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Reproducing Peake's MS drawings: some thoughts and suggestions

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WHICH CAME FIRST, Mervyn Peake the illustrator, or Mervyn Peake the writer? It's very hard to say. He himself made no a priori distinction between them. When he offered *Titus Groan* to Chatto & Windus in May 1943, he told Harold Raymond that it was the first of three parts and that he was making about sixty drawings for each part. He went on,

> I have thought of it all along as illustrated – in fact I have left out descriptions which I would otherwise have inserted had I not decided I could be more graphic with a drawing. I plan a portrait gallery of the main characters at the beginning of the book giving front face & profile, so that the reader can refer back. Maps, diagrams & drawing of the action etc. (*PS* 6: ii, 36)

Chatto declined to publish the book without substantial cuts. So Peake approached Eyre & Spottiswoode at the suggestion of Graham Greene. Even before reading the manuscript, the managing director, Douglas Jerrold, was sceptical at the idea of an illustrated novel, feeling that 'this would be liable to place it apart from "fiction", making a sort of ivory tower of it' (*MP's Vast Alchemies,* p.195). So when the book came out in 1946, it was not illustrated. Yet Peake continued to make drawings as he wrote. His notebooks, now in the British Library, all contain sketches, finished and unfinished, some linked to the characters and storyline, others quite unconnected with them.[1]

Consequently, it is difficult to classify these drawings that accompany and co-create the Titus books; their ontological status is multiple and variable. Drawn as the novels were being written, they may be considered as integral to the manuscript, forming part of the first draft. As such they can tell us something of how the work evolved, but they are

less relevant to the published books. At best, they are archival documents, as confirmed by their current home, the Mervyn Peake Archive in the British Library. But when we consider them in relation to novels that were, from the start, intended to be illustrated, they become 'preparatory drawings.' This uncertain status makes it hard to decide how they should be reproduced – if at all. So my aim here is not to analyse Peake's notebooks, or the editions in which his drawings have been reproduced, but rather to ask the kind of questions that should be asked when illustrated editions of his works are envisaged.

Throughout his life, Peake sought to combine words and images in a kind of 'marriage of the arts' within a single work, making them necessary to each other and inseparable. So the idea of reproducing his manuscript sketches should not be rejected out of hand. Introducing a book of his own drawings, he wrote,

> the core of the problem is: 'Who is one?… What is one's elemental name – one's root name as an artist?… This is the problem of the artist – to discover his language. It is a lifelong search, for when the idiom is found it has then to be developed and sharpened.
>
> (*Drawings*, p.10)

Peake mastered several 'languages,' both graphic and verbal, and when he could he sought to express himself not through words or pictures separately, but simultaneously, in unified works where text and image could fuse to form a whole. He realized this in his books for children, *Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor* – prose and line drawings – and *Rhymes without Reason* – verse and paintings. His book illustrations aim to do the same thing, using the words of other writers.

Two years before he offered *Titus Groan* to publishers, Peake expressed his thoughts about publishing a book of poems accompanied by drawings:

> I think the idea of poems & drawings by the same person – provided they are equal in merit and imagination – the one not *illustrating* the other but trying to convey a parallel experience in another medium, is a good thing.… It strikes me that there would be a freshness and a 'difference' in such a book. (*PS* 6: ii, 14)

He was well aware that there are poets enough, and artists too, but the combination of equal ability in the two fields is rare. He could think of only three English instances: William Blake, William Morris, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In wanting to produce such a book, Peake was not claiming equal status with these artists, but like them he wanted to unite the two poles of printing, word and image, within the covers of the same book, in a closer approximation of the artist's subjective experience.[2] This desire to realize a 'total' book, marrying word and image more closely than by illustrating the one with the other, had antecedents, and Peake was clearly aware of the tradition behind his ideal.

