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Peake's Ballads: 'The Touch o' the Ash' and *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb*

G. Peter Winnington

MERVYN PEAKE WROTE TWO BALLADS, some twenty years apart: 'The Touch o' the Ash' and *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb*. The first (hereafter ToA) is Peake's earliest extant poem; the carefully copied-out MS, with beautifully decorated capital letters opening each stanza, is dated 1929. *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb* (RFB) was written in the second half of the 1940s, while Peake and his family were living on Sark. It is his last narrative poem. Together these ballads represent two poles of Peake's poetry-writing, which makes it all the more interesting to examine them together.

Unfortunately, Rob Maslen did not include ToA in his *Collected Poems* of Mervyn Peake. The only printed source is *Peake's Progress*, where it was erratically transcribed. (I have placed a list of corrections on the *Peake Studies* website.) RFB was also reproduced in *Peake's Progress*, but the original (Allen Lane) edition was full of misprints and omitted a full stanza. I got that stanza reinstated in the 1981 paperback edition of the book. (Do not bother with the Penguin Classic edition of 2000; it reproduces the error-filled Allen Lane text.) However, the only reliable version of RFB is in *Collected Poems*, and that is what I shall be quoting from.

In form, both poems are based on the traditional seven-foot rhyming lines of the ballad, with occasional internal rhymes, in Peake's favourite iambic rhythm. Their themes draw on traditional ballad motifs, which were also some of some Peake's favourites: the sea and sailors, to start with, and especially the solitary figure. Clearly, *Treasure Island* is lurking in the background. So too is *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, whose influence can be felt in both

poems. Their stories are soon told.

In ToA, a shooting star enables an old sailor called Si to predict that the cruel captain of his ship will die ‘three nights tonight, at two-o’-the-clock’ (48), and that Si himself will be the cause of it. His words are overheard and passed on to the captain, who punishes Si by throwing him, bound hand and foot, into the boiler-room furnace. As the hapless Si is cremated alive, his ashes re-assemble into the shape of his body. They rise to haunt the captain until the predicted hour, when ‘the hand of the Ash-man shot forwards out and gripped on [his] gullet strings,’ (61) whereupon the captain falls dead. This is recounted by an unnamed sailor who is repeating the story told him by the bosun of his ship, who claims to have witnessed these events.

No such narratorial complexity in RFB, which is stark in its simplicity. During a World War II air raid on London, a baby is hardly born when its mother is killed: molten lead from the roof above ‘ran in / And over the counterpane’ (179). Thus the baby’s life begins with the death by fire of its mother, just as the ash-body in ToA is born of the immolation of Si. The babe is ‘found in a fire-bright drain asleep / By a sailor dazed and lost’ (179). Carrying it, ‘he pranced like a spider through the fire-torn door / Of a church’ where, after lengthy conversation, they are both killed in the explosion of a flying bomb.

As already intimated, the two poems share a preoccupation with fire, which plays such an important role in the Titus books: Steerpike threatens the Groan family and their immediate attendants with death by burning in the library, which he sets on fire in order to save them at the last minute and thus pass for a hero. Sourdust is too old and frail to make it. Steerpike’s come-uppance occurs when he sets fire to the replacement Master of Ritual, Barquentine – and himself at the same time. Putting out the flames by leaping into the moat enables him to get rid of Barquentine by drowning him, but leaves him scarred for life. There is nothing admirable in Steerpike’s acts.

In ToA, it’s the captain, Bully Shad – is that a truncated shadow? – who is the villain, the most cruel and sadistic of Peake’s authority

figures. He is more cruel than Mr Slaughterboard, who is simply indifferent to the lives of his crew; compared with Shad, Swelter and Barquentine are almost comedic. And the picturebook Captain Slaughterboard, for all his fearsome acts, is tamed by falling in love with the Yellow Creature. So it is appropriate that Bully Shad should be killed by the ash-figure of Si (another truncated name, just as the lives of both captain and sailor are cut short).

