The Salvaged Image:

A Study of Fairy Tale, Mervyn Peake

and the Creative Process

by

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Synopsis

This thesis is a personal view of art as a revelatory process. It focuses on fairy tale, firstly as primordial narrative, secondly as the subject of visual illustration, by the twentieth century English artist Mervyn Peake, and thirdly in relation to my own creative work as an illustrator. In this last aspect, the thesis forms an exegesis of my illustrations for the novel *Mother Moth* by Adrian Bell.

I investigate the roots of narrative, originating with the mother-child bond. The fracture of this bond drives the human story. Fairy tale asks basic ontological questions, and children respond to its candour. Fairy tale answers in terms of the heroic, telling the hero story in its most rudimentary, narcissistic form. I identify this story as the one story, underlying myth and all of history, common to all cultures, including Australian indigenous culture, and identical with Joseph Campbell’s monomyth, and Robert Graves’ Theme or ‘antique story’. It repeats the self’s struggle to gain separate identity.

During a protracted childhood, the self’s struggle inaugurates repressive mechanisms of defence, first identified by Sigmund Freud. Psychological dualities arise, critically, the split of subject and object. Current neurological research supports the concept of the self’s construction as a homeostatic reference, safeguarding the organism. The self’s primary repression is mortality salience, and I argue that strategies of the heroic arise to manage this terror.

These ideas are carried into an examination of the creative life of Mervyn Peake, revealing how an artist responds to the human dilemma. I argue that Peake’s individualism originated in early exposure to conflicting cultural perspectives. As a case study of the creative process, a close analysis is made of six illustrations from Grimm’s *Household Tales*. The conclusion reconsiders the impasse of repression, and defines the creative process as a form of salvaging images, or, in an alternate metaphor paralleling Socratic method, art as maieutics.
Introduction

I am a practising illustrator. For me, art is revelation. It seeks to uncover, or recover, an inclusive reality, to make manifest the fragmentary divisions in human life and consciousness. To do so, its strategies are manifold. It disengages with habitual patterns of thought, and tries to evade scrutiny by those patterns working to clip thought’s wings. It waits with reverence in front of a blank space, or listens to silence. It welcomes discord, embraces contradiction. It distrusts any exclusion, rescuing the unmemorable from obscurity, the unseen from scotomisation, and the unmentionable from taboo. It loves nonsense, joke, polysemy, paradox, symbol, metaphor, faux pas, double entendre. It presents, in Arthur Rackham’s phrase, ‘familiar things in unfamiliar guise’ (1933, n.p.). It sutures, joins, struggles to unify however it can, through absurd identifications and metaphors, grotesque but pertinent assimilations. I see art’s aim as redintegration, finding a self-similar image: the part that will regenerate the whole. I also believe that, concomitant with this aim, many works produced by the creative process help elucidate much that is mysterious about human nature, its drives, conflicts, ambitions and motivations. How and why this is so, in theory and practice, this thesis will show.

My focus is on fairy tale: firstly, as primordial storytelling, secondly, as the subject of visual illustration by English artist Mervyn Peake, and thirdly, in relation to my own creative work as an illustrator. As primordial storytelling, I believe fairy tale provides psychological insight on a very primal level, and much critical commentary supports this view. In its unashamed narrative, fairy tale is a candid diagram of the underlying narrative configuration of human personality, and reveals how requisite the concept of the heroic is to fantasy life. Mervyn Peake responded inventively to the candour of fairy tale, and I will try to show the reasons behind his sympathy with the genre. Reflecting on the genesis of my own work, I hope to help the reader appreciate how sympathy with a text and its ideas ignites a creative process which results in ‘salvaged’ visual images.

Anamnestic activity of the kind I believe the practice of art seeks to authorise is proscribed by normal consciousness. The mind partitions its territory. Sigmund Freud named the mechanism for doing so Verdrängung, literally ‘repulsion’, repression (1915). Otto Rank called it ‘partialisation’. Desires, feelings, imaginings become negated, depleted of emotive force. Repression works like magic. It occurs outside conscious control. For images to avoid
surrender to repression, they must be salvaged, brought back, not by any act of will, but by
submission to practices aiding ‘inspiration’, the enigmatic creative energy behind so much
art, music and poetry throughout a long-established tradition. Yet there are forces working
immediately to deprive creative experience of inherent cathexis. The hallmark of repression
is strength. The hallmark of art is vulnerability.

Many psychoanalytical theorists, including Otto Fenichel, Melanie Klein and Jacques
Lacan, explored and revised Freud’s concepts of repression and the mechanisms of defence.
For expediency, I shall keep primarily with Freud’s theory of personality, since my argument
only requires the reader to accept that, hidden away inside each of us, are emotions and
anxieties which may rise unpredictably, and from which we remain most of the time,
thankfully, shielded. It seemed inappropriate, if sadly so, in the context of the thesis, to
include recent experimental investigations into Ernest Becker’s ideas, made by the
originators of Terror Management Theory, though the reader is referred to the research of
Thomas Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon and Jeff Greenberg for findings about mortality
salience, death thought accessibility, the relationship self-esteem has with anxiety, and the
role of emotion in death terror management, findings which thoroughly support the argument
of this thesis.

My illustrative craft assumes the representability of words in emblematic condensation.
What form the emblem takes, its content and viewpoint, are considerations in a process
combining patience, vigilance and luck. Some writers, for example Kipling and Tolkien,
illustrated their own works. Of any illustrations I know to The Hobbit and Lord of the Rings,
Tolkien’s are the most convincing and meaningful. Victor Hugo, whose drawings of Gothic
architecture reminded Vincent van Gogh of Dürer’s Melancholia (Letters, 1958, Vol.1
p.207), found new freedom in visual art as a complementary form of expression. For some
artists, words and image arise simultaneously. Blake is one, Mervyn Peake another
(Gardiner-Scott, 1989, p.275). When Peake set out to illustrate a text, he did so with
deliberation, lowering himself down inside it, as though into a well, attempting to ‘slide into
another man’s soul’.

The thesis chronicles two trajectories. One is the history of fairy tale. The other is the
creative expression of Mervyn Peake. The two converged when, in 1943, publishers Eyre and
Spottiswoode commissioned Peake to illustrate Household Tales by the Brothers Grimm. The
first five chapters of the thesis present my personal view of the workings of the creative
process, in an interdisciplinary perspective. My theoretical base ranges across
Fairy tale is an art genre into which are deposited the fascinations and obsessions of many generations. No matter its disputed origins, it shares common bonds and themes across cultures. It is archetype, artifact, a collective creative endeavour, composed by the human imagination, and re-fantasised by every new generation. It is my belief that the primary preoccupation in fairytale stories is with the emergence and configuration of the sense of self, and its struggle to gain ascendancy in the psychic order.

On some level, the second story, the progress of an artist’s imaginative life from childhood, recapitulates the first. Their conjunction produced some of Mervyn Peake’s most insightful works, and, invaluable to my study of these, will be Peake’s abilities as writer as well as artist. Not only did he illustrate fairy tale, and author one of the finest fantasy works of all time, the *Gormenghast* trilogy of novels, a fairy tale (Batchelor, 1974, p.93) of monumental size, and an immense allegory of the human mind, he also left practical commentary on his work methods as an artist. To introduce his little book *The Craft of the Lead Pencil*, published in 1946, the same year Eyre and Spottiswoode issued *Household Tales*, Peake wrote:

> . . . drawing should be an attempt to hold back from the brink of oblivion some fleeting line or rhythm, some mood, some shape or structure suddenly perceived, imaginary or visual. Something *about* a head that calls out to be recorded; something *about* the folds of a long cloth; the crawling wave; the child; the tear; the brood of shadows. That movement of the arm that hinted fear; that gesture that spelt amazement. (1946, p.1)

Sandwiched in a slim book whose boards seemingly hold no paper, this short statement expresses the rapture and tragedy underlying much of human art. On this ‘brink of oblivion’, Beethoven reared his music, Shakespeare his poetry. For Peake, what must be prevented from loss is ‘an idea: an idea of a particular breed that can only be expressed through making marks on a piece of paper’ (ibid., p.1). It is the ‘suddenly perceived’, barely grazing the midwinter horizon of our vision. To record it, the artist’s instruments of trade, the perceptive organs, must be kept polished, mirror-bright, clean and ready. ‘Anything, seen without
prejudice, is enormous’ (ibid., p.1). Peake’s fairy tale illustrations make up a tiny fraction of his artistic output. They seem hardly to rate a mention beside the lavish illustrated children’s books published today. *Household Tales* was produced cheaply in the aftermath of World War II, selling for ten shillings and sixpence, and my own copy now bears up frail and a little threadbare, its cream-coloured silky papers lending a mellow, sculptural glow to Peake’s sketches, and a soft interior light to the inks of his colour plates.

Fairy stories are literary works anonymously assembled over time and seeded by humankind’s deepest wishes, yearnings and fears. They represent salvaged images of the most precious kind. Sometimes a story’s very avoidance of confrontation with issues becomes its source of power and strangeness. This, too, illustration must convey. For artists, the attraction of fairy tales is not unlike that of the Bible and myth. Yet, because fairy tales are often associated with literature for children, their illustrations, small-scale in books, rarely receive the sympathetic critical attention afforded their more noble relatives, despite tiny, unassuming masterpieces subsisting in their ranks.

Fairy tale illustration plays a role similar to that of oral transmission, augmenting meaning and acting as a kind of lifeblood. The usual distinction between folk and fairy tale is that folk tale comes down to us by word of mouth, whilst fairy tale has been transcribed. Oral transmission retains a mutability, which written stories lose. By presenting a story in new ways, illustration, like oral transmission, can prevent stagnation. It can reflect fashions in interpretation. Illustrators continue the sacred oral tradition of *das Volksmärchen*, which elaborates rather than contaminates tales, and lets them undergo a kind of cultural stratification. The great amanuenses, Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, set fairy tale in stone. But illustration freed them. The nineteenth-century Golden Age illumined them on the page, the twentieth century animated them on the screen, and the twenty-first made them interactive. Each new rendition has deepened the pool of meaning, revealed current preoccupations, adapted symbols and significances, grafted ideas, and laid down another stratum. Illustration keeps fairy tale alive and relevant. So much is true, with many implications.

But fairy tale and illustration interact in exceptional ways. The events of myth and the Bible take place on far-off mountains. The protagonists go naked or in wind-blown robes. Fairy tale happens in the valley, close to home, amongst chimney pots, garden gates and bakers’ shops, and the people dress in normal clothes. For Peake, ‘The quicksands closing on a centaur’s head tokens no more of magic than the penny loaf’ (1946, p.1). The uniquely
domestic, approachable truths deposited in fairy tales excite a heartfelt epiphany in us all, not least in the visual artist. Fairy tales are about childhood. For Peake, art is about the restoration of childhood’s unobstructed energy.

What do these simple, strange little stories mean to us, and why is their effect so profound? These questions gnaw at the core of all the interpretation, analysis and conjecture to which fairy tale has given rise. The fascination we have with the stories lies partly in finding some sort of solution to their mystery. Yet they defy solution. We may feel we know the answer, but cannot put a finger on it. Speculating about their meaning is like speculating about the meaning of music. However, whenever we read a fairy tale, there often lies beside the text a handy lens for a new viewpoint. Illustration provides commentary. It comments in terms of pathos rather than logos. Colour, line, light and shade provide a paraphrase: ‘something about . . .’ Knowledge is light, but line and colour are a warm flame which shows us shapes that are sometimes more in our minds than on the paper. Is this not also true of fairy tale? As interpretative tools, line and colour are not objective, nor testable by the demands of academic rigour. Yet can we not say that the more idiosyncratic an artist’s vision, the more validity it attains, and the greater its value? An illustrator’s response to a text may make a unique contribution to literary criticism, as in the dozen precious illustrations by D. G. Rossetti (Tennyson, 1857), (Rossetti, 1862), or Blake’s twenty-two for the Book of Job (Blake, 1976).

Pictures cannot solve the question of the way fairy tale affects us. But they pose the question differently, in a language of image rather than word. Just as a great portrait reveals the character of its sitter, some illustrations can speak more eloquently than the tale itself. Just as something about a face grabs the portrait painter’s attention, something about fairy tale fascinates the illustrator. If the idea recorded, as Peake suggests, ‘gave you pleasure’, and is recorded honestly without compromise, truly ‘something about . . .’, then it is extraordinary how often a deeply individual rendition reveals itself as a universal. All that is needed is affirmation, permission for the image to live. It thence becomes a salvaged image, minimally distorted by repression and denial. In Peake’s view, the characteristic quality of this image is that it belongs to the individual imagination:

... your drawing should be the embodiment of the idea, the experience. You are not anxious, for example, that a particular man or the tree outside the window should be recorded, for their own sakes, but rather for the sake of something which you discovered about them. In other words, to copy them in a literal and mechanically accurate way would not allow whoever looks at your drawing to disengage from such fortuitous facts as the number of buttons on the man’s coat or the number of twigs in the tree—what it was that interested you. (1946, p.3)
This thesis also serves as an exegesis of my own work. I have chosen to study the reciprocity of idea and image in Peake and fairy tale because both have influenced my own art. Their influence will be important when considering how my research has benefited my own designs, particularly those for the fairy tale novel *Mother Moth* by Adrian Bell. I shall refer to these where appropriate through the body of the thesis. Here I only want to mention one technique, probably the principal one used to create them, and to let it serve as an analogy to my discussion.

The *Mother Moth* illustrations use a technique of layering, or lacquering, which builds the picture up from the first rough sketch to a patina of depth and brilliance. Nothing is erased, nothing reversed. First thoughts, false starts, slips of the pen, slips of intention, are all retained. The lacquer technique shares the sense of interior depth found in *Mother Moth* and simulates the book’s sense of lost or merged boundary between inner and outer worlds. At the same time, clear and well-defined images were needed to represent the heroine Elspeth’s strong resolve. Before deciding on the technique I tried others, but none gave the same kind of translucence. The method involves the artist in a long and intimate relationship with the picture. Past details — the shrug of a tree-branch, a downward-curving crease beside an eye — all survive, though dressed in newer forms, akin to seeing the child in the grown-up. The picture grows of itself, reinforcing some associations and concealing others.

The gradual layering process compares to the way traditional fairy tale comes into being, through embellishment, metamorphosis, distortion, omission, even unconscious suppression. Stories often hint at events left untold, like objects not present in the picture which still cast shadows. The surface of the layered image may be tersely emblematic, the story grotesquely curt. I think of the murderer wizard in *Fitcher’s Bird* whose eerie method of transport is described like this: ‘Then he made long legs and hurried away. . .’ (Tatar, 2004, p.202). Such conciseness, leaving so much unsaid, is baffling.

In the lacquer technique, the perception of depth comes from light bouncing off a highly reflective flat polished surface. Fairy tale’s surface veneer is equally hard and reflective. Both remind us that all perception is an act of imagination, dissolving and penetrating surfaces. No matter how many secrets the layers of the picture or of the fairy tale hold, their literal surfaces are closed. In fact, their secrets lie already with the viewer. Examining the literal surface only scratches the picture, deadens the fairy tale’s ability to affect us. At the conclusion of Chapter 6, after examining Peake’s illustrations to *Household Tales*, I will return again to this metaphor of surface as it relates to the notion of the ‘salvaged’ image.
The nature of fairy tale allows an artist to achieve a direct and intimate communion with the reader, or listener, who is frequently a child. The illustrator becomes interpreter, the illustration retells the story. Parent and child enjoy the picture, or go to the movie, together. This is an essential part of the fairy tale experience. We put our trust in pictures more willingly than in words, because the work of understanding pictures we feel we do for ourselves. Maria Tatar, Chair of Folklore and Mythology at Harvard University, writes:

‘In my own copy of the Grimm’s fairy tales, held together with rubber bands and tape, there is one picture worth many thousands of words. Each time I open the book to that page, I feel a rush of childhood memories and experience, for a few moments, what it was like to be a child.’ (Tatar, 2002, p.xii)

It goes without saying that Peake’s are not the most popular or celebrated fairy tale illustrations. Nor are they the pictures I grew up with in childhood. Yet they possess certain qualities: they are intuitive, sympathetic, and engage their subjects in an open-ended dialogue. Before analysing them, I shall put illustration in general into perspective against the historical background of folk stories as originally transmitted by word of mouth, and fairy tale in its more recent written tradition. After that, my study briefly probes the reasons which various commentators offer to explain fairy tale’s effect — its ‘spell’. I will review the significant and informative approaches of Jack Zipes, Bruno Bettelheim, Maria Tatar, Marina Warner, and the most relevant interpretations: moral, mythological, political, social, psychoanalytical.

I argue that art’s quest, the recovery of wholeness, overarches the concerns of fairy tale — the evolution of our sense of identity, our relation to the human body and physical world, our struggle with creatureliness, the confinements of individuality, in short, the journey of the soul. All these have parallels in the findings of current brain research, neuroscience, and research into the neurology of emotion, feeling, and the nature of consciousness. For an excellent summary, see the chapter ‘Living with Consciousness’ in Antonio Damasio’s *Self Comes to Mind* (2010, pp.267-297). We can correlate changing perspectives on consciousness with Mervyn Peake’s artistic concept of ‘oblivion’ and his ‘fleeting line’, and their close association with rhythm and mood.

Images created by artist-illustrators often touch us in a very immediate way, triggering all kinds of feelings, including discomfort. This thesis explores the reasons for this. William James wrote:
Feeling is private and dumb, and unable to give an account of itself. It allows that its results are mysteries and enigmas, declines to justify them rationally, and on occasion is willing that they should even pass for paradoxical and absurd. Philosophy takes just the opposite attitude. Her aspiration is to reclaim from mystery and paradox whatever territory she touches. To find an escape from obscure and wayward personal persuasion to truth objectively valid for all thinking men has even been the intellect’s most cherished ideal. (James, 1985, p.432)

Fairy tales relishes mystery and paradox. They offer art a wonderful playground. That an artist’s work has the capacity to evoke such feelings we can verify only from analogy. Formal disciplines, in a sense, lead us away from our goal not towards it. Yet they have their place in helping unlock the secret of why an image affects us. They too help give voice to the ‘private and dumb’.

The thesis concludes by taking my observations about Peake’s work and fairy tale, and applying them as comment upon the purpose behind creative art. Art’s mission was a subject dear to Peake himself. Over the last century or more, the status of the arts in general has declined. Few artists today would have the courage to state their purpose in the way Beethoven dared: ‘... music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy, it is the wine of a new procreation, and I am the Bacchus who presses out this glorious wine for men, and makes them drunk with the spirit’ (Scott, 1934, p.155). When science makes pronouncements, society listens, as it did to the church in the Middle Ages. Art carries less weight. The arts are fiction. Science is fact. Science is objective and trustworthy, its purpose plain: it works. Technology earns money. The arts are subjective and eccentric; their purpose seems vague. Rarely, most damning of all, do the arts put bread on the table.