Although *Titus Groan* was published without illustrations, it could be argued that his 'ivory tower' project of an illustrated novel was in fact realized, only in a different form. Think of his observation about the great illustrator, who has 'the power to slide into another man's soul' (*PS* 12: ii, 16): we could say that Peake allowed his illustrator self to slide into the soul of his writer self. This produced a richly visual novel, in which the illustrator self disappeared into the background, invisible to the reader. Indeed we might wonder how his sketches could possibly enrich the experience of reading the novel; what more could images bring to a book that is already so full of them?[3] Would pictures not ultimately prove less visual than the text itself? Worse, they might become a drawback, diluting the power of the prose. A reader who has seen a character illustrated on the opening pages of the book might be inclined to skip all the rich metaphors that follow and stick with the mental image formed by the initial visual impression.

In my view, however, text and image do not compete with each other quite so directly in the Titus books. There is rather a fecund exchange between them, thanks to their respective semiotic systems. Knowing that his books were not to be illustrated did not stop Peake from continuing to draw as he wrote. For him, drawing was inseparable from writing; it nourished and enriched it. Why should this exchange not be as enriching for the reader as it was for him, a liberation rather than a constraint? Writing of the relationship between the ordinary man and art, Peake observed that we all have a natural, instinctive tendency to project our personality and personal limitations onto whatever we

look at: 'a particular man can see only his own reflection' (*Drawings*, p.9). But when we truly look at a picture, we become a slightly different person. This surely applies to reading too. When we read a descriptive passage, how can we construct our mental representation of it if not by drawing on the stock of images, memories and experiences that we carry in our minds? Our inner picture of a fictional character is directly understandable for us because it is an intermediate construct, formed partly from the words of the writer and partly from our own inner resources. Yet a drawing can take us further away from the comfortably familiar and closer to the writer-artist's own worldview by offering an image that we could not otherwise have imagined. And this image, in Peake's conception of it, is both fluid and adaptable: when his 'particular man'

> enriches his knowledge of pictures – in other words, when he becomes to that extent a slightly different man – he will see a slightly different picture, and so on, until the canvas or the drawing bears no relation to the work he stared at five years earlier. (*Drawings*, p.9)

So how we look at a picture is neither passive nor objective but dynamic and mutable.

This idea could apply, for example, to the gallery of portraits that Peake proposed to place at the beginning of *Titus Groan*. The absence of context would ensure that each reader's relationship with the character portrayed would be naively spontaneous, for this first encounter depends on who the reader is before embarking on the book, formed by personal accumulated experiences, memories, and personality. The first meeting with a fictitious character entails the same processes of decoding and analysis as when we meet a real person for the first time and ask ourselves what this face makes us think of. 'How do I respond to it?' Thereafter this initial impression of a character will evolve as the reader progresses through the events of the story. Unlike an illustration, the image is not imposed on the reader at any particular moment of reading; so no two readers are going to recall a frontispiece portrait at the same moment in the story. In fact, once seen at the beginning of the book, the portrait may be forgotten or, more probably, reconstructed during the process which leads the reader to combine what (s)he

remembers of the image and with what (s)he visualizes from the descriptions in the text.

This process, which does not freeze the viewer's perception but makes it dynamic and fluid, is contained in the very nature of Peake's sketches in his manuscripts. It can be observed through the subtle analysis that Zoë Wilcox makes of these sketches in her paper, 'The Imagination at Work.' Observing the frequency of the sketches and their placing on the page, she shows how closely they relate to the handwritten text. In particular she reveals how Peake's working drawings served to help him with the wording of his story, what to include and what to omit. In his sketches the characters are not 'frozen': they never look quite the same from one sketch to the next, as they would be if they were intended to be recognizable at first glance. On the contrary, depending on the inspiration of the moment, each sketch reveals a particular facet of a character, influenced by the mood of the text; they directly interact with it and the problem that Peake was seeking to solve. Thus Steerpike's appearance changes as a function of the passages he appears in. So these working drawings, which are much more intrinsic to the text than any illustration drawn subsequently could possibly be, could – and maybe *should* – accompany the text in order to enrich the reader's experience and interpretation of it.