Having mentioned Swelter, I should point out that, in the opening scene of *Titus Groan*, the kitchen fires in Swelter's domain 'had been banked dangerously' and 'four grillers were forcing joint after joint between the metal doors with their clumsy boots' (TG27). At this point, Steerpike, leaning 'against the shadowy side of a pillar' (TG32) is bitterly watching Swelter. In ToA, at the moment when Bully Shad tosses the poor Si through the iron door* of the boiler-room furnace, the narrator makes one of his few interventions, saying: 'I was deep in the gloom as I watched him there' (51). The two scenes contain the same motifs, demonstrating the continuity of Peake's imagination: his novels are not punctual flashes of inspiration, but born of the patterns of a lifetime of imagining.

This continuity can be found in the maritime setting of ToA and the numerous allusions to the sea in RFB. One doesn't generally think of Peake as a poet of the sea, yet 'Vikings' (21-22) was his first published poem, and a seascape or lakeside provides the background to a great many scenes in his work, as I demonstrated in *The Voice of the Heart* (chapter 3, 'Islands'). Peake used it to enhance the isolation, desolation, or helplessness of the persons involved.

For all its setting in the heart of London during the Blitz, RFB is full of references to the sea. In the opening stanzas, Peake evokes the sound of the destruction of London, and rapidly moves on to maritime metaphors: shattered windowpanes 'Set sail with a clink of wings' (178). As the sailor walks down the street, the toppling buildings are perceived as passing ships:

And the ships of brick and the ships of stone

* The 'fire-torn door' of the church in RFB echoes these oven / boiler-room-furnace doors.

And the charcoal ships lurched by
 While his footsteps clashed on the frozen waves
 That shone to the scarlet sky. (185)

By the way, I wondered if Peake's artist-eye was seeing those 'charcoal ships' as though they were drawn with charcoal against a fire-bright background. After all, in a 1943 poem, he saw skeletons standing 'Like charcoal-boughs' (124). Then I noticed that, as soon as he enters the bomb-damaged church, the sailor lays the babe upon a pew that has become a 'charcoal bench' (185) – as though it has been afflicted by the 'charry touch' of Si in ToA. So I suppose that Peake was simply exploiting the effect of fire on wood.

After laying the baby on the pew, the sailor 'swarmed the side' of the pulpit 'Like a pilot and came aboard' (186). He calls it his crow's-nest (187), and it comes with a 'gull-winged Book' (189). And at the end of the poem, he envisages his future as though describing a fantastic ship:

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

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

'O little babe, why won't you leap
 Aboard, and sail with me?' (198–9)

In short, RFB is quite as much a tale of the sea as it is of wartime London.

Even the shooting star which inspires Si's prophesy in ToA is associated with the sea in Peake's mind. One of his last poems, beginning 'That lance of light' (which Maslen dates to March–August 1958) describes just such a meteorite that, after a journey of 'a million light-years,' plunges into the sea and 'Hissed at the impact' (218). This would explain why, in stanza nine of RFB, 'the sailor strode

with the new-born babe / to the hiss of the falling stars' (179). Just as the meteorite is associated with time – and with the end of the journey that constitutes its life – so the shooting star in ToA starts a countdown to the moment of Shad's death, and Si's too. Similarly, 'the hiss of the falling stars' in RFB marks the start of a countdown that ends with the fall of the flying bomb and the deaths of both sailor and baby. On a ship, the hours are counted off by the changing watches and the ringing of bells, not to mention by Bully Shad's own brass watch in ToA. The watch is there, metaphorically, in RFB too: the sailor lifts the baby to his ear 'like a watch' and listens to 'the tick of its heart' (181). And Peake takes up this ticking with reference to the programmed 'life' of the flying bomb:

the ticking was

The stuttering of a far machine. (195)

In both stories, then, this remorseless passing of time (in space, in the sky, and on earth) leads to a double death.

Both ToA and RFB are very much about solitude, a motif central to all Peake's work (and consequently it merits a whole chapter in *The Voice of the Heart*). His cruelty isolates Bully Shad; foreknowledge of Shad's death – and his own – isolates Si; sharing that knowledge with a fellow sailor turns the sailor into a solitary and unwilling witness of events, and that sailor, become a bosun, repeats the story to the narrator of the poem

till I wished that I were dead,

Bead!

