpoint to Peake because of the two artists'

many stylistic similarities, but also because of the differences with which they present or parody traditional gender roles. Neither Peake nor Gorey was particularly interested in cultivating a sense of the “gothic” in their work, but this too-convenient term has clung to both of them. The legacies left by both artists are largely synonymous with cult followings, by young members of counter-cultures with which they did not identify. Both were successful pen-and-ink illustrators, but also distinctive prose stylists; both crafted graphic narratives which have received little critical attention because the medium defied genre conventions.

Peake and Gorey alternate between minimalism and maximalism in both word and image with a curious flexibility. Consider the similarity between Peake's virtuosic cross-hatched style of illustration for *The Hunting of the Snark* alongside Gorey's most darkly baroque work, the oppressive shadows and wallpapers of *Leaves from a Mislaid Album* or *The West Wing*. In works like these – and in their prose counterparts, like the grandiloquent narrator of Peake's Titus novels, or the overblown vocabulary of Gorey's *Nurse Frieze* – it is easy to see how either artist could be conveniently labeled as gothic. But elsewhere, and increasingly as he grew older, Peake demonstrated unparalleled economy of line and restraint: his sinuous line drawings for *The Quest for Sita*, or the plainer diction used in *Titus Alone*. Gorey's experiments in verbal and visual minimalism, such as *The Evil Garden* and *The Curious Sofa*, likewise stand out from his more overwrought works. It seems an ironic injustice that two artists so often equated with a fixed, gothic style were actually relentless stylistic experimenters.

Wim Tigges has noted the influence of Carroll and Lear on Gorey, whom he

considers an important figure in modern nonsense (183). What makes Gorey's work nonsense – rather than satire – is “the total absence of moral comment” (Tigges 184) and the prevalence of stasis over any form of progress (Tigges 187). I disagree with this assessment. Gorey's work – like Peake's – represents an advanced form of literary nonsense that sometimes trades in obscure social commentary. Tigges has identified Gorey's “association of violence and cruelty with women and particularly children” (195), but refuses to read any political agenda into a very politically charged body of work. For Tigges, to be considered “pure nonsense,” devoid of any political or satirical element, is the highest compliment. I agree that Peake and Gorey represent the cream of mid-century modernist nonsense, but they also offer a variety of politically and sexually charged double meanings.

Gorey's more “realist” narratives always take place in the early 20th century, and the persistent violence towards women and young girls that one encounters in these stories can be read as a satire of high patriarchal society. In *The Hapless Child*, Charlotte Sophia, the daughter of a wealthy family, is kidnapped, enslaved, lives in the sewer, and eventually accidentally run down in the street by her own father, a recently returned World War I veteran who fails to recognize her. The physical enormity of the wealthy male figure, armored and separated from others by layers of huge fur coats, driving goggles, and facial hair, represents his invincibility. In the Gorey universe, patriarchs like Charlotte Sophia's father are free to leave behind their families to go fight wars with other patriarchs: without the patriarch's protection, the family falls into ruin, degradation, or fatal illness. Careless or ignorant of his own responsibilities, the father fails to recognize the daughter.

The Gilded Bat demonstrates the impossibility of a woman having any impact on

society through the life story of a ballerina who ascends to international stardom. Despite having eventually achieved success through non-stop practice, Maud's life is “really no different from what it had ever been”; which is to say, “somewhat dreary” (N.P.) Her success is epitomized by the patronage she receives from the heavily fur-coated and bearded Baron de Zabrus, who owns or manages “the most renowned” ballet company in Europe, and changes her name to Mirella Splatova of his own accord. The short book is filled with the bitter ironies of the exploitation of young and beautiful women in a male-dominated society. Disappearances and deaths are described in cursory, dismissive ways: “After Federojenska did a *grand jeté* into the wings one matinee and was never seen again, Maud took over *Oiseau de Glace* to great acclaim.” When Maud abruptly dies in an airplane accident, the event is the subject of a narrative ellipsis:

“Over the Camargue a great dark bird flew into the propeller of the aeroplane. At the gala her costume was suspended from the centre of the stage while the music for her most famous variation was played in her memory.”

Perhaps this “great dark bird” is meant to evoke *Swan Lake's* owlish von Rothbart, who freely manipulates and murders his swan daughters in a manner reminiscent of Gorey's exploitative milieu. The existence of a feminist subtext to much of Gorey's work seems undeniable, though this should not take away from its value as nonsense literature.

Peake and Gorey, then, produced a treasure trove of odd and exquisitely illustrated books which could not be successfully marketed to either children or adult audiences. But what does the violence, exploitation, and sexual innuendo of these narratives ultimately signify? For staunch adherents of pure literary nonsense like Tigges, the answer remains

“nothing,” while the possibilities of a symbolic psychoanalytical interpretation akin to Mills' are virtually boundless. Older Peake critics like Batchelor and Watney could turn to a biographical explanation from his colorful life. For instance, Peake was traumatized by an incident in which a rich young man took him out to dinner and propositioned him: in response to an attempted embrace, Peake hit the man, and was greatly disturbed by the whole incident (Smith 56). On another occasion, a muttered implication that his long hair, earrings and weird clothes were effeminate, was enough to prompt a knockout punch – a display of manliness which actually gained him social acceptance among the Sarkese locals during his stay at Eric Drake's artist colony (Watney 59). Perhaps Peake was particularly sensitive to the social pressures of mid-century England's homophobic climate, and the combination of violence and gay jokes found in *Captain Slaughterboard* and *Letters From a Lost Uncle* is a parody of his own mindset. None of these interpretations – the formal or linguistic, the psychoanalytical, and the biographical – can conclusively explain a phenomenon like the Yellow Creature. Symbolic analysis may be helpful in establishing the thematic context of such a figure in Peake, but ultimately, the Yellow Creature is an expression of Peake's nonsensical imagination; the meaning of its existence cannot be defined.

Peake's nonsense works can no longer be viewed as inferior to his better known works, or even as less serious. The criticism of literary nonsense seems to have evolved more slowly than the genre itself, leaving nonsense writers like Peake and Gorey inadequately explored. The symbolism, ambiguities, and shades of social critique which enrich Peake's nonsense show that for Peake, nonsense was more a style than a genre. Accordingly, the

genre of Peake's work is often unclear where nonsense techniques are present, as in the graphic narratives and so much of his poetry. In Peake's unique nonsense idiom, sense becomes obscure while sound – the pure aesthetic effect of the words – reigns supreme. This style bears superficial similarities to that of Peake's nonsensical predecessors, Lear and Carroll; however, it is equally reminiscent of contemporary modernist poetry, or for that matter of *заям*, the nonsense-inflected “beyondsense” of the Russian futurists. Moreover, doubly-gifted artists like Peake and Gorey move fluidly between word and image, so that this type of nonsense is as much a visual as a literary phenomenon. What nonsense in Peake seems to indicate most often, paradoxically, is that the work deals with *more* serious subject matter: isolation from society, existential angst, personal trauma, subliminal sexual urges, and discontent with an established social order.

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Abbreviations

CP: Collected Poems

CN: Collected Nonsense

PP: Peake's Progress

TG: Titus Groan