Since the original publication of the Titus books, every fresh edition has in fact contained drawings taken from Peake's manuscripts. The first appeared in the year of his death, when he could have no say in how they were presented. In 2011 Vintage brought out a new edition with many previously unpublished sketches. For all but the most well-informed of Peake's readers, these editions provide their first – often their only – glimpse of his working drawings. However, the quality of reproduction is disappointing compared with the subtlety of the originals which were executed in a variety of media; fine details disappear from the printed page.[4] In some of the images, the original background has been cut out (see for example Irma screaming on page 388, or seated on page 390); in others it has been maintained, detaching the drawing from the rest of the page. (For instance, on page 32 the lines of the notebook page are visible behind Steerpike's head – see the reproduction of the original page on page 11.) No captions are provided to link

the images with the text, nor are they listed anywhere, which complicates any study of the book. On the other hand, one of the merits of this edition is the inclusion of Peake's original dustwrapper designs.

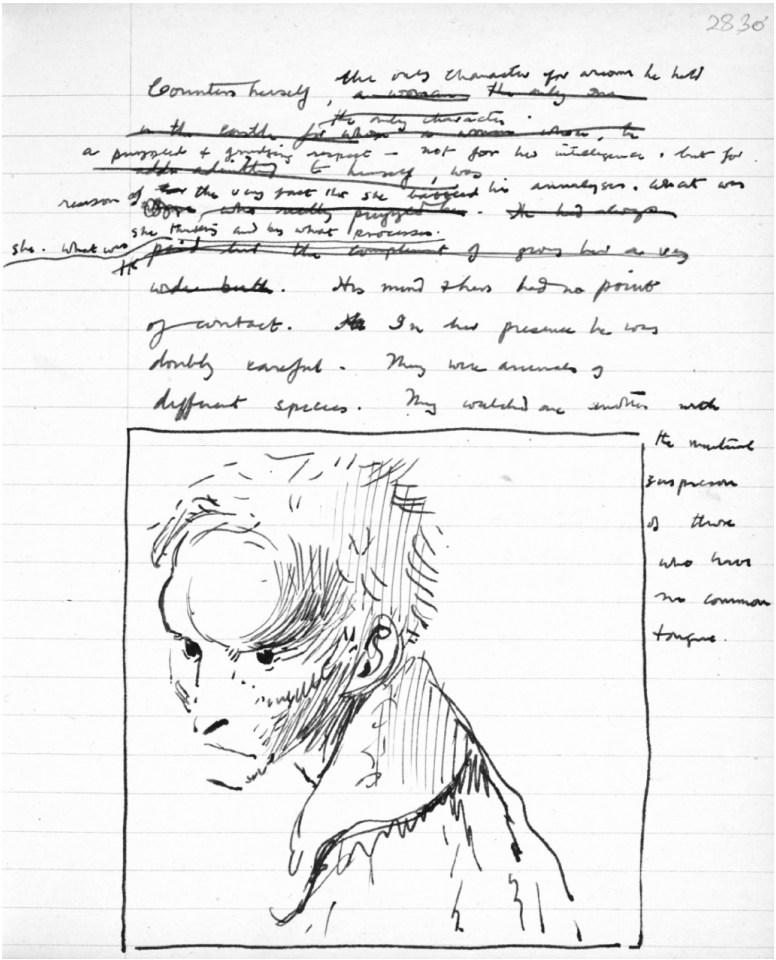
To ascertain how Peake's sketches relate to the text and to determine whether this relationship has been respected, I attempted to trace when and where they were first produced. I have been unable to identify the origin of all the drawings in the Vintage edition, but my findings leave me perplexed. While these sketches certainly come from Peake's manuscripts, the criteria for choosing them (out of hundreds more) remain obscure. The publishers have printed images that range from finished works to the merest of sketches, sometimes directly related to the text, or clearly identifiable, but just as often quite unrelated to the passage they accompany.

Let me offer a couple of examples. In the margin of page 203, there's a picture, executed with a brush in sepia ink wash, of a tall thin man with a plume on his head. This drawing is from notebook 4, folio 37 recto (Add MS 88931/1/3/4), at the point where Keda tells Nannie Slagg of her past (Vintage pages 137–9). So is he a Bright Carver, one of her lovers? He certainly has disproportionately large hands. But Peake makes no mention of the plume. At any rate, it is quite irrelevant to place this drawing beside a passage describing Steerpike's preparations to waylay Fuchsia on the eve of the burning of the library.