Till I wished that I were dead. (61)

Making another person a companion in one's solitude may relieve the burden of solitude, but imposes a different burden on the other person. (In *Letters from a Lost Uncle*, poor Jackson is pressganged – on a beach, of course – into accompanying the Uncle and is literally burdened with all his equipment.)

RFB is all about sharing solitude too. What could be more desperately isolated and lonely than a new-born child lying in a gutter in the middle of an air raid? It is found by Peake's favourite emblem of the solitary: a castaway, a sailor 'In a waterless world' (179). The story of Titus Groan originally started with just such a meeting, 'on

the beach of an island' where 'Lord Groan had been marooned and Mr Stewflower had been living there alone' (PP107). By the time Peake reached the middle of *Gormenghast*, this meeting had become the moment when the young Titus, who has been Lord Groan since the death of his father in the first year of his life, meets the outcast Flay on the banks of Gormenghast river (GI37). Flay has not spoken to anyone since he was banished when Titus was very young. He takes the exhausted boy on his shoulder and carries him off to his cave for rest and refreshment. The truant Titus becomes the temporary companion of Flay in his utter isolation.

In RFB, the stranded sailor carries the infant to the church 'in the crib of his bowsprit arm' (185). From the pulpit, he offers to 'sing [it] a tale / To the tune of a bleeding hymn. . . . Will you listen to me?' he asks and the baby replies, 'I will, I will' (188), sealing a highly significant pact between the two.

However, Peake abandoned the idea of having the sailor tell a tale at this point – the story he began can be found in Rob Maslen's article, 'Fantasies of War in Peake's Uncollected Verse.' Instead, Peake developed the relationship between the new-born baby and the sailor. Fantastically, the child 'can speak like a man' and 'perch in the air' (193) – levitate – just as the newly created ash-form of Si can speak and move about the ship, right up to the cross-trees of the mast. So both poems involve the supernatural, which is significant when we consider how carefully Peake avoided the fantastic in the Titus books.

In the surreal conversation that ensues, the baby and the sailor comfort each other and the baby suggests that they should lure a flying bomb to their church, 'That we may explode in one flash of love / At the height of a world at war' (193). Thus RFB ends with a scene of mutual self-sacrifice, whereas in ToA it is mutual destruction.

This is where the similarities between ToA and RFB come to an end. The first is a horror story, uniformly humourless. The second runs through a wide range of emotions. It opens, for instance, by describing the burning of London in terms that express childish delight in the antics of 'little red monkey-flames' that

Run over the roofs and hop

From beam to beam, and hang by their tails
Or pounce on a table-top.

When they 'run wild / And slide down the banisters' (179), it is easy to forget that fire is not usually so playful; it also causes the death of the baby's mother, cremates the living body of Si the sailor, and consumes the library of Gormenghast (as well as Sourdust). In the Titus books, Steerpike acquires a monkey that he calls Satan; the fire in RFB is the evil consequence of war flown in from Nazi Germany. Yet viewed through the innocent eyes of a child, destruction by bombing can be poetic:

The loose wallpapers pour
And ripple their waters of nursery whales. (180)

And the baby is thankful to the sailor,

You showed me the coloured lights,
And the golden shoals of the falling stones,
And the scarlet of the streets;

so that 'I am rich on my natal day' (193). This is the Peake who wrote in 1937,

I am too rich already, for my eyes
Mint gold. (22)

Peake may not have witnessed much of the Blitz itself (although he wished to depict it), but he was living in London in mid-1944 when the flying bombs began to fall, and he will have seen the devastation they caused. As in the Blitz, the disembowelled houses revealed their inner rooms. This may have reminded him of how, in the early 1930s, he painted a child-high frieze of animals round the walls of a nursery (*MP's Vast Alchemies*, p.65). At any rate, it was in July 1944 that he fell in love with Ruth Shackle, and wrote to her: 'Be careful of yourself – in the streets – crossing roads – & this sky-monster. The future will say, "They met at the time of the Flying Bomb – way back in '44"' (*PS* 13: iii, 9). So while ToA takes place in a cruel and loveless world, RFB is all about love.