I think the arts have a primary directive no different from that of science. Science and art are twin methodologies, pressing their shapes either side of the flimsy curtain separating objective and subjective, being and knowing. Science enquires. Art reveals. Reconciliation, though differently perceived by two opposing character structures, is nevertheless a shared ambition. Mervyn Peake called the removal of that curtain ‘the one Essential’ (1974, p.31).
Chapter 1
THE NAVEL-STRING OF AN ETERNAL IDEA

The spell cast by fairy tales produces what Adam Gopnik in the New Yorker called an ‘unpredictable suspension of the regularities of natural and human order, an arbitrary and therefore sometimes terrifying lifting of the rules, including the rules of justice and mercy.’ (2002, p.139) The stories corroborate our innermost suspicions, re-evoking the earliest, most private, most obscure experience. Fairy tales are authorities, travel guides, companions. For all their strangeness and illogicality, we trust them to speak plainly, and their anonymous authors not to betray us with glib rationalisation. Fairy tales hark back to states of contradiction and multiple affirmation, before homeostasis reigned. P. L. Travers, the author of Mary Poppins, wrote:

Fairy-tale is at once the pattern of man and then chart for his journey. Each of the stories unwinds from its core the navel-string of an eternal idea. Choose at random from the simple, most familiar bed-time tales, say, Hansel and Gretel. How it beguiles the child with its lollipop house and the peppermint doorstep! For us, however, this is only the lure. The trap, the real secret, is the journey through the wood. If you want to find your way home, it says (back to beginnings, becoming as little children), you must scatter something less ephemeral than peas or rose-leaves. Birds will eat one, and the wind blow the other away. Only by marking the path with pebbles-enduring, hardly found, indestructible-can you pick up the trail and escape the witch’s oven which is extinction. (1950)

The stories’ directness intrigu'es, scares, delights us. Though often reformulated to convey a moral, their primary drive is to tell, and they do so with eagerness and condensation akin to dreams:

One of the old women who used to come and tell me her dreams launched out into a long narrative that did not sound like a dream at all. "Did you really dream this?" I asked her. No, this is not something she dreamt last night, it is an old altjira (dream). Then I found out that the Aranda word Altjira meant both dream and folk-tale. (Róheim, 1992, p.31)

The simple indeterminateness of ‘Once upon a time . . .’ belongs to every child, expressing the private struggle to achieve a conscious, mindful identity in the world. The happy-ever-after ending consoles and reassures us.

Fairy tales pose, as children often do to parents’ discomfort, fundamental questions about existence. Who am I? How did I get here? Why rich and poor, beggars and kings? Mothers exist, so are there also witches? What is time? What is death? What is wishing? Can wishing
make things happen? What is miracle? What are people? Are they animals dressed in clothes? Are they immortal souls trapped within strange, animal bodies? Do animals have souls? What is evil? What is good? What are dreams? What is waking life? Is there safe passage for me through all of this?

Consider how many of these and similar ontological questions are touched on by the Russian tale “Beautiful Vassilisa”. The heroine becomes slave to a ruthless stepmother, then drudge to the witch Baba Yaga, then companion to an old woman. But the spirit of Vassilisa’s true mother helps her survive her terrors in the form of a little faithful doll. Birds help Vassilisa sort black seed from millet, and mice help her sort poppy seeds from peas. Or consider the Italian tale “The Ragamuffin Prince”, in which the heroine wakes inside her dream to live happily ever after with her Ragman (Valdislav, 1971, p.141).

‘How to be explicit,’ asks Patrick White in his autobiography Flaws in the Glass, ‘about a grandeur too overwhelming to express, a daily wrestling match with an opponent whose limbs never become material . . .’ (1982, p.70)? Grown-ups, under pressure of earning a living, cease to enquire, and consider such questions trivial, adolescent, unanswerable, the foolish domain of writers. But some power wielded by the fairy spell keeps the inquisitive blade bright, able to penetrate adulthood’s protective skin.

Maria Tatar in her Annotated Classic Fairy Tales quotes Arthur Schlesinger Jr: fairy tales ‘tell children what they unconsciously know — that human nature is not innately good, that conflict is real, that life is harsh before it is happy — and thereby reassure them about their own fears and their own sense of self’ (2002, p.xi). We who are older and wiser are often forced to lie about the world.

We tend to be afraid of any knowledge that could cause us to despise ourselves or to make us feel inferior, weak, worthless, evil, shameful. We protect ourselves and our ideal image of ourselves by repression and similar defences, which are essentially techniques by which we avoid becoming conscious of unpleasant and dangerous truths. (Maslow, 1963)

Deceptions, some sustained by long tradition, protect individuals and cultures. Yet, both for a child fresh in the world, and for an artist who values that freshness of vision, untruth is bewildering. Children sense the presence of skeletons in the human family closet. Author and illustrator Maurice Sendak says:

I find children on the whole more direct and honest, but being a child doesn’t automatically make you superior. Although usually it does. On the whole, children are better and more touching. They aren’t racists and liars. (Warrick, 1993)
Fairy tales acknowledge darkness, dare to expose secrets, or at least, admit the possibility that secrets exist. Sendak’s own work has been instrumental in developing a new tolerance for suitability in children’s literature. His *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) was criticised by psychologist Bruno Bettelheim as too frightening for young children. Sendak argued:

…from their earliest years children live on familiar terms with disrupting emotions. . . . And it is through fantasy that children achieve catharsis. It is the best means they have for taming Wild Things. (Kingman, 1965)

To allow for candid acknowledgment of the presence of evil and dark things, fairy tale often uses the trope of an improbably resilient hero with an irrepressible spirit. The ‘rise’ hero suffers cruelty and mistreatment, is exposed to terrors, and yet survives with composure, often to inherit a royal birthright. The significance of the hero figure will be central to my study. Our feelings toward this figure are ambivalent: a mix of sympathy, admiration, yet there is often aversion, and not a little embarrassment. In fairy tale, a light-hearted spirit, sure-footedness, and firm belief in good luck and serendipity carry the day. Fairy tale heroes have a counterpart in the energetic, absurd good humour of Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

I was in a Printing house in Hell & saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation.
  In the first chamber was a Dragon-Man, clearing away the rubbish from a cave’s mouth; within, a number of Dragons were hollowing the cave,
  In the second chamber was a Viper folding round the rock & the cave, and others adorning it with gold, silver and precious stones.
  In the third chamber was an Eagle with wings and feathers of air, he caused the inside of the cave to be infinite, around were numbers of Eagle-like men, who built palaces in the immense cliffs.
  In the fourth chamber were Lions of flaming fire, raging around & melting the metals into living fluids.
  In the fifth chamber were Unnam’d forms, which cast the metals into the expanse.
  There they were reciev’d by Men who occupied the sixth chamber, and too the forms of books & were arranged in libraries. (Bentley, 1978, p.88)

Contradicting a difficulty with classifying the fairy tale genre is our ability to easily recognise a fairy tale. Asked what constitutes a fairy tale, people answer by example. “Little Red Riding Hood”, “Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs”, “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”, “Cinderella”, or “Jack and the Beanstalk” are considered prototypical, an impression influenced by the films of Walt Disney, whose films were the best known illustrations to fairy tale in the 20th-century. In the popular mind, illustration may become identical with a tale.
Perhaps we should resist defining fairy tales in terms other than ‘indefinable’. Their ineffability marks them as retaining sensual links compromised by repression. Unlike the rules of supervision which parents and teachers offer the child, fairy tale narratives provide alternate descriptions of reality. They do this partly by reducing to bare bones. Stark description of character in terms of role or occupation — king, princess, miller, servant-girl, daughter — draws attention to hierarchy and its arbitrariness. A gnomic brevity makes fairy tales seem like pointers. There lurks the suspicion that we are being shown something. A charm, or a rhyming verse couplet, may be repeated three times. There is a sense of action as only ritual, or preordained, yet exposing the peculiar artificiality of ritual. There is also a sense that fairy tale, and the characters in them, are allies, guides. They are our friends, yet wild and uncontrollable. The fairy tale world is this world, yet it is not. It is this world shifted to a different shape. The illustration of Elspeth and Gryll, *He cradled the beetle in a trembling palm* (Bell, 2011, f.p.126), locks together the ordinary world and the world of fantasy, of magic. This is a major theme in *Mother Moth*, in which the boundaries between the two constantly shift.

I wanted Elspeth and Gryll to seem joined (Fig. 2 on next page). They both focus on the beetle, Arthur, cupped in Gryll’s hand. Gryll’s fingers attune to the beetle’s antennae, which in turn attune to the goblin’s fingers. There is a sense of trust and of protection. The goblin is caught in the world of ordinary reality by the meat-coloured, fleshy leather belt. The darkness makes the scene palpable, yet dreamlike. The two figures float. We sense the presence of furniture, but there is none. The scene is part of a ritual, the catching of a goblin. Ritual appears frequently in *Mother Moth*, and it is a topic to which I shall return.

In my picture, I made the goblin, the creature of fantasy, more solid than Elspeth, who is pale and ghostlike, her hair and body streaming as smoke from the candle. Gryll appears in the foreground, Elspeth behind him. He flits no longer at the periphery of her vision, but occupies centre-stage. His toes are so prehensile they seem to possess independence of will, individuality, as if the goblin were a corporation, a ‘body corporate’, a collection of competing desires. The toes dance upon the belt, making his captivity seem ineffective. His hand teases at the smoke, his arm following the curve of Elspeth’s hair, as if it is he who is dreaming up Elspeth rather than she who dreams up him.
Her identity is as much a product of fantasy as the goblin’s. The smoke from the candle flame unifies the image. Smoke appears frequently in fairy tale as an image of magic, usually comfortable magic. In literature, a fine example is in Tolkien’s *Hobbit*, where Thorin and Gandalf blow smoke-rings obedient to their command: ‘Then Gandalf’s smoke-ring would go green and come back to hover over the wizard’s head. He had a cloud of them about him already, and in the dim light it made him look strange and sorcerous’ (Tolkien, 1966, p.12).

Smoke and candle are of central importance in this image, embodying the fairy tale ally. The candle is partly a reference to Alfredo de Rhodes’ candle, which is his companion under the ground: ‘My candle was my brave companion, though what it disclosed are not things one friend shows another’ (Bell, 2011, p.62). It is Elspeth’s solitary companion also, in her long hours of study of the *Mysterium Magicum*. Gryll is Elspeth’s companion too now, but he is untrustworthy and fickle, like a candleflame. In the smoke, Gryll writes a spell to heal the beetle. Fingers of smoke and those of the goblin entwine. The smoke’s rising column of solidity, movement and life fuses solid with visionary, and provides momentum to power a spiral. Smoke and belt, possibly also hair, all convey pseudo properties of a Möbius strip, that curious half-twisted surface with only one boundary. Smoke is substantial and insubstantial.
I photographed this illustration when it was half-complete (Fig. 1). In the underdrawing, there is strong chiaroscuro modelling. The left image shows the way in which the skeletal system and musculature were worked up under the goblin’s skin. Gryll possessed unmistakable malevolence at this point, masked over in the final version at right. His eyes eventually achieve a friendly twinkle, but underlying it is a certain sense of defeat, of loss, which of course the reader learns about in the course of the story. The corners of his mouth once drew down. He had the face and physique of a very old man, which, combined with soft childlikeness at right, makes him rascally. In the early version, Elspeth appears more haunted, wistful and older in spirit. Finally, she gazes, full of concern for the beetle. The early version’s eeriness comes from glazes applied over cross-hatching. Comparison of the images shows how emotional elements situated in more archaic layers retain their influence at the surface, though they may be obscured. The strength of the picture comes from the ‘home of bone’ (Peake, 1946, p.18) underlying it.

The collaboration which fairy tale offers a child is totally at odds with the adult world. Fairy stories provide kinds of experience otherwise met in dream, waking fantasy or hallucination. But they present threatening material in a safe way. Trifling or irrelevant details may convey great meaning, and the stories beguile us through simple ploys, such as the inevitable happy ending, necessary because, without its inoculation against confronting material, we would probably not read on.

Fairy tale may be distinguished from general folk tale, legend and myth by three features: timelessness, indefinite setting, and the portrayal of a story’s hero or heroine as a child facing extraordinary events. To these three I would add a fourth, academically unsatisfactory perhaps, but one which I would call an ‘indefinable but palpable psychological appeal’. By this, fairy tale can be defined through effect, emotional ‘charge’, something difficult to put in words, but indisputably ‘felt’ by reader or listener.

Fairy tales are the rawest expression of the human dilemma and how we cope with it. As such, they become prone to censoring processes, ‘like the manifest dream remembered in consciousness, conceals a repressed forbidden content’ (Dalton, 2003, p.xxvii). But there is more to fairy tale than omission. Rilke comes closer: ‘beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to bear’(1987, p.151). To quote Elizabeth Dalton:

The fundamental issue evaded in almost all academic criticism is that of emotional involvement, the fact the great works endure because of their continuing capacity to engage our feelings profoundly in spite of our remoteness from them in time, space, and social circumstance. It is sometimes hard to account for the intensity of the work’s emotional effect
in terms of its explicit subject or its beauty of form and language. The emotional experience becomes especially difficult to understand with works that arouse feelings of disgust, anguish, or terror; and yet it is often just these works that one reads with the most intense involvement, as though under a kind of painful compulsion. (1979, p.11)

So it is with fairy tale. I must depend on my reader to ‘feel’ what is meant by fairy tale, and also ‘feel’ what it is that is salvaged by the ‘fleeting line’ of Mervyn Peake’s illustrations.

French author Antoine de Saint Exupéry began his masterpiece *The Little Prince* by recalling as a child seeing an illustration of a boa constrictor swallowing an animal.

In the book it said: ‘Boa constrictors swallow their prey whole, without chewing it. After that they are not able to move, and they sleep through the six months that they need for digestion.’

I pondered deeply, then, over the adventures of the jungle. And after some work with a coloured pencil I succeeded in making my first drawing, My Drawing Number One. It looked like this:

![Image](image1.png)

I showed my masterpiece to the grown-ups, and asked them whether the drawing frightened them. But they answered: ‘Frighten? Why should anyone be frightened by a hat?’ My drawing was not a picture of a hat. It was a picture of a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. But since the grown-ups were not able to understand it, I made another drawing: I drew the inside of the boa constrictor, so that the grown-ups could see it clearly. They always need to have things explained. My Drawing Number Two looked like this:

![Image](image2.png)

The grown-ups’ response, this time, was to advise me to lay aside my drawings of boa constrictors, whether from the inside or the outside, and devote myself instead to geography, history, arithmetic, and grammar. That is why at the age of six, I gave up what might have been a magnificent career as a painter. (1962, pp.9-10)
It would be tempting to lure my reader with assurances that this thesis will elucidate fairy tales and the significance which a visual artist might find in them as transparently as Saint-Exupéry’s Drawing Number Two. That is not the case. Rather, I’m sure Mervyn Peake would agree that Drawing Number One contains a dimension unrevealed by Drawing Number Two. But that does not mean careful scrutiny of Drawing Number One cannot discover the curious little eye at the edge of the hat’s brim. This thesis treats illustrations as boa constrictors, not hats. Hats, of course, abound in the history of fairy tale illustration, as do pictures of elephants inside boa constrictors. But if worked at honestly, a picture will show clearly the ambiguities and elusiveness of the tale it illustrates.

Illustration is often the most direct vehicle by which the fairy tale delivers its peculiar toxin, and a sympathetic illustrator may increase the toxin’s potency. As children, we do not separate illustrations from words. Story and pictures arrive as a package. A good fairy tale illustrator avoids focusing on a moral, social or political message, or using a tale for propaganda, thereby restricting its meaning. Jungian psychoanalyst Marie-Louise von Franz writes:

To study a myth is like studying the whole body of a nation. If you study a fairytale, it is like studying a skeleton, but I think it shows more basic features in a purer form, and if you want to study the basic structures of the human psyche it is better to study the fairytale than the myth. (1980, p.13)

And we could say further: if you want to study the nature of human reality, study not only fairy tale, but art works which fairy tale has engendered.
Chapter 2

THE GENUINE TONGUE OF SENSE

Storytelling precedes history, which is itself the never-ending story. ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’

I believe storytelling begins in the intersubjective dyad of mother and child. Colwyn Trevarthen writes: ‘The core of every human consciousness appears to be an immediate, unrational, unverbalized, conceptless, totally atheoretical potential for rapport of the self with another’s mind’ (1993, p.121). Fairy tale begins here, as does all human storytelling. But fairy tale is what we have of narrative in its rawest form. Symbiosis of minds starts in mutual gaze, a capacity for which infants have from birth. One mind awakens another. Eyes touch, their sight interpenetrates. Consciousness and intelligence are present in the newborn, expressing surprise, perplexity, pleasure and annoyance. Expansion and exploration is launched in time and space. There is struggle and blockage of action. Almost immediately, the gestures and movements of another are mirrored in the self’s proprioceptions. The story has begun.

Primordially, at the birth of historic time, stories were simply overflow of recall or of arising visions, feelings. Accompanying gestures, the shapes and rhythms antecedent to song, were exuberant. The listener was fed on exuberance, receiving a sacred communication, a passing of image from mind to mind, surely as miraculous as the transfer of mother’s milk. To conceive of such an antediluvian language, existing before the knower and the known part company, is the closest we come to words as fertile sounds, to prosody as nurture. Jacob Boehme called it ‘the genuine tongue of sense’ (Boehme, 1965, Vol. 1, p.302). There was thus a fabled epoch when humankind saw ‘not surfaces’, nor felt encased in a sensorium. The senses were porous. In Boehme’s analysis, the human will knew ‘that all beings were its mothers which had brought it forth’ (Boehme, 1969, p.198). We may experience a brief restoration of such surface permeability when looking into the eyes of a lover. Near the conclusion of Mother Moth, when meeting her real mother for the first time, Elspeth is struck by the thought: ‘Eyes are so unenterable’ (Bell, 2011, p.241).

The image of the eye — mutual gaze between mother and child — figures throughout Mother Moth. The book laments the restriction of vision and the impossibility of sincere
communication. In early childhood, Elspeth doodles a picture of something she labels as her mother:

She later finds the picture deeply disturbing. As Elspeth’s deputy, I drew this doodle, and the process unsettled me. I drew it spontaneously, without prior thought. Examining the result in hindsight, I would comment that it contains more masculine elements than feminine. There is nothing motherly about it. Even the arches of the letter ‘m’ are pointed and arrogant, lacking any maternal softness. Most of all, the spiralling eyes with pin-point pupils are voyeuristic and repellent. In Mother Moth there are constant reminders of eyes. Elspeth feels trapped inside her demon costume, unable to see out, and must enlarge its eyeholes (Bell, 2011, pp.67-68). Danny Daniels has ‘eyes looking different directions’ (ibid., p.45). In the starless kingdom beneath the ground, the goblins have no need of eyes. But darkness ‘has brightened their eyes and withered their limbs’ (ibid., p.162). And then of course, there is the advice of the Mysterium Magicum: ‘Look from the corner of the eye. The corner of the eye gives glimpses of the magical world unknown to hard looking . . . Oh, fatal sisters, the eye must be an acid bath’ (ibid., p.89). Mutual gaze is the gaze of daydreaming. ‘Hard looking’ sees ordinary reality. Mother and child gaze in an imaginative unity of vision. Having no mother, Elspeth has been denied this. Mother Moth’s eyes are ‘everywhere’ (ibid., p.188). ‘Witches do not have poor eyesight, as in fairy tales. This notion refers to ordinary sight, not the eyeless eyes of a witch’ (ibid., p.208). Significantly, it is by drawing that Elspeth will enter her mother’s eyes. ‘She would have drawn, and the yielding chalk in her fingers would have taken her inside her mother’s eyes’ (ibid., p.244). At the very end of the book, the vicar sees Elspeth’s eyes as ‘extraordinarily bright’ (ibid., p.264).