In the chapter describing Keda's feverish visions, there's a drawing on page 254 of a broad-hipped woman, with one arm akimbo, and the reader is inclined to wonder if it's Keda. It actually comes from the verso of folio 10 in notebook 10 (Add MS 88931/1/3/10), one of a series of drawings that have no apparent connection with the writing of *Titus Groan* and certainly not with Keda.

Another, brief example. In the Vintage edition, the sketch that Peake made of Titus being carried in a palanquin to his tenth birthday masque is printed not at the appropriate point in *Gormenghast* but during the Earling in *Titus Groan* (p.351). At this point, Titus is but one year old, so readers are confused: the image matches the text neither in the means of locomotion nor in the age of the boy.

Over the years, Peake's various publishers have placed his drawings in all kinds of arbitrary places. In some instances this leads to complete

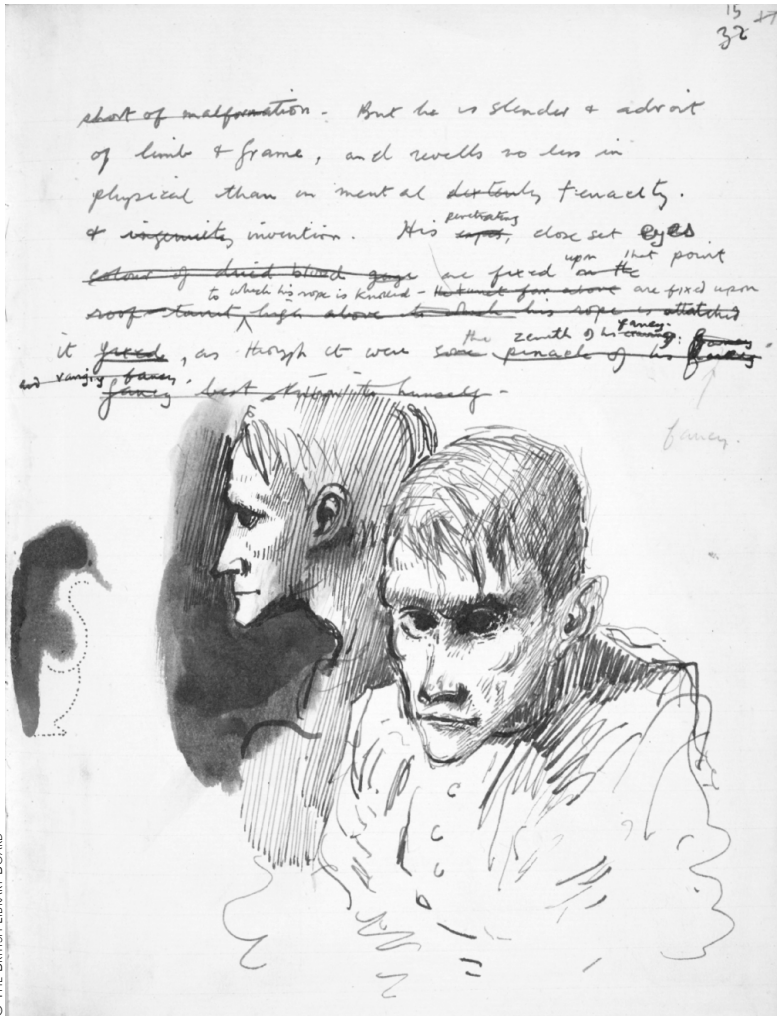


The sketch of Steerpike that appears on page 32 of the Vintage edition, shown in its original context, where Peake is telling how Steerpike is baffled by the Countess: 'his mind & hers had no point of contact,' so 'in her presence he was doubly careful' (BL Add MS 88931/1/3/19 f.28).
(Image reproduced from Zoë Wilcox's 'study of the drawings in the Titus manuscripts' in *Miracle Enough,* page 192.)