As I showed in *The Voice of the Heart*, Peake's work is full of ill-assorted companions: his solitary males invariably pick up partners that are humanized animals of ill-defined gender. Think of Captain Slaughterboard and his Yellow Creature, of the Lost Uncle and

Old Man and Child
(28 x 36 inches)
Signed 'Mervyn Peake'
and dated 1933.
From a photograph by John
Bignell, taken for the cata-
logue of the DLI Museum &
Art Gallery exhibition,
'The Voice of a Pencil'
(Dec. 1979-Jan. 80).

Jackson the turtle. In a 1933 oil painting, Peake depicted a really old man with a tiny child in his lap (see facing page), in a setting that could be thought of as anticipating London in the blitz, although it actually seems to depict a craggy natural landscape. The dark pits of the old man's eyes contrast most strikingly with the gentleness of his gesture as he admonishes (or instructs) the tiny infant. This darkness adds to the contrast between the pale, smooth skin of the child compared with the heavily wrinkled man.

In RFB we have a variation on this partnership theme, inspired by love and charity: the sailor picks up a human baby of undetermined gender; by rescuing it from the gutter, he may be thought of as a

kind of Good Samaritan, and the baby certainly thinks of him as such, for it repeatedly calls him its 'saviour'. However, the illustration that Peake provided (albeit years after writing the poem) of the sailor dancing over the shattered panes of glass with the child on his shoulders evokes not just Flay carrying Titus but, more tradi-

tionally, Saint Christopher with the Christ-child, whom he drew for Fabian at about the time he wrote RFB (see *PS* 12: iii, 47). Garance Coggins has observed that this illustration seems to quote Blake's frontispiece for *Songs of Experience*.

It is clear that the sailor is thinking along religious lines too: having first qualified the child as a 'doll' (181), he graduates to 'little fish' (183) with fists 'like a brace of anemones' and a 'body as soft as an egg' (187). On the strength of this, he heads straight for the traditional symbol of the fish for Christ, exclaiming

'O, Christ in heaven! I must worship you
For the ticker you keep in your chest;
I must worship you for your new-look, babe,
That'll never be washed or dressed.' (187)

On the next page, he calls it a 'finless fish' (188), which sounds like 'sinless'.

From this point onwards, the baby takes on Christ-like qualities, first by inspiring the sailor with Biblical strength:

'With the light of your eyes so fixed on mine
Then strong as a lion I am!
The lion of Judah, or Africa,
Or the one that lay down with the lamb.' (187)

Then, in various speeches, it reveals that it has already suffered everything that can befall a human being:

'I've lived it all before,
For there's nothing new when the womb is through
With its restless prisoner.' (188)

In particular, it has experienced everything of a sailor's life:

'I have swarmed the masts of a thousand fleets,
I have drowned through the bruise-blue sea,
I have burned through an age of scarlet fires
So have no fear of me.' (189)

It has infinite sympathy for the man who has saved it.

For all his saintly qualities, the sailor is human. He has hurt his shoulder by 'warding off [a] burning beam' (184) and he is bleeding to death from 'the glass that is lodged in [his] hip bone' (184). In his pain, he is unrecognizable; he

threw back his head and laughed
In a way that was loud and torn,
And even his mother would never have guessed
That his face was the face of her son (184)

His strength is 'ebbing away' and he tells the baby that 'the lion in my breast has died' (191). He fears death, and his Christ-child companion, who has already 'died a thousand times' (193), feels divine pity for him in terms that are quintessentially Peakean:

Down the burning cheek of the naked babe
A tear slid heavily
As though it were taking the curve of the world. (194)

For Peake, a tear is 'the loveliest emblem of the heart's condition' (G337). The babe promises to cheer him as he dies with the

Christian message of hope, 'For death is so mean and small' (192) and 'the Grace / Of God' is immeasurably infinite.