When I designed the jacket for Mother Moth (Fig. 3 on next page), I made central the eyes on the moth’s wings. These eyes are ‘unenterable’ because they are painted, without sight. Clouded, milky, red-rimmed and heavy-lidded with age, they shine out of the burnished
darkness, straining to see, not with their own light, but with the reflected light from the candle. The technique of glazing normally places transparent darker colours over light. However, Mother Moth’s eyes have a light glaze over dark, so black shines through. The effect is sinister, like placing a torch under one’s face. The eyes look dead, crusted, and only surface deep. Old eyes appear so, lacking the limitless depth of a baby’s eyes. Mother Moth’s pupils are also elongated and predatory.

In this picture, candlelight figures again, with a repetition of the pattern of melting wax. Above the candle, the beak-like, hairy nose of the moth-face is eaten away. Leprous, the nose is becoming a mouth, implying an absence in the creature not only of sight but also of taste and smell, and her proximity to the candle flame implies an insensibility to pain. Yet she survives. The goblins pet and stroke her. For the witch face is an aspect of how the eye
beholds the picture. Pareidolic imagery, the mind’s ability to discover images in random stimuli, such as faces in clouds, fascinated Mervyn Peake. So I will come back to this subject. The reality is equally the beauty of the moth, its velvety wings, powdery softness and bright, sensitive feelers, covered with alert little hairs. It is an image of pure receptivity, illumined by the candle. The witch does what she must, to fill her emptiness, her absence of being. When Helen Page describes Mother Moth’s appearance to Elspeth, it is in terms of what is not there (ibid., p.225). The antithesis between witch and moth, between the wilful pleasure of the goblins and their captivity, between the moth and the flame, all set the scene for the novel.

Once humanity’s stories begin to be told with purpose, their purpose is nourishment, edification: the building of something in the fledgling listener’s mind. This making of shapes is a godlike exchange, transcendent as the communications of Morpheus, god of dreams. The storyteller implants a narrative, a knowing. The knower receives the viewpoint. The seed grows inexplicably, in some interior ground. The actions of characters in the story develop character in the listener, literally, engraved marks, or traits, tracks made by the plough. The knower, the self, is the slow accretion of such ‘marks’ of character. This mimetic intersubjectivity is believed to be made possible by mirror neurons, first discovered in the 1990s by the neurophysiologist Giacomo Rizzolatti and colleagues (Damasio, 2010, pp.102-103). These are neurons which fire in the brain both when we perform or imagine an action, and when we observe or imagine an action being performed by someone else.

*Mother Moth* seems to mourn what is lost in the process of human enculturation. The process is symbolised by the witch’s feeding, ‘fattening’, of her victim. In the picture on page xv, illustrating the book’s Prologue (Fig. 4 on next page), the intoxicant is distilled from spittle and ground-up fingernails. An electric power socket provides the warmth of maternal love, and the process reduces any dimension of the transcendent to a mechanised grinding. An earring hangs from the witch’s nonexistent ear. She wears protective goggles on chains. But with no eyes needing protection, the goggles are a badge, a necklace, an adornment. The witch’s thumb revolves a starwheel, which in turn winds a dark, entrapped star at the centre of the machinery. Passing through the gears of this star, the processed food drops into a flask, where it is heated. The process is digestive, in the way the developing self digests what it is fed. The nurturing mother semi-digests the food, like a mother bird, and expresses it to her child.
The design is reiterated on the back of the Emblem cello (Fig. 5). But here, the process reverses. Elspeth’s imaginative understanding of the *Mysterium Magicum* rises upward, cracking open the mechanised universe. She is cosy in her boat. There is security and adventure. She is confined within an open Ouroboros, whose tail forms the bell, the speaking end, of an ancient serpent, a bass wind instrument. The Hebrew word on the cello’s shoulder, ‘Aleph Lamed Pe’, meaning ‘secret, marvelous, wonderful’, celebrates Elspeth’s discovery. The bird flies free of the cogs of the mechanised universe. The witch’s machinery is exploded. The bird’s flight, seen from the point of view of life, is death, from the point of view of death, is life.

For a mystic like Boehme, stories are witch’s brew, and poison the innocent ear. History appears as the endless, compulsive repetition of the one story, the one fixation. It is the story of story itself — that is, a narrative involving a protagonist. Why is story arranged this way? We recognise it as the story of the ‘hero/heroine’, an inadequate designation for my protagonist, who is better referred to as the ‘notable’ or ‘celebrated’ one, the ‘darling’, the ‘madcap’, ‘immortal adventurer’. It is the story of the one with whom we identify. This character is often an underdog, someone placed in a terrible predicament, or given a daunting
task. Rarely is there doubt in recognising this character, to whom the most cynical adult will usually respond. More often than not, the hero/heroine is introduced in the story’s opening sentence: ‘One summer’s morning a little tailor was sitting on his table by the window’ (Grimm, 1946, p.169). Grown-ups react with reverence to stories of heroes who make real sacrifice for others, but tend not to respect fairy tale heroes and heroines who are often unashamedly boastful, brash, lucky, or inordinately deprived. To admire their exploits might be immature. Nowhere is the story of the hero more audaciously presented than in fairy tales.

There are fairy tale elements in the literature of ancient Egypt, in the Bible and in Homer. Over millennia, a complex written tradition evolved. Stories such as the Indian animal fables collected in the *Panchatantra*, arrived in Europe along the trade routes, and pagan transformation tales in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* and Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* were assimilated to the Christian tradition. From the 14th-century, many stories recorded in Latin were intended for an audience of clergy and nobility. The modern popularity of fairy tales stems from the late 17th-century, and the publication of stories by Mme d’Aulnoy, Mme L’Héritier and Charles Perrault. Before this, an oral tradition of telling wonder tales, ‘Zaubermärchen’, ‘contes merveilleux’, had continued uninterrupted in Europe from earliest times. Later this would mix with the dramatically visualized frame stories of *The Thousand and One Nights*, translated into French in 1704, and influence countless authors. Mme d’Aulnoy, published two collections of tales in 1697-8 which she called *Les Contes de fée*, and it is from French ‘conte de fée’ that the English term ‘fairy tale’ derives.

The research of Professor Ruth B. Bottigheimer of Stony Brook University, New York, seriously challenges accepted notions of oral transmission. (Bottigheimer, 2009) The plotline of the ‘rise’ fairy tale in which a lowly protagonist triumphs over adversity and marries royally, Bottigheimer attributes specifically to Giovanni Francesco Straparola, who is said to have devised it in Venice around 1550. The laws of Venice, Bottigheimer maintains, at this time prohibited marriage between nobles and commoners, and so the tales gained popularity. An accurate account of the origins of what we think of as modern fairy tale is probably impossible to attain, and need not concern us.

In *The Morphology of the Folk Tale*, Vladimir Propp analysed the narrative structure of Russian folk tales and accounted for all their plot components in a list of 31 generic functions, which he called ‘narratemes’, centering around the trials of a hero. The stories frequently begin with the hero leaving home, confronting a prohibition, and violating it. The hero is banished or given a task. A deceitful villain enters, often in disguise. The hero meets a
magical helper, or acquires a magical agent, or sometimes helps three different creatures who offer services in return. Adversity tests the hero, who may suffer a reversal in fortune and needs a miracle. The magical helpers come to the hero’s aid. Impossible tasks are performed. A magic spell is broken. The villain suffers defeat and punishment, while the hero receives rewards of wealth or true love. Jack Zipes comments:

If there is one ‘constant’ in the structure and theme of the wonder tale that was also passed on to the literary fairy tale, it is transformation — to be sure, miraculous transformation. (2000, p.xvii)

Joseph Campbell identified a single universal myth of the hero (1993, pp.3-46): ‘A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.’

The myth of the hero is common across cultures. The word in Greek means half-god, protector. Heracles, the best known of Greek heroes, has a strange, ambivalent relationship with his persecuting stepmother, Hera. The hero’s progress often displays such ambivalence. He is both conqueror and victim. Robert Graves, in The White Goddess, a historical grammar of poetic myth, equates the life and death of the hero with the annual cycle of seasons. The hero sacrifices his life to the mother goddess and at the same time exonerates his people. But after death, he is miraculously resurrected. Minstrels sang his story, going ‘from village to village, or farm-house to farm-house, entertaining under the trees or in the chimney corner according to the season’ (Graves, 1961, p.19). Like tellers of fairy tales, these minstrels were story-tellers of the common people. They celebrated variations on what Graves calls ‘the Theme’, or ‘antique story, which falls into thirteen chapters and an epilogue, of the birth, life, death and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year; the central chapters concern the God’s losing battle with the God of the Waning Year for love of the capricious and all-powerful Threelfold Goddess, their mother, bride and layer-out’ (ibid., p.24). Coleridge describes her in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”:

> Her lips were red, her looks were free,  
> Her locks were yellow as gold:  
> Her skin was as white as leprosy,  
> The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she,  
> Who thickens man’s blood with cold. (2004, p.11)

Mervyn Peake drew her:
The Triple Lunar Goddess appears universally in pre-Christian folk traditions of Greece, Phoenicia, Scandinavia, Rome, the Celts, even India and Africa, where, amongst the Khoikoi people, the hunter deity Heitsi-eibib is the son of a cow, an animal sacred to the moon goddess, and fights and slays the beast Ga-gorib. Like Orpheus, Dionysus, Mithras, Krishna, Osiris, Tammuz, Odin and Jesus, Heitsi-eibib is a resurrection figure. The hero’s quest is to unite with the goddess. ‘The ultimate adventure, when all the barriers and ogres have been overcome, is commonly represented as a mystical marriage of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the World. This is the crisis at the nadir, the zenith, or at the uttermost edge of the earth, at the central point of the cosmos, in the tabernacle of the temple, or within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart’ (Campbell, 1993, p.109).

With her ability to ‘transform herself into sow, mare, bitch, vixen, she-ass, weasel, serpent, owl, she-wolf, tigress, mermaid or loathsome hag’ (Graves, 1961, p.10), few would doubt that the goddess makes frequent appearances in fairy tales.

Despite sociohistorical accounts typecasting fairy tales as moral allegories, or as stories incriminating women or disseminating Christian values, these are mere overlay upon a deep fundamental psychology, racially and individually ancient. Though they have been employed as such, fairy tales are not moral allegories. Charles Perrault’s Tales of My Mother Goose (1697), was originally titled Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités: Contes de ma mère l’Oye (‘Stories or Tales from Times Past, with Morals’), and the eight little
stories Perrault chose to record were intended for presentation at court. He therefore concluded each with a moral maxim in verse. But the tales themselves, from wherever they arose, were generations old, and they included some of the world’s best loved: The Sleeping Beauty, Little Red Riding-Hood, Puss in Boots, and Cinderella.

To conclude this chapter, I will briefly remind the reader of what has become fairy tale’s most notable diffusion. In Germany, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm recorded stories allegedly told by peasants. Among the many people who passed on tales, we know of an innkeeper’s daughter, Dorothea Viehmann, an old cavalryman, Johann Friedrich Krause, and a young friend of the Grimms’ sister, Marie Hassenpflug. Marie Hassenpflug knew both the oral tradition and also Perrault’s Mother Goose.

The brothers Grimm published the most famous volume of fairy tales, synonymous with the genre, Kinder-und Hausmärchen (‘Children’s and Household Tales’), in five separate editions from 1812 to 1857. It contained two hundred and thirty-nine stories in all. The first edition included some stories in dialect and High German. Jacob Grimm, in Deutsche Mythologie, suggested an intriguing bloodline for his tales, tracing their origin into pre-Christian times to the era of native Germanic pagan faiths, a time he equated with an idyllic Golden Age. Wilhelm Grimm wrote in his preface to Kinder-und Hausmärchen: ‘These stories are suffused with the same purity that makes children so marvellous and blessed’ (Tatar, 1987, p.254).

The stories were also suffused with much violence and brutality. In “The Robber Bridegroom”, one of the tales told to the Brothers Grimm by Marie Hassenpflug, the heroine conceals herself behind a barrel and watches in horror as her fiancé and his band of thieves force a girl down on a table and hack her to pieces. A finger lands in the heroine’s lap. In “The Girl Without Hands”, a girl has her hands and breasts chopped off for refusing to marry her father. With each subsequent edition, the brothers presented a carefully revised version of their work. But Wilhelm Grimm, though he often deemed stories unsuitable for children, did not so much excise incidents of violence and cruelty, but references to pregnancy or incest (ibid., p.7). As an example of a social process unconsciously mirroring a psychological one, Elizabeth Dalton equates Grimm’s censorship with secondary revision of dream:

Going back to the earlier versions of one of their tales is rather like the process Freud describes in interpreting a dream: The edited text, like the manifest dream remembered in consciousness, conceals a repressed forbidden content, often an unedited account of cruelty and incest. (2003, p.xvii)
In “The Juniper Tree”, another tale collected by the brothers Grimm, a woman decapitates her stepson using the heavy lid of a box with a sharp iron lock. The head flies off and lands amongst apples. The story goes on:

She went up into her room and took a white kerchief from her dresser drawer. She put the boy’s head back on the neck and tied the scarf around it so that you couldn’t tell anything was wrong. Then she sat him down on a chair in front of the door and put an apple in his hand.

(Tatar, 2004, p.212)

The woman’s biological daughter comes by and knocks off her stepbrother’s head. The mother then cooks the corpse and serves it to the boy’s father in a stew. “The Juniper Tree” provides a typical example of fairy tale pedigree. The Brothers Grimm are thought to have sourced it from the artist Philip Otto Runge (1777-1810) who had set down the tale in Low German dialect and published it in the “Journal for Hermits”. But the story was already age-old. Goethe had alluded to it in an early version of Faust (1774). Its Russian equivalent concerns a birch tree, its English a rose-tree, and there are many resemblances to elements from other tales. In “The Juniper Tree”, the stepmother cuts her finger peeling apples. The sight of red blood upon white snow causes her to reflect: “If only I had a child as red as blood and as white as snow!” (Tatar, 2004, pp.210-211). At her black-framed palace window, the wicked queen in “Snow-White” pricks her finger and exclaims: “If only I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window frame” (ibid., p.243).

Motifs in “The Juniper Tree” of a couple desiring a child, maternal jealousy, cannibalism, retribution recur time and again. There seems a connection to Stone Age shamanic ritual, which, real or symbolic, often included sacrificial death, return to the womb (the cooking pot), consumption of the victim’s flesh, ancestral return, shape-shifting, and resurrection. These rituals often take the form of puberty or initiatory rites, presided over by parents or elders. Thus, the sister in “The Juniper Tree” plays the role of priestess, placing the boy’s bones under the tree.

Jens Tismar distinguished ‘das Kunstmärchen’, or literary fairy tale, from ‘das Volksmärchen’, the oral folk tale (Kunstmärchen, 1977). Tismar’s distinction is relevant because there has been endless academic debate amongst folklorists as to the relationship between the two, and whether the tales of say Hans Christian Anderson, probably the best known of literary fairy tale writers, deserve to be regarded in the same light as those originating out of the ‘sacred’ oral tradition, or whether Anderson’s tales are truly fairy tales at all.
In his monograph *Kunstmärchen*, Tismar characterises the literary fairy tale as written by a single identifiable author, as being ‘synthetic, artificial and elaborate’, as warranting no more merit than oral tales, and, most relevant to my study, only defined in relationship with oral tales (Zipes, 2000, p.xvi). But a literary fairy tale, like any creative work, may rival a tale handed down. ‘Fairy tale’ is an arbitrary designation, and they are still written today. We cannot identify earliest examples, as we can with say novels or sonata form. Fairy tale authorship is often in dispute, and in fact authorship matters very little. We are collectively the authors of fairy tales. W. H. Auden reckoned *Nursery and Household Tales* ‘among the few indispensable, common-property books upon which Western culture can be founded’ (Tatar, 1987, p.xiii).

The beginning of this chapter identified in human history a compulsive redrafting of one story. It is told in politics, sport, books, movies. It is at its most violent and terrible in war, when our feelings about it become most deeply divided. It is the story of the hero, and its base is so universal as to make it seem synonymous with being human. The Hungarian anthropologist and psychoanalyst Géza Róheim (1891–1953) applied Freudian theory to anthropology. Róheim did fieldwork in central Australia from 1928 to 1931, working with remote indigenous communities, analysing dreams and children’s play. He developed an ontogenetic theory of culture, which views cultural diversity, and any culture’s collective institutions, as the result of individual childhood trauma. Róheim saw the purpose of culture as protecting ‘mankind against the danger of object loss, the colossal efforts made by a baby who is afraid of being left alone in the dark’ (1971, p.100). In *Fire and the Dragon*, Róheim sought to differentiate between myth and folk-tale. He makes a marked distinction between the tales he himself collected and

explanatory narratives which end up with some peculiarity of an animal species or some phenomenon in nature. Therefore, they are hardly "Märchen" at all in our sense of the word, because the ending indicates a certain claim to be believed, attempt at connecting the fable with reality. (1992, p.31)

Examples of such ‘explanatory narratives’ are “How the Koala Lost His Tail” and “Why Kookaburra Laughs”. But, on the far side of the earth, far from the forests of Germany, the gods of Mt Olympus and the bards of Wales, Róheim collected a kind of story, having ‘one constant theme; the struggle of human beings against the demons’ (ibid., p.31). In these stories, ‘good looking’ heroes struggle against
hairy giants with big penises and testicles . . . The females of the species have big breasts and genitals, sometimes they are superhuman in size . . . The war between human beings and ogres is being waged with equal ruthlessness on both sides but whereas the ogres always eat the indatoas, human beings never retaliate in like kind.