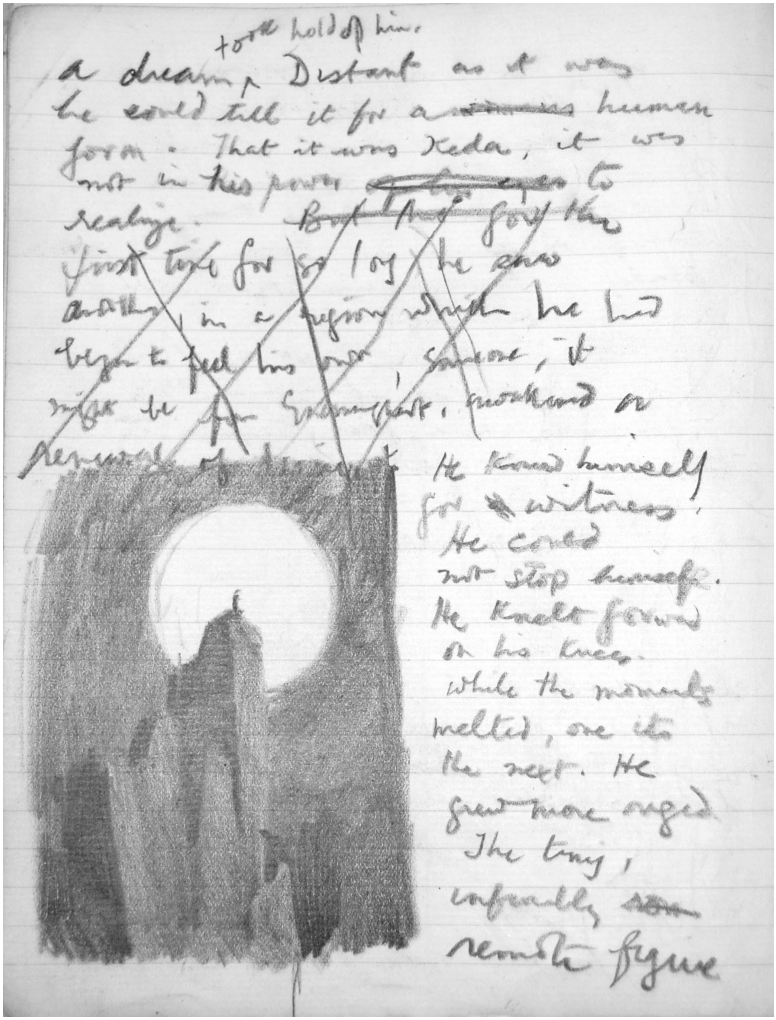
misrepresentations of the world of his novels. Take, for example, the sketch of an old man's head with long hair and beard; he is lying on his back with his eyes closed. He is clearly dead. Ever since the first illustrated edition of *Titus Groan* in 1968 and right up to the Vintage edition of 2011, this image has been placed on the final page of the book, as though concluding the text. In the closing chapter, the infant Titus has been ceremonially installed as the new Earl, so the drawing might be taken to represent Lord Groan, although he was neither an old man nor bearded. It may equally well be interpreted as symbolizing the death of something else in Gormenghast – tradition perhaps – killed by the changes that have taken place in the course of the novel. All such speculations on the part of the reader are however pointless, for there was nothing symbolic or allegorical about this drawing in its original context. It comes from notebook 13 (folio 105 verso, Add MS 88931/1/3/13), the episode in *Gormenghast* in which an old, old man's long hair and beard are set on fire by an angry youth. Peake sketched this hoary head at the foot of the page in which he describes the pedagogue's three disciples beside his deathbed, in a small red room lit by a single candle. He was possibly recalling the old man whom he had seen laid out in the chapel on Sark, a few years before. Impressed by the sight of the corpse flanked by four tall white candles, its long white beard extending over the white shroud, he had surreptitiously made a drawing of it (*PS* 2: iv, 20). This, at any rate, would explain why the beard is intact, rather than scorched as the story would require. So the drawing belongs to a grotesque and comic scene: realizing that the old pedagogue's death means liberation for them, the disciples leave the room 'hand in hand' and go bounding 'across the golden landscape, their shadows leaping beside them' (p.427). Detached from its context and placed at the end of the previous novel, this sketch takes on a completely different meaning.