At this moment, the baby sees the figure of 'Christ's Mother' (196) among the rubble in the church. In his weakness and despair, the sailor cannot see her, or hear her beating heart, yet the baby can, rather as Peake's own child in Maeve's womb can hear the beating of her heart, that 'double-throated chord of loving' (77). The babe asks to be taken to her; as the sailor does so, symbolically reuniting the literal baby with its mother and at the same time the Christ-child with the Virgin, his 'brain broke loose' (198), enabling him to embrace death with joy, untrammelled by reason.

The first consequence of this is his hallucinatory vision of a sailor's life, ending with his inviting the babe to join him, that I quoted earlier. 'I will,' answers the child, echoing his earlier promise to the sailor. But at this moment, he hears 'the *silence* of the cross / That we've been waiting for' (199). This is highly ambiguous: is it the silence of death on the Cross that this Christ-child knows awaits him, or the silence that follows the cutting out of the engine of the flying bomb, signifying that it is now about to fall?*. The answer is of course both – or rather, all three, for there are in fact three crosses here: there's the cross of Christ's crucifixion; the German iron cross that was painted on the wings of flying bombs; and the shape of the flying bomb itself, with its 'short black wings that made the cross' (201). And all three recall the cross-trees on the masts of sailing ships, the place that Captain Shad selects to await the coming of his death in the shape of the ash-form of Si.

Meanwhile, the child has 'slid out of the sailor's coat / And hovered over his head' (200), as though to protect the sailor from the falling bomb – and something equally fantastic has taken place. In the ruined church

* The V1 flying bomb was propelled by a pulsejet engine that made a characteristic rapid popping or buzzing noise – hence they were familiarly known as 'buzz-bombs'. Londoners quickly learned to sigh with relief when one passed overhead with the sound unchanged – or to rush for shelter if they heard the engine stop.

a headless horse
 Lay stiff in the smouldering aisle with a hoof
 At its heart like the sign of the cross. (185)

At the time when we encounter them early in the poem, the significance of the headless horse and its curious posture are lost on us, but now

the dead horse rose on its armoured feet
 And strode to where they stood, (200)

with the result that all these symbols come together:
 the silence broke and the air was filled
 With the whirr of the diving cross
 While the babe hung poised and the fainting sailor
 Leaned on the headless horse. (200)

The proximity of these heads is significant. Traditionally, the brain in the head – our reason – is what prevents Christians from accepting belief and trust in God. Traditionally, too, the horse symbolizes the body, controlled by the rider, reason. Now this horse is not only riderless but headless; the sailor has ceased to reason and is leaning against the horse, while the babe hovers above them both, in the place where their heads might be. They form a kind of Trinity. And at this very moment, the bomb falls and explodes. Its tail

Stuck out of the floor to point the place
 That it had journeyed from.

While plunged below in the shattered crypt
 Was the skull of the scalding head. (201)

This anticipates Peake's belief in *Titus Alone* in the evil of technology and Muzzlehatch's resulting desire to blow up the factory.

'Scalding head' reminds me of other moments in Peake's writing when a skull is associated with bubbling water. For instance, following Sourdust's death in the fire, Flay fetches his skeleton from the library: 'after scratching his own skull for a long while [he] at last decided that the only thing to do would be to carry the rattling relics in his arms *as though he were carrying a baby*.' It was raining hard at the time, the water 'streaming over the bones and skull in his arms and *bubbling* in the eye sockets' (TG 336). On the following page,

after Steerpike has appropriated the skull for his own purposes, Sourdust's remains are buried with a calf's skull, 'after it had been *boiled* and was free of the last vestige of flesh' (TG337; my emphasis in each case). So the 'skull of the scalding head' of the flying bomb, surprising enough here, is not without its antecedents.

While ToA may be definitely pagan, the religious message at the end of RFB makes it thoroughly unique in Peake's oeuvre. His most explicitly Christian poem, it nevertheless remains faithful to the pattern of immolation that we find in ToA and the Titus books, and other basic motifs which recur throughout his work.

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