The story starts with a sentence like this:
"An indatoa lived with a neera" or "an old man lived with his grandson" and ends with the formula "then they came to a big camp and lived there for ever. (ibid., p.32)

Noting the resemblance to the traditional fairy tale ‘Once upon a time’ and ‘they lived happily ever after’, Róheim goes on to identify other similarities:

The other striking analogy with European Märchen is the transformation motive in its particular setting. Just as in the European folk-tale the animal metamorphosis of the hero is frequently the result of a curse of an injured person; there the serpent form is due to the evil magic of a man whose wife the other man has captured. (ibid., p.32)

Even in tales of the remote Australian Aborigines, the ubiquitous theme of the hero recurs. Like their European equivalents, the Aboriginal stories instance a marked domestic flavour. While concealing strange and grotesque elements, they still remain ostensibly everyday family stories about finding one’s place in the world, stories, as Bruno Bettelheim would later phrase it when making his own comparison of fairy tale versus myth (1977, p.35) of optimism rather than pessimism.
Chapter 3

THE KEY TO THE THIRTEENTH ROOM

What can we take from this accumulation of information? First, let me say, in providing an understanding of fairy tales, it is not my intention to reduce or determine their meaning. Rather, I hope to reveal why coercions of taboo and censorship achieve exactly that reduction, and thereby lead to stories’ disparagement. My conviction holds that the potency of fairy tales lies in their effect. Some material in this chapter was published previously in the article “Fairy Tale Architectures and the Collective Memory Palace” (2009).

Returning to the mother-child relationship, which lies at the heart of many fairy tales, and is the focus for Mother Moth, I ask the reader to recall how formative is its symbiosis in relationship to the self’s distinctive development.

The protracted childhood of humans is unique amongst creatures. Rhesus monkeys suckle their young for just a few weeks, humans for up to, or even exceeding, two years. We remain infantilised, helpless during an elaborate incubation. ‘As long as man is suckled at a woman's breast,’ wrote Anatole France in the Bride of Corinth, ‘he will be consecrated in the temple and initiated into some mystery of the divine’ (Brown, 1959, p.165). In humans, a mammalian relationship of closeness and sensitivity is fine-tuned to an extraordinary degree. The results present physically in body characteristics which, in comparison with other primates, are unusually neotenous. Humans never develop large jaws, heavy brows and shaggy terminal hair, typical of apes. We have small teeth. We retain into adulthood round baby faces with generalised features. We remain, or try to ‘remain’, cute. Cuteness wins affection. Smooth, domed foreheads and easy bipedalism are characteristics of young, but not adult, chimps and gorillas. Chimps mature sexually by age eight. Anatomist Louis Bolk, who listed what he saw as indicators of neoteny, wrote: ‘Man, in his bodily development, is a primate foetus that has become sexually mature’ (1926, p.8). We compare with our primate relatives as dogs compare with wolves. Crucially, however, neoteny enables humans to preserve a plasticity of behavior, a receptivity and ability to learn that other creatures lose as they mature. The human mind remains infantilised.

The goblins in Mother Moth are old yet childlike. Their grotesqueness arises from a paradox. As adults with childlike qualities they are endearing. As children with adult
qualities they are ugly. In the picture of Gryll and the tap, (Fig.7) I tried to show the delight offered by a simple garden tap mounted on an old grey post.

![Figure 7](image)

In the story, Elspeth tells Lester Champion she will drink from a tap in the garden. Lester is disgusted.

As soon as he’d gone, Elspeth went for her drink. She washed her face and then, glancing down, saw Gryll outstretched on his back beneath the tap. He lapped the cool water luxuriously. The stream played into his open mouth and he gargled delightedly.

‘Good as freshly melted Himalayan snow, isn’t it?’ Elspeth giggled.

Gryll sprang up.

‘The sweetest drops fall from your face, pretty Miss Witch,’ he said. ‘Especially your ears.’

The goblin shook himself dry like a dog. (Bell, 2011, p.156)

Prodded by Gryll’s elongated finger, the water-stream is made elastic. Each of his toes enjoys the feel of the cool grass with the discrete delight a violinist’s individual fingers take in the resonating string. The prominent bellies of the tap and of the goblin relish the water together, as the toes and flowers enjoy the breeze and externalise the goblin’s unselfconscious pleasure. His folded legs are like tubes of plasticine. Though an old man’s legs, they cross comfortably like a child’s. He has hair sticking out of his ears, yet they are hairs which seem alert to every sound. Goblin neoteny in this image appears as lovable, and any grotesqueness seems amusing.

This contrasts with the formal image of a goblin, engraved by Alfredo de Rhodes for his edition of the *Mysterium Magicum*, and shown on page 64 of *Mother Moth*. Here, the adult
features of the figure are pronounced (Fig. 8). The nose and chin are bulbous, the musculature is strongly defined, though the limbs lack suppleness. The joints are enlarged, swollen, and their mechanical hinge-likeness is felt. The figure stands haughtily, in quasi-Egyptian posture. The rose thorns are sharp, and there are teeth in the mouths of the snarling snakes. Snakes and rose grow from the same root. Gesturing ceremoniously, the goblin’s hands and fingers exhibit no flexibility. They are large, strong, inured to labour. Grotesque elements in this image frighten rather than amuse.

We discover ourselves in the world as frail, helpless. More than any other creature, we are desperately dependent and immature, requiring a long period of protection. This is so because we possess such extraordinary sensitivity. Softness and malleability are the very qualities which have made our species successful. We cry inconsolably, from fear, hunger, pain. We not only hurt, but know we are hurting, and feel sorrow. From the beginning, this knowing is active, energetic. It may not be something we do, but it is an active grasping, exemplified in the newborn’s tiny, grasping fingers. We struggle to find breath and nourishment. The uncompromising surface of the world resists us, and, in that resistance, we come into being. We begin life as a separation, a farewell, and, throughout life, taking leave will be our hardest, most poignant act, the one to make us curl up inside. Grief is the primal emotion, lamentation a child’s first act in the world. Leave-taking begins the never-ending story. The hero sets forth, alone, or with a little magic help.
Opposing needs rend the child, who is propelled on one hand into the world — toward life and independence — yet, on the other, seeks refuge and love. The first urges creative self-expression, the second conformity. We run fearlessly, until we fall, then are gathered up to sulk. Devoted parents, conscious of a baby’s helplessness, provide omnipotence, or the illusion of it. The opening lines of the song “Viva la Vida” by the band Coldplay express how we felt in that former golden age: ‘I used to rule the world, / Seas would rise when I gave the word.’ Our powers once were truly supernal. If we felt hungry, a banquet was laid. If we felt tired, a giant bent down to carry us. The gods were our servants.

It could not last. Life’s momentum makes us our own worst enemy. When the servants rebel, which eventually they must, we feel destructive impulses towards them. These impulses are no more ours than feelings of hunger and tiredness. In themselves, they are not bad. They are natural expressions of energy. But the child is at their mercy. There is real distress. Unlimited self-assurance at one moment turns into fright the next. Obstruction leads to tantrums. Desire to return to the mother for reassurance threatens loss of autonomy and fear of re-engulfment. Desire for freedom threatens abandonment and loss of closeness. Conflict rages, confusion reigns, nightmares and phobias ensue. Separation from mother, repeating the trauma of birth, feels like impending annihilation (Schur, 1972, p.124). Symbiosis means the loss of the other is felt as the loss of oneself. The child may fear retribution for harbouring feelings of rage, marvellously invoked in Maurice Sendak’s book *Where the Wild Things Are*. Against this backdrop of chaos and ancient night, a highly sensitive, conscious being struggles to differentiate itself. Life pushes forward inexorably. Energy demands discharge.

The goblins in *Mother Moth* embody this discharge. At Halloween, the ordinary world and the world of fantasy collide. They jostle one another. Guests at the Champion Mansion Halloween party are both ordinary people in costume and supernatural creatures. All play like children. Yet the adults are involved in ritual. Their play is formalised. ‘We dress up and wear masks at Halloween to repudiate the ghosts who are abroad, and so we make light of terror’ (Bell, 2011, p.208). The goblins’ play is uninhibited. They personify pure gratification. They are endlessly mutable, polymorphous, all-flexible. They luxuriate in the punch, mock the party-goers’ pretensions, absorb the ticklish vibrations out of the piano. They delight in excess. The adult connection with magic is feigned. It is an illusory vestige, dependent on mechanical props — steel springs, a Medusa wig with motorised snakes, electrically illuminated skulls. All is papier-mâché, lighting effects, pageant.
The adults have learned to discharge their energies in ritualised ways. The scene of *Gatecrashers from another world* (Bell, 2011, f.p.210) takes place on a chequer-board floor, drawing attention to the staged nature of social interaction, in which veiled competition permits continuous reinforcement of self-esteem and winning of approval (Fig. 9). The goblins care nothing for these social niceties. Their presence causes parapraxes, ‘misperformances’, among the party-goers.

![Figure 9](image)

The unbearable ambivalence experienced by the small child gives rise to various responses, which psychoanalysis has called ‘mechanisms of defence’, most clearly described by Anna Freud (1936). When love and hatred are directed towards the one person, this contradiction can be handled ‘by splitting the contradictory feelings so that one person is only loved, another one only hated, a countercathexis preventing the two feelings from having contact with each other. An example is the contrast of the good mother and the wicked stepmother in fairy tales’ (Fenichel, 1946, p.141). In time, these opposing characters will take up residence in the child’s emergent sense of self, an artifact of diamond hardness.
formed by psychic forces under immense pressure. Once only an object of others, the self is now able to designate itself. It too is an object. It takes hold of the lens of attention, and is able to focus attention upon itself. Neurologist Antonio Damasio writes:

> What is being added to the plain mind process and is thus producing a conscious mind is a series of images, namely, an image of the organism (provided by the modified protoself proxy); the image of an object-related emotional response (that is, a feeling); and an image of the momentarily enhanced causative object. The self comes to mind in the form of images, relentlessly telling a story of such engagements. (2010, p.203, Damasio’s emphasis)

The self develops as a strategy to manage anxiety and cope with conflict. It is a compromise, a bargain. Its primary function is behavioural adaptation, self-preservation. But in process of time, a rich storehouse of biography will be accrued and an individual soul created. Taking itself as its own object, the self fears to suffer the loss of itself. Anxiety is triggered by powerlessness, when the child is faced with the threat of either isolation or re-engulfment. Either means annihilation. Behaviour must be regulated to suppress the symptoms of anxiety — pounding heart, churned stomach, sweating, tingling, rising panic. The child now assumes control once belonging to the parents. We learn to regulate anxiety by experiencing its hazardous potential in small doses, using the mechanisms of defence: denial, disowning thoughts and feelings by projecting them on to others, repression, identification. The only way to cope with awareness that is terrifying is to limit that awareness. Only through self-imposed restriction can the self survive overwhelming anxiety leading to psychic disintegration.

Experience can be described through first-person sensation, second-person corroboration, or third-person evidence. They are interdependent. We have been examining the roots of consciousness from the third-person perspective. Now, we turn to first-person.

Knowing takes place inside being, but it is the strange paradox of human life that being takes place inside knowing, and does so assuming the structure of a narrative, a division into subject and predicate. Within this narrative, the knowing self becomes protagonist. We have been following the self’s dramatic story. Damasio, quoting T. S. Eliot’s *Dry Salvages*, writes:

> You exist as a mental being when primordial stories are being told, and only then; as long as primordial stories are being told, and only then. You are the music while the music lasts. (2000, p.191)

It is my contention that fairy tales reiterate the primordial story of how we as mental beings come to exist, how we discover ourselves as the music. The structure of fairy tales can be seen as a blueprint for this process. Commentators such as Sheldon Cashdan (1999), Alice
Miller (1985), and Bruno Bettelheim (1977), interpret fairy tales as aids to dealing with psychological conflict or as moral lessons. But, though the insights of these commentators have been invaluable, I believe fairy stories inspire deep analyses because, more tellingly than myths, fairy stories recount what it feels like to be a human child, discovering oneself as a creature in the first-person, in possession of a creature body, what that discovery ultimately means, and what can be done about it.

Children love fairy stories not because of any edifying moral lessons the stories convey, but because fairy stories express feelings children experience often secretly, unconsciously, may be ashamed of, or threatened by — feelings the adult world refuses to acknowledge, and has set up vast cultural networks to suppress and avoid. Like the youth who went forth to learn what fear was, fairy stories venture into primordial places the adult world will not. The stories allow children the opportunity to confront life’s demons in fantasy and overcome them.

One of the fairy tales Mervyn Peake illustrated was “Our Lady’s Child”, in which a little girl is given by her impoverished father into the care of the Virgin Mary, who takes her to heaven and entrusts to her the keys to thirteen doors, twelve of which she may open, but the thirteenth she must not. Overcome by desire to know the secret behind the thirteenth door, she gives into temptation and discovers the holy Trinity sitting in fire and splendour. She touches the light with her finger, which becomes dipped in gold, refusing to wash clean. When the Virgin Mary asks for her keys back, she discovers the girl’s disobedience, evidenced by the gold finger. She reprimands her, puts her to sleep, and when the girl awakes, she is no longer in heaven, but in a dark forest, hedged by thorns. Peake depicts the lonely child confined in this wilderness, and he captures eloquently the identity of her prison: fleshly, corporeal, dendritic, womblike (Grimm, 1946, p.64). Betrayed first by a sin of uncleanliness, of spiritual stain, unable to manage her body, the tiny heroine is now dwarfed, bewildered, engulfed by physicality.

Knowing takes place inside being, and, if we were to build a fairy story out of that metaphysics, it might be that one day, knowing peeps into the thirteenth room of the palace of being, and makes a frightful discovery. We all know what it sees there — fairy tales abound in representative images: the beast, the clammy frog, the blood-stained handkerchief. In a nutshell, knowing discovers the vulnerable, fleshly nature of being. Though golden, holy and precious, bits of it stick to your finger. Knowing is aghast and guilty at the horror it has stumbled on. In our story, overcome by feelings of loss, guilt and helplessness, knowing
longs to protect fragile being from harm, and in despair, digs out the interior of itself to make a vault wherein the body of being can be laid to await hope of resurrection. It is the genesis of the biographical self.

Eventually of course the little girl in “Our Lady’s Child” earns forgiveness, and the tale ends happily, its moral predictable enough. The images likely to infiltrate our dreams, however, are of those strange heavenly rooms, each with an apostle sitting in it, the Virgin Mary with her big bunch of gaoler’s keys — what sort of heaven has so many locked doors? — the dirty finger dipped in gold, and the ‘poor little animal’ girl eating roots and wild berries, who, even as a rich and beautiful queen, will not attain acceptance in heaven until she proves her virtue and honesty: good both outside and in.

It is a tale of self-discovery and self-perception, suggesting different metaphors of personhood: the little girl in charge of many rooms — a palace — containing secret quarters she must not look into; the forest orphan, reduced to dumb animalhood after succumbing to forbidden pleasure; the queen in a royal castle, unjustly accused of eating her children; the prisoner at the stake, who finds repentance and reinstatement as a worthwhile human being.

As biographical selves, we are each a library of memories. This is the interior world in which we live, a palace if our self-esteem is high, or a dark forest hedged with thorns if very low. The self calls on memorabilia to create itself at every instant — at every instant born anew. Equally there exist cultural collective selves which do the same, storing identity in rituals, symbols, beliefs, fashions — what Richard Dawkins calls memes (1976, p.192). There is an edifice inside each of us which, through long process of addition, enlargement, accretion, by the practice of storytelling, the implanting of the narrative we talked about in Chapter 2, becomes the locus for a feeling of primary worth. The knower, the self, can even be viewed as particular arrays of neurons in the brain. Education, the moral imperative, instilling of values, all seek as their end the forming up of a contributor to society. We might see this as the essence of becoming human.

The formula of every fairy tale is that of St Paul when he told the Corinthians: ‘It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.’ (1 Cor. 15:44) The original magic is always the magic of transmutation - base metal into indestructible gold; or that of transubstantiation, of the Eucharist, bread into body and wine into blood: ‘this do in remembrance of me’ (1 Cor. 11:24). The edifice built within us is a sacred precinct. It is the holy of holies. Within its fantastic realm, we can command phantoms to rise, or summon back loved ones who once comprised the joys, thoughts, experiences of a living present. We become the ark of history,
literally predestined in a remembered future, reincarnations of our ancestors, the ‘goers before’, who thereby travel the path beside us. The west African Yoruba and Edo people call new-born boys ‘Father Has Returned’ and girls ‘Mother Has Returned’ (Koster, 2003, p.66).

Souls in antiquity, arriving in the invisible underworld of Hades, drank from the river Lethe and so forgot their mortal lives. The name Lethe, anticipating Freud, meant ‘concealment’. For the Greeks, forgotten experiences remained extant: they were sequestered, isolated, banished, but not erased. Initiates in the Orphic mysteries were instructed to avoid the waters of Lethe and drink instead from the pool of Mnemosyne, the kindly goddess of memory who took pity and bestowed on human consciousness, through the aid of her nine daughters the Muses, the ability to memorialise, to create history, to commemorate heroic deeds.

Fairy tales commemorate the story of the hero. They project the voyager’s creation of a sense of self, the one who walks through their landscape. ‘Mankind’s common instinct for reality’ wrote the American psychologist William James,

> has always held the world to be essentially a theatre for heroism. In heroism, we feel, life's supreme mystery is hidden. We tolerate no one who has no capacity whatever for it in any direction. On the other hand, no matter what a man's frailties otherwise may be, if he be willing to risk death, and still more if he suffer it heroically, in the service he has chosen, the fact consecrates him forever. (1985, p.364)

Not only does human knowing confine being to the form of a subject-predicate narrative, the resultant reality is fashioned very specifically in terms of an executive persona, an inside, implementing action on a stage, an outside. This specific interpretation of being arises because of the organisation of fantasies around an executive centre: ‘... you are the music / While the music lasts’ (Eliot, 1968, p.42). The story is manufactured in the form of images which knowing fantasises for itself using those portions of being deemed admissible and non-threatening. It does not use material from the thirteenth room. How we project the objectivity and introject the subjectivity we each believe we are interacting with is equally how we construct the interactive self.

In fairy tales, we witness the hero’s unconcealed narcissistic triumph. Fairy tales are the revealing, even embarrassing, first drafts for the great saga — the great cultural collective saga — the chronicle of human victory over being’s ceasing to be, over what was contained in the thirteenth room. This is why fairy tales display similar plot components, like houses designed late at night by the same obsessive architect.
At the heart of the many fairy tales lies the image of the mother, the infant’s source of life, nourishment, love, warmth, contact. It is in relationship with the mother, as object of a mother’s affection and care, that the helpless child first conceives a sense of separate identity. So long as an infant’s needs are instantly gratified, unity reigns. As Freud puts it: ‘Originally the ego includes everything, later it detaches from itself the external world. The ego-feeling we are aware of now is thus only a shrunken vestige of a far more extensive feeling - a feeling which embraced the universe and expressed inseparable connection of the ego with the external world’ (1930, p.4). When gratification is delayed or disappoints, the infant experiences pain, frustration and discord. The image of the mother — the image of being — suffers division. The good parts — the fairy godmother parts — are introjected to build the infant’s rudimentary self. The parts arousing hostility are projected, cast out, and the painful, bad feeling associated with them becomes ‘resident evil’ in an external world. Psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden calls this splitting ‘a boundary-creating mode of thought and therefore a part of an order generating (not yet a personal meaning-generating) process’ (1986, p.48).