All in all, then, despite its good intentions and original images, the Vintage edition disappoints. Rather than enrich the reader's experience, the misplaced drawings tend to mislead us into drawing false conclusions. So what can be done with Peake's original drawings for the Titus books?

It would make good sense to reproduce them in an edition which



Two studies of Steerpike from BL Add MS 88931/1/3/13 f.15 showing his high shoulders and 'his penetrating, close-set eyes'. Deleted from the MS is a phrase qualifying his eyes as being 'the colour of dried blood'.
(Image reproduced from Zoë Wilcox's 'study of the drawings in the Titus manuscripts' in *Miracle Enough,* page 192.)

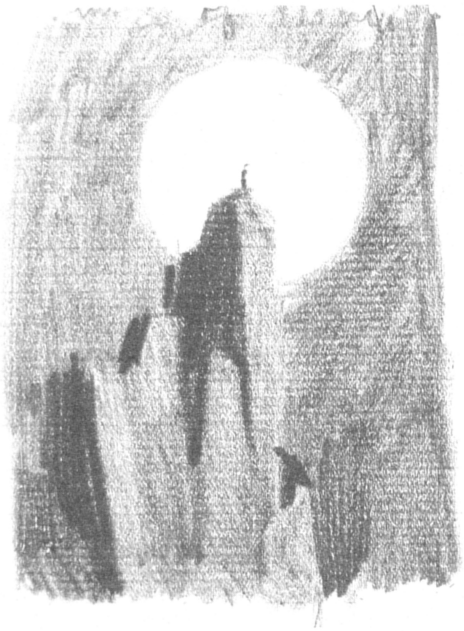


Keda upon her crag, as seen by Flay (from BL Add MS 88931/1/3/10 f.11v). On page 320 of the Vintage edition, where it belongs, there are sketches of Flay in front of his cave. The handwritten text beside the image is quite readable, beginning 'He knew himself for witness' and ending with 'The tiny, infinitely remote figure' as in the published book. (Image kindly provided by Alison Eldred.)

were husky with rushes, a great militia whose contagious whisperings suggested discontent, and with this sound in his ears he dragged his way through the reeds, his feet sinking ankle-deep in ooze.

It was his hazy plan to take advantage of the rising ground that was heaping itself up upon the right bank, and to climb its nearest spur, in order to gain a picture of what lay ahead of him, for he had lost his way.

But when he had fought his way up-hill through the vegetation, and by the time he had fallen in a series of mishaps and had added to the long tears in his clothes, so that it was a wonder that they held together at all – by this time, though he found himself at the crown of a blunt grass hill, he had no eyes for the landscape, but fell to the ground at the foot of what appeared to be a great boulder that swayed; but it was Titus who was swaying, and who fell exhausted with fatigue and hunger.



There he lay, curled up, and vulnerable it seemed in his sleep, and lovable also as are all sleepers by reason of their helplessness; their arms thrown wide, their heads turned to some curious angle that moves the heart.

But the wise are careful in their compassion, for sleep can be like snow on a harsh rock and melt away at the first fleck of sentience.

Keda's crag is placed in *Titus Alone* in the Vintage edition (page 756).

placed them correctly in the text, although this would not be a straightforward undertaking, by any means. On the other hand it is not possible to realize Peake's project as he described it, for we have only his working drawings and no paired portraits in 'front face & profile' of the characters; nor, for that matter, did Peake ever draw diagrams of the action or a map of Gormenghast. Moreover, the images that we do have cannot be treated as finished works; they remain sketches, drafts, cartoons (in the technical sense of preparatory drawings) or sources of stimulation for his imagination. They reveal his creative process at work, as witnessed by the presence of the notebook lines behind each sketch. It is quite possible to edit them out; publishers have done it often enough. But these revealing lines are not merely an aesthetic problem. In the original context, they are the interface between image and text, which together served Peake's process of self-expression. The organic exchange between hand-written text and hand-drawn images is lost when the drawings are reproduced beside typeset text. Cutting out these background lines goes a step further in dissociating them. It arbitrarily transforms working drawings into finished sketches (hence the rougher sketches look particularly inelegant when subjected to this treatment).