In fairy tales, evil most often takes up residence in the figure of the witch. But she is precisely a creature of terrible paradox because, like the well-known ambiguous figure-ground illusion of the young woman and hag, the witch is the good mother in disguise, implying that the good mother may well be a witch in disguise.
The illustration *She looked upon a witch, 387 years old* (Bell, 2011, f.p.216) faces the challenge of portraying what is most horrifying when only imagined (Fig 11). The image unashamedly tries to increase the story’s toxin. Figure 10 is the image as an underdrawing. In an earlier version of the manuscript, Miss Page attended the Halloween party dressed as a witch. Her costume later changed to that of a ghost. The underdrawing emphasises the witch’s ribcage and boniness. She is scrawny and birdlike, her posture seductive. She poses like a striptease dancer, but what she removes is her whole flesh. Her cloak, fastened between her breasts, elaborates on the shape of a wishbone. But, though opening like a wing, the cloak will not help her fly. As she tugs a twist of hair to raise her rubber facemask, its features stretch, lugubrious and inanimate. Helen Page, who, in the early version, has her head in her hands, now puts out a hand to shield her from terror. She is literally melting to form a pool on the cold slate floor. She is pale, bloodless and almost a real ghost, a spirit. Her outstretched arm slashes across the picture like a rent. It directs attention toward the head of the witch.

This is a picture of the mother in her good and bad aspects. Evil has finally revealed itself. The truth — what the child suspected all along — is out. The good mother is powerless against her adversary. The child must take up the fight.

Joseph Campbell, identifying what he called the *monomyth*, laid bare the uniquely human obsession, what we might even call a monomania. The fairy tale hero or heroine crosses a threshold into a region where familiar things present as threat, or strange incongruous events happen. These are often random, or seemingly so. The child often finds herself utterly alone, like Snow White, or Our Lady’s Child. When a child hears a fairy tale, the dramatic action is mentally staged in a familiar setting: a back garden, kitchen, the local park or playground, a beach. This space will remain inwardly consistent, avoiding depersonalisation, and the space will remain consistent for each repeat reading of the tale. Children enjoy this consistency, insist on it, as is well known.

At focal points through the journey, disturbing images must be confronted. These produce anxiety, but only in the way of a funfair ride. In fact they serve to demonstrate mastery over anxiety. Incongruity threatens; a witch, whose character a child assembles out of bits of a neighbour and of a kindergarten teacher, jumps out from behind a laurel bush in the garden, and the child chuckles merrily at it all as a creation of fantasy. It is in fact one more version of the terror-management game peekaboo, in which the disappearance of mother inspires a moment of pure panic, converting to relief at her return. Anxiety is ‘housed’ in a familiar
space, within a representation of the self, where it can be deliberately controlled, its excitement turned into satisfaction. Always in fairy tale there is tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, disrupting then reinforcing the self’s sense of security.

In *Life Against Death* (1959), Norman O Brown argued that history is a representation of the psychological development of the collective human individual. Just as each one of us suffers trauma, represses experiences too painful to be consciously admitted, yet must tolerate them in modified form as symptoms of neuroses, so humankind through historical time must do the same. The version of the historical narrative as it is bequeathed to us determines our apperception. Thus we replicate as types of the sociocultural hero-self. Our allegiance will be automatic and unconscious, because we respond out of longing and need. Once identified with the hero, mental life submits to ‘boundary-creating modes of thought’ which endure from infancy to old age. Like favourite threadbare clothes or old photographs, the customs, routines, superstitions that sustain our sense of self-esteem and security insulate, captivate, and keep us warm. As Rilke wrote:

. . .there remains for us yesterday's street
and the loyalty of a habit so much at ease
when it stayed with us that it moved in and never left. (1987, p.151)

We compensate for panic, dread and bewilderment through magical self-aggrandisement: the fable of the hero. Life’s randomness must somehow be rendered predictable, fate preventable, and the process of storytelling, of ensuring homeostasis in mental life, lets us weave an ordered vision in which each of us walks forth as the specially chosen hero.
Box within box like a Chinese puzzle — so it seems to me, was my childhood. Only half do I believe in those far away days, lost in the black engulfing sea.

Figure 12

Mervyn Peake was born on 11 July, 1911 in China. The landscape of China appears constantly in his work, as in the tiny castle and steps at the bottom of his illustration to “The Singing Soaring Lark” (Fig. 12). His earliest memories were of the McKenzie Memorial Hospital in Tientsin, modern Tianjin, where his father was the Congregational Missionary doctor and his mother the matron. He lived behind the high wall that enclosed the quarter-mile long hospital compound. In addition to the hospital buildings, six grey-stone Gothic-style houses accommodated the hospital staff. Each house, Mervyn recalled, was remarkable in feel and smell, ‘as if a dog and a frog, and a squirrel and a rhinoceros, and a pig and a cat were all standing in a line’ (Gilmore, 1978, p.472). Dogs, parrots and monkeys were kept as pets. Ta-tse-fu, the cook, walked about aimlessly sharpening sticks, and showed Mervyn how to kill chickens. In the shade of a favourite, rook-filled tree, Mervyn read Treasure Island. He showed a friend how to make the waves in a ship picture pointy-topped. There were flowerbeds, a tennis court, and a mortuary. Pottery dragons on the roof corners watched Mervyn play, and warded off evil spirits. Dr Peake used as a paperweight a goose egg-sized gallstone he had removed from a patient. He is known to have performed at least one secret autopsy at midnight in the shed that housed the family donkey.
In 1950, Mervyn made remarkable notes for a projected autobiography, which he never completed. The notes show his deep love for and connection with his environment, and equally his sense of profound alienation from it. So evocative, the notes are worth quoting at length.

It is not so much that they seem far away, those days in the long compound; nor that the ever thickening mist that divides me from my childhood, confuses my memory; it is not because of this that I feel so severed from those early days. It is because the pictures in my mind seem not to be a part of me, but are like the glimpses of some half-forgotten story in a book, or a character from a long-lost book.

What I remember seems to be the background and the property of some one else, and the child that I see leaning over the warm handrail of the high verandah, or buying those sickly sweetmeats at a street corner where the beggars sit and showed me their sores, is severed from me forever.

It is another child from me and this seems strange to me for I can remember a fragment, here and there of acute distress and radiant pleasure. (ibid. p.472)

Mervyn listed under his ‘Fears’: ‘the black jersey, the shapes of clothes hung over chair backs, the changeling’ (ibid. p.474). We see a world remembered dimly: the hospital, the smell of casts and dressings, ether and surgery, of tobacco alight in his father’s pipe. There must have been meals delivered on trays, bloodied sheets in the laundry, bandaged people hopping on crutches, Sunday prayers, electric generators, heat and flies, bits of anatomy unexpectedly revealed:

There seems no thread to join those distant days to the present hour in which I sit writing with all its questionable proof of being - the pen in my hand, with the sun slanting through a Kentish orchard where the small hard callow apples, the ‘June drop’ as they call it, sprinkle the grass in their thousands . . . There is looking back both so much and so little to say about those days. I cannot think of them without a sense of space - of something infinite. The compound was my world - my arena. A world surrounded by a wall . . . And on the other side of the wall was China. (ibid. p.473)

There were ‘the ants which ate the houses and the beetle which ate the books. Above all there were the surrounding 325 million Chinese who seemed to press in menacingly on all sides, alien in language, appearance, culture and beliefs’ (Yorke, 2002, p.20). Outside the wall, mandarins in bright silk robes rode in sedan chairs through the streets full of beggars, lepers and hawkers. Dr Peake, in his Memoirs of a Doctor in China, lamented the injustice in Chinese society, the mandarins with ‘their torpid bodies and passive minds, and the toiling near naked coolies’ (ibid., p.23). Dr Peake, gave his services to all with equal impartiality. Maeve Gilmore later wrote of Mervyn: ‘he was the gentlest man alive—a gentleness that came from his father who, having seen the cruelties of human beings, had retained an innocence that was touching and impossible to understand’ (1970, p.26). Everything in China
was ritual. ‘The observance of propriety,’ Dr Peake wrote, ‘doing and saying the correct thing, is esteemed one of the cardinal virtues.’

Before Mervyn’s third birthday, the family travelled to England via the Trans-Siberian railway across ‘the wolf-infested wilds of Russia’ (Yorke, 2002, p.27). After one stop on the journey, Mervyn’s elder brother Lonnie got left behind by the train, and had to run to catch it up, Ernest Peake only just managing to haul his frantic son aboard. The incident affected Mervyn deeply, and the image of a child alone in the wilderness reoccurs in his work. From a wayside station in the Urals, Mervyn’s mother, Beth, bought him a glass-topped case of multi-coloured stones, and in Moscow, the family saw the Kremlin and heard chanting priests.

Once in England, they remained there for a little over two years, renting a house in Kent. At the outbreak of World War I, in August 1914, Dr Peake volunteered with the Royal Army Medical Corps. Lonnie went to Eltham School, and Mervyn stayed home with his mother:

The Peake’s were good, solid, worthy people. If they had dreams, they kept them to themselves; and then suddenly, woof, a genius. Mervyn’s mother was well aware that she had given birth to a wonder. She loved him, and cherished him, for he was a special person. (Watney, 1976, p.23)

Beth Peake bought her son sheets of paper for his drawings and to colour. She took the two boys to holiday in Dorset with their paternal grandparents, whom she also was meeting for the first time. By the middle of 1916, Dr Lei, left in charge of McKenzie Memorial in Ernest Peake’s absence, was calling for help. So in October, the Peakes returned to China, travelling by sea around the Cape of Good Hope. ‘The whole journey,’ Mervyn recorded at the age of ten, ‘took two months, and it was pretty risky because at that time the war was on and the German submarines were out’ (Gilmore and Johnson, 1974, p.10).

Both Mervyn and Lonnie fell severely ill soon after their return to Tientsin. The illness may have been encephalitis lethargica, which reached epidemic proportions world-wide immediately prior to the influenza pandemic of 1918. In his book Awakenings, Dr Oliver Sacks recounted the stories of victims of encephalitis lethargica, and the disease’s treatment using L-Dopa, a drug which increases dopamine concentrations in the brain and helps patients with Parkinson’s. Because Mervyn Peake in his forties developed a neurodegenerative disorder characterised by parkinsonism and cognitive decline, it has been suggested that his parkinsonism was postencephalitic (Watney, 1976, p.29). Indeed, the official cause of Peake’s death was given as ‘encephalitis lethargica’ (Yorke, 2002, p.323).
But that he had sleepy sickness is disputed, firstly on the grounds that he may never have contracted it, and secondly because his much later illness is not symptomatically suggestive of postencephalitic parkinsonism, but more so of Lewy body dementia, a condition displaying symptoms of both Alzheimer’s disease and Parkinson’s disease (Sahlas, 2003). Towards the end of his life, Peake suffered from visual hallucinations, worsening bouts of depression, and abrupt fluctuations in cognition and alertness. These symptoms, plus motor problems associated with Parkinson’s, neuroleptic hypersensitivity and frequent falls through loss of balance indicate a possible diagnosis of Lewy body dementia.

Mervyn and Lonnie both recovered. Lonnie was sent to boarding school. Mervyn spent all his time drawing. According to Laura Beckingsale, a missionary friend of the Peakes: ‘He hardly ever looked up from the table. A most extraordinary little boy’ (Batchelor, 1974, p.11). Mervyn listened to Laura’s missionary tales, of ‘frolicking’ rats, evil spirits, and he remembered particularly about a snake-bitten girl whom Laura had to sit on while the girl was given a tracheotomy. The summer of 1917 was so wet that by September Tientsin city had flooded, and stood at the edge of an inland sea. Mervyn watched naked men linking arms above their shoulders to assist people over the floodwaters. Much later, the flood reappeared in his writing as the flooding of Gormenghast. By the time he was old enough to start school, Lonnie had been sent to boarding school. Each day, Mervyn rode to Tientsin Grammar on the family donkey. In the unfinished autobiography of 1951, he described the school:

> It had nothing to do with China. It might have been flown over in a piece from Croydon . . . Its windows were mouths that shouted, “I know I’m ugly, and I like it.” There it stood, horrid and ugly among the sweetstalls on the wide road. The rickshaws would rattle by in the sun, while we tried to remember the name of the longest river in England, the date of Charles II’s accession, or where one put the decimal point . . . On the way back from Sunday school I would watch the huge Americans playing baseball without a smile on their faces. Great men, fifteen feet high at least with clubs to crack the devil’s head for ever, dressed up like armadillos. (Watney, 1976, p.26)

The smug, superior, self-satisfied mouths of the school windows are as vividly emotive as anything he drew, anthropomorphistic as a description in Dickens, strident as Disney, alarming as a talking tree in a fairy tale forest. He responded instinctively to the world of magical broomsticks, conversing winds and sausages in chef’s hats.

For any young child, China in the early part of the twentieth century was a bleak, strange, hostile environment.

People with bayonet and bullet wounds, or who had leapt from moving railway trains, were brought to hospital in wheelbarrows. In the mortuary lay the bodies of the many people
who committed suicide, either by opium overdose, or taking nitric acid, or by ingesting snake dung or phosphorus matches. Peake noted mysteriously: ‘The tall Chinaman with the acid face.’ With Tientsin becoming industrialised, there were many accidents: burns, fractured spines, torn off and mangled limbs, pigtails caught in machinery. Ernest Peake averaged a thousand surgical procedures per year. Mervyn watched them sometimes, apparently from the hospital rafters, or through the window. On one occasion, he saw an amputation. ‘I didn’t mind till the thing was off, when they put it on a tray and dumped it by the window, right underneath me. Then I keeled over’ (Smith, 1984, p23). It was a world where white was the colour of death, young girls’ feet were tightly bound, statues had their lips sweetened with sugar, and the gods were appeased with animal sacrifice. Amongst the local population, Ernest Peake’s blue eyes were greatly feared. Mervyn soaked it all up. At age ten, he was already illustrating his own original stories. If he drew all the time, it was to help make sense of his world. “Ways of Travelling” was published in the London Missionary Society’s magazine “News from Afar”.

Ways of Travelling

There are many ways of travelling in the world, such as by aeroplane, which travels at a great speed over the earth, and by submarine under the water. These were not used in the Great War.

In Africa, the halleck wagon is used by the natives. It has a cover something like a Peking cart.

The camel is a very good journey maker, because it can carry very heavy loads and also can go without food or drink for many days. One day when I was in a motor car in Peking, when I was seven years old, I counted about one hundred camels.

I am now going to describe some ways by which I have travelled myself.

The first travelling I ever did was in a mountain chair, from Kuling, when I was only five months old, and I was carried about five hundred feet above. From the chair I went on to a Taungtse river steamer. The steamer was very nice and comfortable. I know, because I have been on some since. They are much smaller than any ordinary sea steamer.

From Chajgwa I went into a “native horseboat” or junk for several hundreds of miles to Honchow. The Chinese junk can travel in four different ways. Firstly, the boatmen can pull up the sails so that the wind catches them and then the boat goes very fast. Secondly, the boatmen go on to the shores and pull the junk along by ropes. This is called tracking. They can also take long poles and walk up and down the deck pushing them into the mud, shouting “Hey-bee.”

Figure 13
Children quickly become keen students of human nature. Survival may depend on astute observation. Mervyn Peake seems to have retained into adulthood a childlike non-resistance to adversity. He accepted life with minimal dissatisfaction, and ‘had a very philosophical attitude to physical pain’ (Peake, 1989, p.151). Hitting his finger with a hammer, rather than react with annoyance or swear, he would say nothing, untroubled by what had occurred. This was so also in later life when illness made him more and more subject to serious falls. Sent to do a course in theodolites on Salisbury Plain during World War 2, he went to the Commanding Officer and explained ‘that he felt out of his depth; that when, for instance, he saw a 6 or a 9, or a 0, he always thought of them as female shapes, a 7 or a 1 as masculine’ (Gilmore, 1970, p.47). In an article in the journal Peake Studies, Charles Gilbert writes of Peake:

He is heir to the child who watched the paper horses being burnt, his mind feeding on the brilliant oddness of the ceremony rather than its meaning. As John Cowper Powys observed of Dickens in an essay exploring the novelist’s ‘child-like imagination’, ‘The surface of things is the heart of things.’ Peake himself loved Dickens and his writing seems to make something of the same imaginative bargain with the world. Sex, philosophy, religion are thrust out of the author’s terrain or admitted only as cardboard. In return he has the power to remake the rest of his creation in his own image. (Gilbert, 1998, p.14)

‘The surface of things is the heart of things.’ To observe a ritual is to see one thing and take it to mean another. Seeing the heart of things within the surface of things views the surface in its full sensory dress. Ritual observance comes to occupy most of our vision. This is the partialised, or fetishised, vision circumscribed by fear or anxiety, when objects become representations, vessels, cathected only narrowly.

Peake was keenly aware of odd, even grotesque, ritual behaviours and ceremonies. The meaningless tedium of ritual is a persistent theme of the Gormenghast novels. In Mother Moth the despotic rites of Fiona Suckling’s rule at New Moon Bridge school reach a terrible climax with her taunting of Isabel Morrison in the school hall. Elspeth’s fury and frustration unleash destructive poltergeist activity.

Playing Mozart’s well-known Alla Turca, from Sonata in A, K331, Isabel is in a world of her own. For her, this is not ritual performance. It is not accomplishment, nor a goal-directed activity. It is, for a moment, being inside the music. In the illustration Timbers crashed everywhere I tried to visually express the oneness of Isabel and her music through the device of Isabel’s face reflected in the piano case. The girl in the reflection has a life of her own, quite separate from the girl pressing the keys of the ancient, toothy piano. In an irony, the old piano has actually won the rejuvenation so desperately sought by Mother Moth. In the
reflection, Isabel’s plaits fly upward. The hair of the girl at the keys floats down. The piano is made living, imbued with the energy of Isabel’s playing. Not only this, but Mozart lives also, ‘while the music lasts’, within that inward spatial dimension which music creates. I will return shortly to this concept of an expanded temporality.

For the headmistress, nothing of the sort exists. Her whole attention is used up in a display of authority. She listens intently to the music for ‘a wrong note or something’ which offends her ‘sensitive musical ear’ (Bell, 2011, p. 194), yet she hears nothing. Her reminders to Isabel to concentrate serve only to remove Isabel from her true self, which is her playing, her art. Miss Suckling wants to keep Isabel in her physical self and environment, where she can be controlled, and which, of course, will soon be literal dust. When the building collapses, Miss Suckling, executing a pirouette, collapses heavily (Fig. 14). Isabel remains floating, as if in water, in the medium of her music, continuing to play, unaware. The patterns of dust in the air were created using patterns of water-flow. Water was splashed over an oily surface, and where it was rejected, dots and lines give a rock-pool transparency.

Figure 14
‘The surface of things is the heart of things.’ We do not see what we behold, but what we are shown. We see ‘cardboard’, and only a moment of rare insight can reveal the cardboard quality of our vision. When he illustrated “Mother Holle” (Fig. 15), Peake made the central focus of his picture the huge hennin atop the heroine’s mother’s head. It is ridiculously out of place against leaves and clouds, and only counterbalanced by the woman’s immense posterior.

Figure 15

Yes, to psychoanalysis, the hennin is an immense, draped penis, hidden from view. To say so only re-fetishises the image. The hennin tells us how the woman thinks of herself and wants to be seen. We are meant to look at her headgear, her mark of authority, though it may remind us of a washing line. Before it, the heroine bows, discomfited, almost trying to ignore it, her fingers positioned as if to hold a pencil. After being drawn to the hennin, our eyes travel to the shoulders and slender arms of the girl. Her delicate hands and fingers concern us because, in the story, she is forced to spin until her fingers bleed. Peake contrasts her hands with the huge, coarse hands of her stepmother, and with the idle, scheming hands which the stepsister clasps like a nest of snakes behind her back.

Children accept providence. Life is simply what happens. They quickly develop private rituals and superstitious beliefs: not stepping on the lines in the pavement, or holding one’s
breath for a time to prevent some event happening. Notably, ritual helps traumatised children, or those diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) or autism, avoid becoming overwhelmed. Stereotyped activities, such as flapping or rocking, relieve anxiety in the same way as foot-tapping. Their world demands structure and manageability.

Fairy tales are about ritual. Their narratives are predictable, often making use of ritualised progressions, particularly involving the number 3. Repetition in a story is comforting. All activity in fairy tale is ritualised. Work, such as spinning or sweeping, is a good example. Peake shows the poor servant-girl in the second story of “The Elves” (Fig. 16), broom in hand, struggling to read what she cannot.

In a shift which she has outgrown, she stares intently at the bizarre marks on the paper. She knows they contain significance, and may make out that significance by holding the marks close. This act is reading. Beside her are the sweepings she empties every day ‘on the great heap in front of the door’ (Grimm, 1946, p.47). The marks on the paper turn out to be magical indeed, for they are a letter from the elves inviting the servant-girl to be godmother at a christening. She attends, and spends time with the little folk. With pockets ‘quite full of money’, she returns home and takes up her broom to continue sweeping, but discovers strangers living in the house. Seven years have elapsed.

As children, we cope with the world in its openness. But, ‘of necessity, the sensuousness, fullness of detail, the color and vivacity of the image must fade’ (Heinz, 1957, p.152). Over
time, images more and more serve as the instruments of abstract thought. Peake retained a child’s ‘untrained’ eyes, the ability children have to focus their attention in the ‘wrong’ place. In fairy tale, actions appear in a timeless present, without history, without consequence, each effect its own cause. We see beneath the surface by seeing the surface as it really is, just as the surfaces of the Mother Moth designs entirely contain their depth. The temporal analogy is pertinent. Present time in no objective sense houses past or future. Wedged between them, it seems ephemeral, its duration barely distinguishable from the quantity of consciousness needed to measure it. Yet memory is an experience in the present, likewise anticipation. Most of waking life is spent in memory or anticipation, both unrecognised as occupying a limitless present that we falsely partition.

A surface having infinitely inward depth, or a present moment without temporal boundary, suggests an investment of equal energy in every perception. Perception is then egalitarian, non-discriminatory. It fills us with a sense of being, or becoming, everything. I am reminded of Walt Whitman’s “There was a Child Went Forth”:

There was a child went forth every day;
And the first object he look’d upon, that object he became;
And that object became part of him for the day, or a certain part of the day,
Or for many years, or stretching cycles of years.

The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass, and white and red morning-glories, and white and red clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird,
And the Third-month lambs and the sow’s pink-faint litter, and the mare’s foal, and the cow’s calf,
And the noisy brood of the barnyard, or by the mire of the pond-side,
And the fish suspending themselves so curiously below there—and the beautiful curious liquid,
And the water-plants with their graceful flat heads, all became part of him. (1971, pp.332-333)

Mervyn Peake’s way of seeing was in part no doubt a product of uncommon alienation, caused by his growing up with a bewildering array of cultural interfaces with ‘reality’. In the midst of such confusion, he drew, often compulsively. Drawing helped him forge an identity. He seems to have been precociously imaginative, conscious of imagination’s working, the workings of perception, the mutability of experience, and the self’s essential instability. The creatures in his work emerge, transform, writhe, suffer torment, but they are all comfortable with their creator. Fairy tale similarly engages the dreadful in a homely way.
Chapter 5
PATCHES OF DAMP

The Peake family moved to England in 1923, and Mervyn went to Eltham College, Kent. One of his teachers, also born in China to missionary parents, was Eric Drake, who had a great influence on Mervyn, and early on recognised his genius. After Peake’s death, Drake wrote to G. Peter Winnington: ‘What lies behind Mervyn is too big to be just a cult, or a protest, or what have you. It is the base of a surprising pyramid, a lotus with its roots in the primeval slime and its head in the sun’ (Winnington, 2000, p.50). Drake gave Mervyn and another boy the chance to work on creating an illustrated book about an island inhabited by beasts, pirates and Native American Indians. The project lasted a year. Mervyn did cowboy and western drawings in the style of Stanley J. Wood, an illustrator he called ‘my secret god. His very signature was magic’ (Peake, 2011, p.16). Indeed, Mervyn signed himself ‘Mervyn L. Peake’ into the 1930s. Speaking on the radio in 1947, he said:

I remember the impact of certain illustrations in my schooldays. Turning the pages I would come upon these rectangular worlds, these full-page illustrations, charged, some with terror, some with tragedy, suspense or exhilaration — whose haunting qualities have remained in my mind to this day. (ibid. p.16)

A pen and ink drawing from 1928, illustrating lines from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18, is ravishingly full of flowers and textures, and shows immense skill in handling depth and tone in intricate pattern (Fig. 17 on next page). Produced by a teenager, it is astonishing. Even though the picture is black and white, bold, living line creates every colour and hue. We see vivid colour. There is synesthesia. A handful of English artists, Samuel Palmer is one, can convey this kind of sensual intoxication. The spouting coolness of the fountain water falls as both musical cadence and melting fireworks. The purple mouths of the foxgloves murmur, and make us want to reach to taste the leafy pods and succulent clusters of berries dangling above. Already present is Peake’s characteristic attention to the negative space. Empty sky is proliferate and shimmering. There is heat and summer stillness. Above all, the eye delights in texture — of leaves, bark, squashy fruit, velvety flowers, air, light, and of smooth, white alabaster skin. Materialising out of profusion, the statue’s sensuous body reaches up, emergent from its spiral shell and fluted Italianate foundation, with tilted neck, arms and
torso moulded of sunlight, a consciousness as fleeting as summer itself, half in copiousness, half in the indispensable emptiness of the sky. The lines of the boy and the lines of the tree are one, yet separate. And, in the careless emergence of the torso’s smooth, melodic curve from its membranous, shell-like tail, we see elements of Peake’s love of the grotesque. All that I have spoken of — the child’s identity, the fundamental need for expression and fulfillment — is marvelously evoked in this picture.

Figure 17

When I drew the design for Patricia’s web, *Mother Moth* p.12, I tried to use black and white in such a way as to lay the appearance of jewel-like colour on the page without colour being present. The text above the design states that Elspeth ‘made three coloured drawings in fifteen minutes.’ I felt the text on the opposite page gave such rich indication of colour, to place more would gild the lily: ‘Elspeth drew and carefully coloured her, using orange, black, creamy gold and lemon, building the colours one on another till they were full and glossy. A familiar rapture descended as she worked, where all thought fell away and left only the world shining in: the broken eggs soaking the path, the pieces of white shell, the gold
splashes of their yolks, the sky blue puddles, all brimmed in on her and signed themselves somewhere in her drawing’ (Bell, 2011, p.13).

The verbal description of colour brings it loudly before the eye. To my mind, the illustrator’s job was to enhance the lines and patterns of the spider and the spiral depth of the web, giving the impression of a spider’s web catching the rays of the rising sun (Fig. 18). Because there is so much reference to synesthesia in Mother Moth, I liked the idea of this early anticipation of it.

The most important synesthetic image in the book is undoubtedly Smelling the moon at the very end. Gryll first describes smell as a diagnostic tool, while trying to revive the beetle, Arthur. Elspeth asks Gryll:

‘What did you mean smelling him?’
‘Smelling what was the matter. Nose knows best. That’s the old saying. It means smell, of course. Whatever you want to smell with — fingers, toes . . .’
‘I smell with my nose,’ Elspeth said.
‘Please yourself.’ (ibid., p.127)

Later he seems to recall the smell of the moon purely on a whim:
‘Well, what smells do you remember?’
‘All sorts. Books, bed sheets, blankets, pillows, candle wax, beetle dung, cold window glass, the moon — ’
‘You’re just looking round the room.’
‘The moon’s not in the room.’ (ibid., p.130)

This kind of association is akin to doodling, something I will come back to in a moment. For the image of *Smelling the moon* (Fig. 19), I wanted everything drawing upwards, as the moon pulls the tides. Elspeth and Helen Page seem as if lifting. Placing their heads within the tranquil sphere of the moon unites their separateness. The lunar topography becomes a cartoon speech-bubble, a shared thought-bubble. I wanted the moon to simultaneously appear as an endless tunnel into brightness, recalling Gryll’s last instructions to Elspeth on how to dig her way out of the underground. ‘Yes,’ she tells him. ‘I’ll dig. I’ll dig forever’ (ibid., p.261). The use of monochrome amongst the stooping, animal shapes of the trees and watery path, intensifies the fragrant honey gold in the bubble. It also gives a primeval quality to the image, reminding us of ever-present boundaries and fears.

Figure 19
The sense of smell is primary to emotional experience. There is no better example of this in literature than Kenneth Grahame’s moving description of the Mole’s smelling his way home in *The Wind in the Willows* (1971, pp.94-95). Smelling the moon forging a bond of sharing between Elspeth and Helen Page, who, though not touching, nor ‘mutually gazing’, are nevertheless deeply connected. Elspeth, now seeming smaller and younger, has her journey to find her mother completed in the sense of smell.

By 1929, Mervyn was studying art at Croydon School of Art and at the Royal Academy Schools. He won the Arthur Hacker Prize in 1930, and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1931. His studentship ended eighteen months early in June, 1933, and he went to join his English teacher, Eric Drake, who had set up an art gallery on the Channel island of Sark. Peake developed an enduring affection for Sark, and remained with the artists’ colony there for two years, exhibiting his paintings both on the island and at the Cooling Galleries in London. Back in England, he taught part-time at the Westminster School of Art, and, in September, 1936, met Maeve Gilmore, a student, whom he would marry in December of the following year.

In an invaluable memoir, *A World Away*, Maeve set down insights into Mervyn Peake’s thinking and working. Here is her description of her first visit to his lodgings near Battersea Bridge:

> At the top of the stairs there was a succession of rooms. I had never seen anything like them. They were not furnished. They were simply alive. Paintings and drawings everywhere. Dark patches on the walls, which I presume must have been patches of damp, but faces and landscapes had been woven into them, so that what should have been detrimental was turned into a world of angels and monsters. (1970, p.16)

A drab little living place next to a bus station is transformed. For Peake, a patch of damp tells a story. What others might overlook, as rot and decay, comes alive with significance. In the opening of the 1956 novella *Boy in Darkness*, he describes the Boy’s staring at a comparable patch of damp ‘with its inlets and bays; its coves and the long curious isthmus that joined the southern to the northern masses’ (Golding et al., 1956, p.158). Peake frequently experienced what has been called ‘apophenia’, particularly the phenomenon called pareidolia. Apophenia refers to finding meaningfulness in irrelevance. Pareidolia makes out faces in clouds, or music in a waterfall. William Blake remarked: ‘I can look at a knot in a piece of wood till I am frightened at it’ (Bentley, 1969, p.294). Michelangelo believed the art of sculpture removes the superfluous to reveal the figure hidden in the stone (Crispino, 2001, p.46). One of the profoundest expressions of bound spirit in Western art, the figures of the
Captives, intended for the tomb of Pope Julius II, and now housed at the Accademia di Belle Arti, Florence, demonstrate his method.

Peake, from earliest childhood, used images generated through pareidolia in his art. One way of producing these kinds of images is doodling, something Peake did all the time. His writing uses a similar stream-of-consciousness process. In this method of creative self-expression, the attention is often diverted. Habitual patterns in conscious thought and reaction mask these image formations. In his radio talk ‘Book Illustration’ Peake said that the illustrator ‘must stare, stare, stare: and having stared and while staring he must draw, and draw, and draw. Not for the sake of illustrating some particular book, but to extend his experience by recording something that excites his eye and his imagination’ (Peake, 2011, p.18). According to Peter Winnington, Peake went round London doing what he called head-hunting, ‘with a pencil instead of a spear’:

Mervyn possessed an intuitive ability to apprehend something of these people’s lives and to render it in his sketches. He was fascinated by ‘the story that is told by the tilt of a hat, a torn sleeve, the stare that is out of focus, the humped shoulders’, by the hidden and the unfulfilled life of every person who passed. It is this sympathy that gives them their solid physicality, their ‘is-ness’, in his drawings. (Winnington, 2000, p.61)

Peake held his pencil in an odd way that frequently drew comment. His teacher Gordon Smith described Peake holding his pencil ‘Chimpanzee-wise’, and Eric Drake thought he held it in the fashion of a Chinese calligraphy brush (Winnington, 2000, p.62). He allowed his hand easy freedom of expression. This is shown in his mastery of line. In doodling, the pencil initially follows its own path without lifting from the paper. The outline is then worked up. The process is one of discovery, pareidolia. Thus the resulting image is not imposed on the paper by the artist’s conscious will. Imagination gets free rein. This kind of discovered meaning arrives energised in the form of revelation. It is the way a child sees, a pure image, what Peake would later call ‘the one/Essential’ (1974, p.31), cleansed of preconception. The lines upon the page incorporate seamlessly the child’s vision.

Peake animates his drawing through teasing it out of nothingness. Near the end of his radio play A Christmas Commission, recorded in 1954, Peake has the Artist say:

What can I do but stare at this white wall
As though its margins held the wild world in?
But there is no wild world,
Only a silence
Which I am to challenge with my craft.
A world shall roll forth out
of this void; out of the labyrinth that
shall be Christ’s green cradle. (Peake, 2005, p.23)
I think Peake expresses here a sense of receptive wonderment experienced by many artists, one I have experienced myself. It seems as if nothing is imposed, and the world reveals itself as art. The patch of damp on the wall becomes indistinguishable from the mind seeing it, revealing the mind’s essential clearness to itself.

In March, 1938, Peake held his first solo exhibition at the Calmann Gallery, coinciding, as Maeve bitterly remembered, with the entry of Nazi troops into Austria. Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor, Peake’s first book, an illustrated comic fantasy, was published the following year. His talent for the grotesque seemed to align him with Neo-Romantic tendencies in British art. Soon after this, Peake was commissioned by Chatto and Windus to illustrate a book of nursery rhymes to be called Ride a Cock Horse. The poet Walter de la Mare, a friend of the Peakes, wrote of this book:

Fantasy and the grotesque, indeed; a rare layer of the imagination, and a touch now and then, and more than a touch of the genuinely sinister. But, as I think, not a trace of the morbid—that very convenient word. How many nurseries you may have appalled is another matter. How many scandalized parents may have written to you, possibly enclosing doctor’s and neurologist’s bills, you will probably not disclose. Anyhow, most other illustrated books for children look just silly by comparison. (Gilmore, 1970, pp.31-32)

Before Mervyn and Maeve’s wedding, her brother had suggested Mervyn should take out a life insurance policy.

Mervyn hadn’t the slightest idea what life insurance was, but thought it was something to do with making provision in case he died young. He had to have a medical examination, but his overwrought imagination convinced him, when the doctor told him to stand against the wall for his height to be verified, that this was to measure him in advance for his coffin. He promptly fainted, and fainted again when the doctor, in order to check his blood pressure, strapped the balloon-like pressure sleeve on his arm and began pumping. Not unnaturally the necessary certificate was not given, and Mervyn left the consulting room, confusedly, believing that he had somehow cheated an early death. His grasp on matters of this kind was never very strong. (Watney, 1976, p.77)

In 1940, after the outbreak of World War II, Peake went in the army, and was invalided out in 1943, suffering depression. The editor at Chatto and Windus suggested he illustrate Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner. The famous portrait of the Night-mare Life-in-Death was originally rejected by the publishers as ‘too strong meat for the times’ (Coleridge, 2004, p.xiii).

He was invited by Leader magazine to visit Germany in 1945 to record the aftermath of World War II. The effect of seeing and recording destruction poverty and misery on such a vast scale would be appalling for anyone, but was particularly so for Peake. He toured the ruined cities, felt the hatred and desolation of the populace, witnessed the war trials of Nazi
officials, who seemed to him ‘petty rather than terrible’ (Watney, 1976, p.127), and visited Belsen concentration camp where he drew from life this portrait.

Figure 20

Sketching the people at Belsen as they died of starvation, he felt a deep sense of shame. He wrote home to Maeve of everything he saw, but of his visit to Belsen he wrote nothing. Maeve later said: ‘He was quieter, more inward-looking, as if he had lost, during that month in Germany, his confidence in life itself’ (Watney, 1976, p.127).

Then, in 1946, *Household Tales* was published. Before I talk about the images, I would like to remind my reader of the object of my analysis. I would re-emphasise Peake’s dedication to his craft. We only need read from his Foreword to *The Drawings of Mervyn Peake* published in 1950:

> 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. But worse than no style is a mannerism – a formula for producing effects, the first of suicide. If I am asked whether all this is not just a little ‘intense’ – in other words, if it is suggested that it doesn’t really matter, I say it matters fundamentally. For one may as well be asked, Does life matter? – Does man matter? If man matters, then the highest flights of his mind and his imagination matter. His vision matters, his sense of wonder, his vitality matters . . . For art is the voice of man, naked, militant and unashamed.’ (Gilmore and Johnson, 1974, pp.81-82)
We may expect to hear in Peake’s illustrative work this ‘voice of man, naked, militant and unashamed’, and I believe we do.

There is an often-quoted poem in his anthology *Shapes and Sounds*, published 1941, a few years prior to the time he drew his illustrations for Grimms’ fairy tales. I refer to it because it represents Peake at his most moving, writing about creative struggles. Here is its first stanza:

If I could see, not surfaces,
But could express
What lies beneath the skin
Where the blood moves
In fruit or head or stone,
Then would I know the one
Essential
And my eyes
When dead
Would give the worm
No hollow food. (1974, p.31)

Peake got under the skin where the blood moves in his understanding of Grimms’ tales. Throughout this poem I feel him struggling to reach out and touch some kind of truth, what he later in the poem calls ‘secret genesis’, something he knows he does contact at times in his art, through his drawing. It takes hold of him to the extent that it becomes a consummation of his eyes. Via this strange, unforgettable image, he tells us how the achievement of a radical new awareness also compensates the earth with something of real, alimentary value. His dead eyes will ‘give the worm / No hollow food’. As an artist, I was deeply moved by this image. It lets us believe that art can be food, that it can be valuable, not just vanity. Creativity can have substantial relevance. More lies hidden in this image.