To what extent is it possible to re-create the intimate relationship between text and image in an edition of the Titus books? The most obvious step would be, quite simply, to reproduce each manuscript page, with the option of transcribing the text on the facing page – a critical edition. This would offer privileged access to the genesis of the works, as has been done with the manuscripts of other writers.

An intermediary or compromise solution between this (probably rather expensive) critical edition and an illustrated edition would be to accept the unfinished nature of the sketches and to reproduce all those that relate to the story at the precise point where they were originally drawn. There would be no exceptions and the background lines would be included. Such an undertaking would require careful preparatory study to determine which drawings are in fact relevant to the text. This approach would pose a great many editorial problems, for it means guessing whether apparently unrelated sketches might possibly have a bearing on what Peake was writing at that moment.[6] There would also

be discrepancies in the distribution of the images, due to the varying frequency of working drawings in the notebooks. Zoë Wilcox calculates that 91 of the 157 character drawings appear in just four of the thirty-four manuscript notebooks (Wilcox, p.180).

Finally, an edition combining the two approaches might be envisaged, with the finished portraits reproduced as 'a portrait gallery of the main characters at the beginning of the book' and the manuscript sketches reproduced in context, as outlined just above. This would observe the difference in status between the finished and the spontaneous drawings and present them in a manner that both respects Peake's intentions and enhances the reader's experience. Thus the reader could participate in a process of recreating the work from the existing material.

Despite the editorial problems, such an edition, or editions, would have the merit of restoring to Peake's sketches the role that they played during the genesis of the Titus books, instead of treating them as optional decorations. His readers would gain a sense of the intimate and organic relationship between text and image that characterized the writing of the books, fulfilling, if only in part, Peake's aims as an artist. If readers were sometimes disorientated by the mingling of lines between text and sketch, then they would simply be discovering further galleries in the labyrinth of Gormenghast.

Adapted from the French by GPW

Notes

1 A list of the contents of the Mervyn Peake Archive at the British Library, shelfmark Add MS 88931, can be viewed at http://searcharchives.bl.uk/.

2 When the book was published, as *Shapes and Sounds,* Peake's artwork was limited to a dustwrapper drawing. The illustrations he made for it were exhibited in December 1941, but only one of them has been recovered so far.

3 When Lisel Drake Beer read *Titus Groan*, she wrote to Peake: 'Reading it is like turning over the pages of a Dürer series, or a Holbein Dance of Death, or any one of those series of wood engravings of the 16th century.… *Titus Groan* is a remarkable piece of writing, every page is thick

with pictures, nobody but a draughtsman like yourself could have written such a book with so much imagery crowded into every sentence' (letter dated 4 December 1946, now in the British Library, shelfmark Add MS 88931/11/3).

4 Apparently the photographs for the new illustrations in the Vintage edition were made under adverse conditions during the transfer of the MSS from Sotheby's to the British Library.

5 Zoë Wilcox writes that her 'method for recognizing characters was to identify their distinguishing physical features; to note landmarks and events depicted in drawings that helped to give context; to check for likenesses between drawings; and to consider their placement in the text' (Wilcox, pp.178–9).

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GARANCE COGGINS is studying in France at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (Ulm) and at the University of Nanterre (Paris Ouest). Her article derives from her dissertation entitled 'Quelle place pour les dessins de Mervyn Peake dans *Titus Groan,* premier tome de la trilogie dite "de Gormenghast"? Le rapport texte-image de l'écriture à la publication: 1939–2012' (briefly: 'The text–image relationship in Peake's *Titus Groan* from 1939 to 2012') with which she completed the first year of her MA in art history at the University of Nanterre. She is currently looking into the implications of the text–image relationship in interactive ebooks, both for her research and for her own drawings and animated films.