The poem asks about the meaning of life, the age-old adolescent questions. They are the same questions I mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 1, as posed by fairy tale. In Chapter 3, I tried to show how fairy tales recount the first-person human experience, finding oneself as a soul in possession of a body. Now the age-old questions are put from the point of view of the artist. How can I make a genuine, heroic contribution? What’s the point of my life? Can I feed the world with my pictures? Can creativity, the great art of wishing, really make things happen?

Ernest Becker was a great cross-disciplinarian scholar who was unafraid to ask these same age-old fundamental questions. Becker’s most famous book was *The Denial of Death*, in which he proposed an explanation of the human obsession with heroism as a way of coping with the fear of death: ‘the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing
else; it is a mainspring of human activity — activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of
death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man’ (1973,
p.ix).

Reminded of mortality, Vladimir Nabokov wrote of existence as ‘a brief crack of light
between two eternities of darkness’ (Nabokov, 1989, p.19). It is the metaphor of the crawl
space, encountered previously in Chapter 4, when I spoke of the fleeting present moment
seeming wedged between past and future. The moment becomes indistinguishable from the
observing consciousness. To behold the miracle of imagination as the creator of all memory,
all anticipation, within the instant of consciousness now, is astonishing, but also a terrifying
vastation, confronting what Becker calls ‘individuality within finitude’ (1973, p.26). In
Mother Moth, The Stone Goblin crouchbacks go under the ground to evade fate (Fig. 21).
‘Theirs is the great work, the sacred arcanum’ (Bell, 2011, p.89). Understanding the
psychological damage mortality salience can inflict, we appreciate the kindness and necessity
of repression. The world in its openness must be shut out, and presented to consciousness
more safely.

Figure 21

According to Becker (1973, pp.25-66 passim), culture provides opportunities for heroism,
for winning self-esteem, and a screen to shut out awareness of death. But culture is only
symbolic. It is not flesh and blood. The discovery of the frailty of the physical organism is
the real problem, the discovery made by Knowing in the thirteenth room. This is the
unavoidable reality. Meeting God in the garden in the cool of the day, Adam and Eve were
embarrassed by their hastily sewn fig aprons. But I would argue that the real cause of the Fall
does not lie in the sexual organisations as Freud thought, but in divisions far more deep-
seated. They lie with finding out the existence of the physical organism itself, its
predisposition to sickness, old age and death. Nakedness makes us ashamed, but death makes
us terrified.

The denial of death is the denial of the physical organism. It is also the denial of the
physical environment, which must be expurgated, sanitised, made manageable. Denying
death denies life, for which the symbolic culture world provides a surrogate. Our compulsive
need to make symbols substitute for corporeal realities is what Becker calls the ‘vital lie’ (1973, p.51), the cause of so much evil and suffering in the world. Our faiths and beliefs, our ‘immortality projects’, go up one against another, and breed wars: religious, political, domestic, all of which take their toll in innocent flesh and blood.

Conflicts arise, as Bill Clinton, commending Becker in his autobiography, puts it, ‘in ways we understand only dimly if at all’ (Clinton, 2004, p.235). That is to say, the most important secret we keep is the knowledge that we are keeping secrets: ‘repression’ only works when we are unaware it’s happening, and Becker gives new and poignant meaning to Freud’s concept. He describes a hopeless dilemma: facing inevitable death involves terror we cannot endure, but refusal to face it condemns us to a life unlived. We are each an infinite, immortal inside encased in a finite, mortal shell.

What does this mean for those artists for whom the body is energy, creative power and delight? Peake was a bohemian, an individualist. He wore a beret, and, according to Maeve Gilmore, ‘bright red waistcoats, orange velvet ties and occasionally odd socks: one red, one white, not to be looked at but because he was even then absent-minded’ (1970, p.18). He lived and worked in the glory of his senses, and wrote: ‘The expression or expressiveness of the features are intensified when they take place in their home of bone and not when they are wandering loosely across a piece of paper’ (Peake, 1946, p.18). He delighted in bones.

Whilst he was living in the artist’s colony on Sark, the rotting remains of a whale washed up on the beach. Peake cleaned the flesh from some of the whale’s smaller bones, dried and kept them. Afterwards, married with a family, he still kept the collection with him. ‘Their shapes can be seen as a horse’s head, a gargoyle, a ship, or strange flying objects, modern in the extreme and yet ancient like China, strange emblems of power’ (Peake, 1989, p.52). Finding a dead rat lying in a lane, Peake drew it. Sebastian Peake describes how his father ‘caught the life in its death, the helpless paws caught in an innocent supplicatory gesture, as though they were gripping something. His drawing even brought out the rat’s own individuality in its position on the path. I wonder if its being dead made it more attractive to him’ (ibid. p.53).

I believe the concerns of art are all-importantly aesthetic. American philosopher of art Susanne Langer wrote: ‘. . .works of art are projections of ‘felt life’ . . . images of feeling, that formulate it for our cognition. . . . Art makes feeling apparent, objectively given so we may reflect on it and understand it’ (1957, pp.25,73). But consider the word aesthetic opposed to its antonym: anaesthetic. Repression inhibits awareness in the mind as anaesthetic inhibits consciousness in the brain. Aesthetic comprehension reverses this, disinhibiting our habitual,
socialised forms of seeing, hearing and feeling, and expressing the resultant image. What kind of image? Mervyn Peake’s word for it, as he tried desperately to record such images with his pencil, was ‘fleeting’. Importantly, it is conscious. So in what does a conscious image consist? This question of course goes to the heart of the matter: ‘. . . my eyes when dead . . . give the worm no hollow food’. Peake asserts that conscious images — qualia, a term to describe experience as it feels to the feeler (Jackson, 1982, p.127) — can provide degrees of nutrition for worms.

Research by Portuguese neurologist Antonio Damasio (2000) suggests that the implicit substructure of our consciousness is not thoughts or language, as has long been supposed, but ‘feeling’, and that emotion is critical to thought and decision-making. Damasio argues that the brain elaborates our experience of conscious thought and subjectivity via a complex map of the body’s viscera and musculature, our ‘felt’ sense of reality. The thought layers and language layers structured above this ‘felt’ sense are built of metaphors, analogies drawn from the body. Our impression of having an unchanging, persistent identity — me — arises as a homeostatic reference point against which to measure and assess changes in body state.

The human brain is future-oriented. Much of our time is spent in anticipation. But the future also portends inevitable death. Acceptance of this fact contradicts the brain’s responsibility to protect the organism. Like a good parent telling a ten-year-old the R-rated movie is dull and boring, the brain solves the problem using artifice. With its own representations of reality to call on, maps of the organism’s ideal state, the brain can build a closed circle, a defended fort. The self, the me, transforms into an immortal spirit, ethereal and untouchable, safely strapped in behind the controls of a purely symbolic environment. Death, disease, disaster: these happen somewhere else, ‘out there’.

Thoreau wrote in his journal for 1850-51: ‘All perception of truth is the detection of an analogy; we reason from our hands to our head’ (Thoreau, 1962, p.463). Contemporary neurology supports this claim. Professors George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) have traced very convincingly the roots of human cognition and abstract reasoning to the sensorimotor system and the emotions. Tim Rohrer expresses the association eloquently:

Let me begin with a bold and preposterous claim. I want to hand you an idea that at first may seem hard to grasp, but if you turn it over and over again in your head until you finally get a firm handle on it, it will feel completely right to you. Now, if I could make a movie of what your brain was doing as you read that last sentence, it would most likely look very similar to a brain movie of you turning an unfamiliar object over and over again in your hand until you found a way to grip it well. (Hampe and Grady, 2005, p.165)
Rohrer’s research bears out Lakoff and Johnson’s. The embodied view of thought rejects any divide between mind and body. Life as it is danced in heart and limbs and viscera is the music of our thoughts and language. Johnson argues that our most abstract concepts arise from our relationship with the world (2007, pp.180-188 & passim). For example, the root of the word *true* is the same as that of the word *tree*: steadfast and straight (Partridge, 1966, p.740). When these words were young, lovers plighted their *troth*, as many still do, beneath a sheltering tree. Thus our minds work by association. Our thoughts saw up the wood of the world to make things. Chairs snugly buttress human backsides. We no longer see in the chair the wood of the tree of truth until Vincent van Gogh paints it. Then we again behold the miracle, a work of genius. Some things we fashion so deftly, it is difficult to spot the material they are made from: *beauty, time, mind, gravity*, concepts so perfectly wrought we can’t believe a human hand has turned them.

Neurological research concurs with the Romantic poets, and Lakoff and Johnson are arguing that metaphor, sourced in the human body and the body’s negotiation of its environment, can be considered as underlying all of conceptual thought and the sense of identity. Metaphor is then disguised as ‘literal’ truth, that is, truth unrecognised as symbolic. We repress acknowledgment of the corporeal bloodline of our most exalted concepts and sacred ideals: it reminds too much of mortality. Even the notion of ‘truth’ itself William James calls ‘an idea abstracted from the concretes of experience and then used to oppose and negate what it was abstracted from’ (2000, p.101).

Qualia — how things *seem* — arise after repression has done its work. Becker would say: creature anxiety keeps us blind. In Peake’s formulation, surfaces appear opaque. Our perceptions cannot be allowed to threaten our hard-won symbolic detachment from the corporeal world, and thereby trigger creature anxiety.

Creativity challenges the blocks placed on conscious life by repression. Artists develop strategies to circumvent them. John Keats’s Negative Capability (Keats and Forman, 2004, p.57) is a famous example. Mervyn Peake asks to see beneath surfaces, and ‘hear / Beyond the noise of things.’ In knowing ‘the one / Essential’, he hopes to repay a debt to corporeality. But seeing truly, expressing truly, is a matter of dissolution of boundary — between conscious and unconscious, internal and external, real and imaginary, mental and corporeal. Like borders between nations and countries, these boundaries are fictitious, but exist to keep us safe. Contravening them risks opening the portal through which terror comes.
An artist who wants, in Rilke’s words, to ‘accept our reality as vastly as we possibly can’ (2001, p.88), faces this terror, with only artistic integrity as an ally. Becker writes:

Man’s best efforts seem utterly fallible without appeal to something higher for justification, some conceptual support for the meaning of one’s life from a transcendental dimension of some kind. As this belief has to absorb man’s basic terror, it cannot be merely abstract but must be rooted in the emotions, in an inner feeling that one is secure in something stronger, larger, more important than one’s own strength and life. It is as though one were to say; “My life pulse ebbs, I fade away into oblivion, but “God” (or “It”) remains, even grows more glorious with and through my living sacrifice.” (1973, p.120)

Mervyn Peake’s ‘transcendental dimension’ is replete with worms, eyeballs, and ears the shape of shells. At times there is a surrealist tinge to his work, a nightmarish quality reminiscent of works by Max Ernst or Alfred Kubin, as in the cover for *Shapes and Sounds*:

![Figure 22](image)

Yet there is equally subtle humour and compassion inherent in Peake’s images. Art for him means quietly observing and recording. It is a kind of openness, a learning to see: ‘What does it matter how long or how slow you are in this traffic of lead and paper? The advance from virtual blindness to that state of perception — half rumination, half scrutiny — is all that matters’ (1946, p.20).

The ‘corporeal’, the world of matter in the form we conceive it, is in fact one more symbol: a metaphor, constructed like any ‘higher level’ image. It can carry frightening associations: excrement, billion-year-old rock, flaking skin. Such fears may include deeper insecurities, about nothingness, or a universe perceived as ultimately indifferent. The question is how I envision the *stuff* life is made from. Do I envision something holy, or
degraded? Is the universe living or dead? Is the blue planet a paradise of beauty, or mud I must wipe from my shoes?

My sensory organs determine what I perceive, and unconscious projections of fears and emotions may tarnish what I see. Fear of mortality biases me to assume worms can’t digest qualia: thoughts and feelings, attributes too private, too ‘ethereal’, too much me. Worms chewing on my noblest thoughts and emotions may seem an abhorrent idea. But if the worm is seen as my natural heir, my next of kin, part of my living body, then Mervyn Peake’s worm becomes cousin to William Blake’s worm in the Book of Thel:

Then Thel astonish’d view’d the Worm upon its dewy bed.

‘Art thou a Worm? image of weakness, art thou but a Worm?
I see thee like an infant wrapped in the Lillys leaf:
Ah weep not little voice, thou can’st not speak. but thou can’st weep;
Is this a Worm? I see thee lay helpless & naked: weeping,
And none to answer, none to cherish thee with mothers smiles.’ (Bentley, 1978, p.69)

To become aware of our symbolism, acknowledging our oneness with life and with death, knowing the ‘one / Essential’, means that the worm consumes us just the same way happiness and sadness do, reincorporating us into what we already are and have always been. ‘Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love’ (Rilke, 2001, p.92).

Mervyn Peake’s worm is not a creature to fear. Free of such fear, our thoughts, our feelings, only ever metaphors, would readily reassimilate with the soil — the humus — from which they originally grew. Peake’s poem concludes:

Where is that inexhaustible,
That secret genesis
Of Sound and Sight?
It is too close for me,
It lies
Unexcavated by these eyes
In the lost archives of my heart. (1974, p.32)
Chapter 6
THE FLEETING LINE
Illustrations to Household Tales

Very few first edition copies of Household Tales, illustrated by Mervyn Peake, remain. The book is better known in reissues. The first of these was by Methuen in 1973. A Pan-Picador paperback came out in 1977, and an American facsimile in 1979. But no later edition contains the original colour plates which Peake supplied to Eyre and Spottiswoode. Methuen included only forty-seven of seventy-five tales, and the cover design of the American facsimile used the original frontispiece chopped in half.

The illustrations were commissioned in the summer of 1943. Graham Greene, who was a director at Eyre and Spottiswoode, helped line up the work for Peake, who was to receive £150 for producing seventy black and white drawings, and a colour spread. On 22 July that year, Peake wrote to Greene: ‘As for Grimm — nothing could be better . . . Mrs M showed me a book which was the size of what they have in mind and I was delighted. A large squarish shape. I look forward to getting down to it — and will work in the country’ (Watney, 1976, p.120). The Peakes had a place near Burpham, West Sussex. Here, Peake began writing the first of the Gormenghast novels, Titus Groan, continuing with it during his time in the army. Many of the book’s eccentric characters, their names and idiosyncrasies, Mervyn and Maeve worked out together, walking on the South Downs, with the towers of Arundel castle never far from view. By 1943, they had two young children. Maeve Gilmore writes:
Grimm’s Fairy Tales, also for Eyre and Spottiswoode, was being illustrated, and once again we were all called in to pose — Rumpelstiltskin, a witch, a sprite, a queen, a princess, in a rage, laughing, holding a scythe, whatever was necessary to transform and fuse imagination with reality.

While Mervyn did his illustrations, in the evening, after the boys were in bed, and he sat ensconced behind his drawing board, trapped by it and the fine mapping pens and Indian ink which he used, I read to him: *Bleak House*, several other Dickens’, *Candide*, *The Loved One*, a catholic selection. (1970, p.72)

### 1. The Goose-girl

Here is Peake’s illustration for the story of “The Goose-girl”:

![The Goose-girl illustration](image-url)
In the story, a young princess leaves her widowed mother and journeys into a distant land in order to marry a prince. Accompanied by her maid-in-waiting, the princess rides a magical talking horse named Falada. The queen supplies her daughter with a trousseau, and before saying goodbye, takes a knife and cuts herself, letting three drops of blood spill on to a white handkerchief, which she then gives to the princess. Once on the road, the maidservant soon betrays her mistress, refusing to gather water for her in her golden cup, but instead making her bend down and drink from a stream. As she drinks, the bloodstained handkerchief drops from the princess’ bodice and floats away. The maid then forces the princess to swap horses, swears her to silence, and when the pair arrive at their destination, the wicked maid-in-waiting marries the prince. The rightful princess is given work helping a little boy Conrad tend geese. The maid has the horse Falada killed by a horse knacker for fear the talking animal will expose her false identity. But the princess pays the knacker in gold to hang up the horse’s head above a ‘great dark-looking gateway’ (Grimm, 1946, p.144). From here, the horse looks down, and each day bemoans to the goose-girl her fate, as she drives the geese out to the field:

“Princess, princess, passing by
Alas, alas! If thy mother knew it,
Sadly, sadly, her heart would rue it.”
(ibur., p.144)

When the princess sits down in the meadow to comb her hair, Conrad is overwhelmed with desire to pluck a strand of it. But she summons the wind to blow away his hat, which he must chase, thus missing his chance to steal her hair. Next day, after the same thing happens, Conrad complains to the king how the goose-girl vexes him. He tells the king about the horse’s head hanging above the dark gateway. The old king asks the boy to accompany the goose-girl once more out to the field, and, concealing himself by the gateway, manages to overhear the girl conversing with the head of the horse. When he questions her, she is unable to reveal her secret because of the oath she gave to the maidservant. The king suggests she tell her sorrows to the iron-stove. She does so, and the treachery of the maid-in-waiting is thus exposed to the king, who eavesdrops with his ear against the stovepipe. The malicious servant is punished, and the goose-girl marries the prince.

At first sight, looking at Peake’s image for this story, one could be forgiven for asking why he decided on so bizarre a perspective. It is the tale’s sole illustration. Why are the
princess and the head of Falada so widely separated, in an immense, timeless, cavernous space? The whole thing looks eerie, empty, improbable, and even silly. There are many traditional illustrations to ‘The Goose-girl’, the one by Paul Hey (Grimm, 1948) for instance, which Peake almost certainly knew (Fig. 24). Hey portrays the archway very realistically, with the horse’s head mounted on a side wall, in easy whispering distance of the passing girl.

But Peake’s illustration has something distorted, de-familiarising and unsettling about it. As a straightforward depiction of the tale, it fails. Yet for me, far from failing, the image catches the essence of fairy tale. It is condensed, in the same way as fairy tale or dream. Its simple, emblematic quality begs symbolic elaboration. It dissolves and re-forms strangely in front of the observer’s eyes. Ambiguities of line, tone and shadow stimulate the mind to project images and feelings. It encourages pareidolia. The disorienting height of the gateway, the abnormally large geese hurrying through it, the tiny, petite goose-girl, ‘delicate as a Dresden shepherdess’ (Grimm, 1977, p.15), as Russell Hoban described her in his introduction to the Picador edition of Household Tales, all prompt us to look into the heavily-worked surface of the picture, and hence beneath the surface narrative of the fairy tale.

Paul Hey shows great sympathy for the betrayed, weary princess. The sympathy in Peake’s interpretation is of a different order. Recall his introduction to The Craft of the Lead Pencil:
drawing should be an attempt to hold back from the brink of oblivion some fleeting line or rhythm, some mood, some shape or structure suddenly perceived, imaginary or visual. Something about a head that calls out to be recorded; something about the folds of a long cloth; the crawling wave; the child; the tear; the brood of shadows. That movement of the arm that hinted fear; that gesture that spelt amazement. (1946, p.1)

The illustration for “The Goose-girl” offers one such ‘salvaged’ image, rescued ‘from the brink of oblivion’; ‘salvaged’, because art has prevented its loss. Seen from this point of view, art is not invention, not artifice. It is ‘record’. The image is not made, but documented. The skills of the artist are honed not to produce idols, objects of reverence, for admiration or worship, but to investigate, record, and seize the ‘suddenly perceived’. The creative process rejects any proprietary claim over its creation. Repression makes idolatry, separating image from its source in the human imagination, then worships the artifact, turns it into merchandise, an item for consumption. Idol replaces imagination. Idol reifies the hero.

What is revealed in the incongruous image for “The Goosegirl”? What is held salvaged, and what ‘oblivion’ is he anxious to thwart — insensibility, thoughtlessness, neglect of perception? Why is the picture’s composition so odd? What engenders its curious ‘grotesque’ quality, a defining a characteristic of Peake’s literary and graphic work? Does some instinct or intuition access deeper significance in the story? What techniques help render the artist’s vision?

I look at the figure of the goose-girl, and agree with Hoban: she does indeed resemble a figure on the lid of a music box. She is statuesque, poised, resisting the pull of a great current of light, which draws everything, including the thoughtless, energetic geese, out through the archway, like a river. In her hand she holds a living stick, which seems to point the way to life and light, its little leaves, a cluster of three black stars, like a hieroglyph, against the massive piled-up clouds.

The princess’s thrown-back head further accentuates the uncanny height at which the head of the horse is displayed. The source of this uncanniness is surely the absence of the horse’s body, replaced by a bony, ghostly menace. Peake has caused the empty brightness of the archway to do ambiguous double duty. It reinforces the horrifying truth about the horse’s decapitation, which the girl herself has asked to be reminded of by having the head nailed up in this confronting location. At the same time, the positioning of the feet of the arch recalls Falada’s once strong slender legs, and the arch’s stone solidity recalls his once noble stance. The viewer envisages an ethereal ‘cloudy’ substitute for the
body of the horse, defined by the shape of the arch and the brightness in earth and sky beyond.

The neck of the horse appears to grow organically out of the stonework of the arch, Hoban also observes. In order to pass out into the field, where she will daily resist the attentions of Conrad the goose-boy, the fallen princess must first do her duty and reflect on the terrible fortune which has befallen her beloved horse, remember how her mother’s heart would break if she knew her daughter’s fate.

The geese rush into life with gusto. The living stick in the goose-girl’s hand strains towards the sun. But she herself is detained, resisting the current, a China figurine conversing in a dark submarine-like cavern with a horse, not unlike the one on the title page of *Household Tales*, suspiciously like a seahorse draped with a funereal seaweed mane, a mane no doubt crusted with congealed blood. And the top of the arch also has a vertebral quality, grotesquely reminiscent of the horse’s severed spinal cord.

Russell Hoban writes: ‘The great dead eyes are certainly not horses’ eyes, they are other. They make one think of a deer but also of a preying mantis. They are disquieting, disturbing, disorienting: if a horse has eyes like that, then anything might be almost anything, and gone are the guarantees implicit in the ordinary look of things.’

The floating, weightless branch enhances the subaquatic atmosphere of the picture. The elongated necks of the squawking geese remind of the horrors of decapitation.
Illustrators of “The Goose-Girl” often concentrate on the princess’ long golden hair. But Peake has covered the girl’s head so that little of her hair is visible. Her feet are tiny and bare. She is a girl on the threshold of life. Life calls her forth, and she can answer on condition she performs a certain ritual. The life she will consent to is contained in the dead body of the horse.

She partly seems like a doll or china ornament because her anatomy, like the decapitated horse, is segmented. One can imagine, with finger and thumb, rotating her torso above the waistline of her heavy skirt, like a toy doll with moving body parts. Her upper body is strangely twisted in exactly this way. The neckline of her bodice imitates the line marking the horse’s severed neck. The shape of her skirt emulates in miniature the shape of the arch. The position of her feet echoes the feet of the archway, and her feet are oddly ‘wooden’, and positioned to match the angle of the sides of the arch. Many parallels identify her with the dead horse. She stands poised with immense nobility, like a ballerina, all her grace and dignity conferred on her by the piercing eyes of the horse. But here she stands for eternity, caught in this gloomy communion.

Referring to another context, Hoban suggests:
... place the book to one side rather than directly in front of you and let your eyes go out of focus: as your vision shifts in and out of its normal binocular function, the arch of light in the opening of the wall moves back toward the goose-girl and away, back and away; the goose-girl moves into and out of the arch of light, and the geese hurry towards the meadows. (1977, p.16)

It seems the princess will never, despite the energy flow pulling her through the arch, escape her interior dialogue. She cannot rush into life like the geese.

The story of “The Goose-girl” is generally supposed to be about achieving autonomy and conquering adversity. Child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim writes: ‘... the story tells that if one remains true to oneself and one’s values, then, despite how desperate things may look for a while, there will be a happy ending’ (1977, p.140). The loss of the bloodstained handkerchief, according to Sheldon Cashdan in The Witch Must Die, refers to a child’s neglectfully disregarding the bond he/she shares unavoidably with a parent; the princess ‘does not appreciate the contribution her mother makes to her psychological well-being’ (1999, p.131). Dependence on her mother has prevented the princess learning sufficient maturity. She transfers her need for dependency to the evil and deceitful maidservant, who defrauds her of her noble identity. By drinking from the stream as a beast would drink, without the use of her golden cup; by losing her mother’s precious handkerchief, and allowing the maid-in-waiting to ride her horse, the princess debases herself and violates prohibitions. But by not allowing Conrad to steal her hair, she begins to take responsibility for her rehabilitation. She faithfully keeps her word, even when it is given to someone scheming and malicious. Her display of mature accountability gains her the reward of marrying the prince and living happily ever after. This is the traditional interpretation of the story’s meaning.

Peake, however, devotes his attention to the goose-girl’s dark, introspective dialogue with Falada, an immense, black-draped melancholic icon of her own conscience. The horse has long symbolised the human body, most prominently in the ancient concept of the centaur. The princess from now on will only access her body through the gateway of her shame, her cultivated maturity. She will be quarantined. She will view life through the aperture of this archway. Her resistance to the natural urgings of life, her reliance on the integrity of her royal status, her goodness, personified in her golden hair, will all lead her to redemption.

But the happy ending is bought at a price. Peake highlights the essential pathos and ambiguity of the story by showing us rushing, energetic geese, a dead stick regenerating as it contacts warm authentic sunlight, clouds stretching up infinitely, but in a dark corner of the
picture stands a girl with covered head, dignified, gracious, but unable to pass through the door, waylaid by a dead horse’s head.

Thus, reinterpreted in the light of Peake’s illustration, a more complex primary meaning, difficult to put in words, emerges for “The Goose-girl”. It is the meaning he discovered in the tale and recorded. He wrote: ‘It is all a matter of making marks, marks that correspond to an inkling of leaden or inky or pigment vision. The vision may be weak, confused, or obtuse, but it must be vision. A loaf of bread is not worth drawing, and nor is anything else unless, it is seen, as it were, for the first time’ (Gilmore and Johnson, 1974, p.81). We must grant that every picture element has been placed with intention. Form is content, and the content is the form. That is to say, the image can communicate itself only in this arrangement and no other. It ‘calls out to be recorded’, pressing up out of a demand to draw attention to the divisions, unresolvable paradoxes and conflicts which beset psychic life, and of which the image itself is a symptom. It asserts itself in an effort to restore psychic wholeness. The intention behind its disclosure does not lie with the artist, but with the vision, as in sleep, we do not intend the dreams we dream, yet dream with intention. We see also why the image’s motivation is necessarily iconoclastic, to destroy other images that have previously stultified, been fashioned into objects, turned to stone. Like the manoeuvres of dream, fertile invention and unpredictability are meant to break the habits of thought and perception. The grotesque may go unrecognised, yet unerringly find its mark. There is anomaly and curious juxtaposition. Rules and conventions are ignored, or the viewer must learn and adhere to new conventions, thus highlighting the value of an artist’s unique style and idiosyncrasies.

2. Jorinda and Joringel

Peake created two images for “Jorinda and Joringel.” The tale concerns a witch who turns innocent maidens into birds and imprisons them in cages. In her castle she has seven thousand cages of rare birds. The heroine Jorinda is captured and turned into a nightingale. Her betrothed, Joringel, is frozen to the spot by the witch’s spell and cannot help his beloved. With the aid of a magic flower, Joringel is eventually able to rescue Jorinda.

Peake’s image of the witch and the nightingale (Fig. 25 on next page) floats suspended in sculptural immobility, reminding the reader of poor paralysed Joringel who has come under the curse of the witch’s castle.
Though we can feel a slow, calculating, almost arthritic, turn of the old woman’s head, the hands seem petrified, like long dead branches, as if an interval of centuries will need to elapse before her ancient fingers capture their prize. Lizard-like, penetrating eyes, with lids suggestive of cracked nuts or seeds, study the tiny bird, whose own eye is represented by a single inconsequential dot of the pen.

The weight of scrutiny the little bird is under is cold and enormous, besides which, the witch’s actual bodily weight embeds her left heel heavily in the ground, leaving no doubt that no matter how supernatural and luminous she may appear, she is in fact very creaturely, very real, a reality attested to by the traditional grandma flip-flop slipper on her left foot, and a dark scrawl of ink around her ankle, suggestive of a sinking sock.

She is bulky, well-fed. Yet her arms are stick-like and her hands are skeletal. A fishbone pattern of cross-hatching on the back of her left hand intensifies predatory and cat-like associations, and the general effect is to make us want to see what is under that old robe or dressing-gown, or whatever shapeless thing the witch is wearing.
Clever use of cross-hatching on the tattered black makes the figure appear aglow — aglow with the bird’s song perhaps, as though the nightingale were a bright, singing lamp.

The whole image shimmers, seeming to draw itself aside and upward like a rising curtain, and the figure of the witch seems cut out, the reader’s eye being first drawn into the contours of the negative space surrounding the black. Into this white, as it were behind the curtain, Peake has managed to insinuate the existence of the magical realm. Reality seems to lie concealed under the old woman’s mantle, and it is the negative space that makes the illustration powerful and terrifying.

The image for “Jorinda and Joringel” is dramatically simple and condensed. Because the negative space is so articulate, nothing is added to the story, and the illustration kindles the imagination of the viewer.

3. The Three Spinners

“The Three Spinners” provides another example of how Peake entices meaning from a story without clouding its archetypal simplicity.

The story opens with a lazy heroine, scolded by her mother for refusing to spin. A passing Queen inquires what is happening, and the girl’s mother defensively explains that her daughter longs to spin all day, but the family cannot afford enough flax. The obliging Queen immediately takes the girl to her palace and shows her three rooms full of flax. ‘Spin me this flax,’ the Queen says, ‘and you may have my eldest son for a husband.’

The girl of course, cannot spin the flax. But she is helped by three women, one of whom has a broad flat foot, the second a huge bottom lip, the third an immense thumb. The foot treads the wheel; the lip wets the thread, and the thumb twists it. Thus the girl easily succeeds in her task. She invites the three women to her wedding, whereupon the Prince is so alarmed by their grotesque appearance, he forbids his bride to ever touch a spinning wheel again.

At first impression, Peake’s picture shows a strangely undulating full-length portrait of three women striding away from us, arm in arm, casually talking, smiling to each other, with kind happy faces. Each is very different in appearance. Regarding their dress, especially their wimples, Gordon Smith records a letter from Peake, which reads: ‘I have been Grimms-fairy-tale-ing rather concentratedly – as they (Eyre and Spottiswoode) want 70 drawings before Xmas. Not so simple – technically, as I want to get all the costumes, etc., authentic..."
mediaeval, and change my technique from the cross-hatching stuff I’ve used so far. I think it’ll be the best thing I’ve done so far in illustration’ (1984, p.102).

Figure 26

The formal balance of this image around a central axis of symmetry, exemplified particularly in the feet and mirrored marching step of the women, conjures up immediate associations with trios of witches, such as the weird sisters in Macbeth, the Norns in Norse
mythology who ruled over present, past and future, the Fates in classical mythology, charged
with spinning and managing the threads of human destiny.

Now we distinguish the one enormous foot, shod like a cart
horse’s hoof, the deformed lip, the
incongruous thumb. And suddenly,
almost to our embarrassment, we
notice the thumb signaling to us. Its
owner is aware of our presence,
protective in a vague and inattentive way: the ideal parent
perhaps. We have entered the picture space, included in the
action of the story. The undulating lines of the women’s large
posters are dizzying. We ourselves are
close to the ground. We hear the leather of the big shoe scraping and
dragging on the cobble stones, the muffled, well-meaning gossipy
conversation, the wet sticky lisp caused by that overfull lip.

Composition and perspective in this picture do not intend to present
a pleasing or balanced image. Their use concerns the way the viewer
looks at the picture, that is, where we, as observers, are located in the
space, and not only how we view the picture, but how we view ourselves.

This is the advice Peake gives the artist in *The Craft of the Lead Pencil*:

> It is for you to give the spectator no option but to see what you liked; the curves, or the jagged

nesses; the outline shape, or shadowy patterns, the sense of movement, or stillness, the
contrasts of flatness with solidity, dark with light, smooth with rough — whatever it may
have been — the drawing must be about that — your choice; give him none. (1946, p.4)

Portraying the three women from the chosen angle, Peake forces the viewer to assume the
role of the heroine. The three spinners have helped us, got us out of a spot. Now they’re on
their way. We won’t need to see them again. That grotesque thumb says reassuringly, ‘It’s
okay, dear. No problem,’ perhaps in answer to our, ‘And thanks again.’

Strange creatures are thumbs. This one stands erect, fleshy and calloused, bent back by
years of habitual use. Much as these women are kind and grandmotherly, they are also
hideous and disfigured. They are drudge horses. Not only has the foot of the pedal treader
grown huge, but her upper body is shrunken and wasted compared to the bulkiness of her
companions, her chin has receded into nothing.
Work, struggle, motherhood perhaps — child birth — the very kindness and good qualities we, as the heroine, called upon in our time of need, have disfigured these ladies, molded their characters, reduced life’s possibilities, fixed their destinies.

The flowing curves of their femininity are contradicted by ambiguously disturbing masculine characteristics: big shoulders and arms, the large heel on the shoe, the strong muscular neck of the spinster on the right, the lack of any visible hair on the women’s heads, and most striking of all, the erect thumb.

The world of work and daily bread has destroyed their essential femininity. The same ambiguity is exemplified in their clothing: the coarseness of the cloth refutes its light, rippling female lines. The wimples seem ridiculous, perched on the heads of these huge, brawny women.

We watch their departure with relief. How can they be so oblivious? Their step is smooth, flowing, like the oiled spinning wheels they work with, like their conversation: unthinking, mechanical. They walk into a bright sky, but theirs is the destiny, the fate, every child longs to avoid and willingly escapes from in fantasy.

The moral of “The Three Spinners” generally advocates industry and hard work. Sheldon Cashdan writes: ‘The three spinsters are maternal icons. But they are icons of a specific sort: they represent the industrious side of the heroine, a part of her that is yet to be realized’ (1999, p.201). Mervyn Peake rejects this cliché by forcing his spectator to adopt the child’s point of view, and by depicting the spinners with backs turned: thank goodness this icon of moral uprightness is leaving town.

Peake does not flinch from the real and terrible ambiguities inherent in the story: the paradox faced by the child — every child — who knows and feels herself to be inwardly a princess, yet is trapped in a world which will slowly ask its price of her, encase her dreams, narrow her possibilities, and deform her. Peake the artist sees the maxim behind “The Three Spinners” as no different from the one over the main entrance of Auschwitz Extermination Camp: Arbeit Macht Frei — ‘Work makes free’.

The joy of the little girl is full, her relief palpable, because the spinners are leaving. ‘May I please invite them to the wedding,’ she asks the queen, ‘and let them sit with us at table?’ The queen agrees, but the invitation is out of courtesy, good manners, not out of any real affection. The little girl is learning the ways of the world.

Before concluding with this illustration, I would note the way Peake has avoided superfluous detail, careful not to place the tale in a setting beyond its own description. Fairy
tales, like dreams, are autonomous worlds, rich in compressed meaning, which may be non-rational, inexpressible in words. However, tree, devil, sack, stone, button or river all fall over themselves to impart, reveal something to us. A tale’s very inability to tell an unequivocal story begs us, alerts us, to try and find a key to the mystery using parts of our being other than critical intellect. With economy of line, which is comparable to the economy of description in the story, Peake places the viewer inside the action, or he injects affective meaning into negative space without diluting or modifying the tale’s gnomic impact.

Fairy tales are easily interpreted as moral maxims. With his picture for “The Three Spinners”, Peake compels us to enter the story and look through the eyes of a child confronting inescapable fate.

4. Our Lady’s Child

I touched on the illustration to this tale briefly in Chapter 3. The story tells of a little girl who is taken up to heaven, where she receives honey and cakes and plays with the angels. But at age fourteen, she enters a forbidden room, and three times denies to the Virgin Mary that she has done so. Her punishment is to be cast out of paradise.

Awaking from a deep sleep, the heroine finds herself in the midst of a wilderness. ‘She wanted to cry out, but she could bring forth no sound. She sprang up and wanted to run away, but whithersoever she turned herself, she was continually held back by thick hedges of thorns through which she could not break. In the desert, in which she was imprisoned, there stood an old hollow tree, and this had to be her dwelling-place. Into this she crept when night came and here she slept’ (Grimm, 1946, p.63).

Peake’s single illustration for this tale places us in a Dantesque forest (Fig. 27 on next page). The little girl, as if lamenting the loss of heaven, raises her head towards a stream of luminosity issuing from the right or eastern border of the picture. The strange, bulbous glade where she stands is spherical, feminine, womblike if viewed as concave, breast-like if viewed as convex. The hollow tree, the little girl’s nightly dwelling place, Peake has shaped like a ragged vagina, our gateway into the world. The womblike forest glade easily becomes a continuation of the birth passage exiting at the front of the tree.
The girl’s head is large and infant-like. She seems to have no mouth, perhaps symbolising her loss of speech. She wears a brooch, or her heart, or a heart-like shape, is pinned to the torn garment she wears, like a pocket. This detail at first seems unremarkable, so tiny as to be merely a slip of the pen. However, the size of Peake’s original drawing was much larger, and there can be no doubt that his lines are deliberate. The illustrations to Household Tales were produced during the latter years of World War 2, and the little girl’s aloneness, her attitude of fear, her uniform-like dress with its star-like badge, all serve as a terrible reminder of the
suffering in Europe during that time, nowhere more devastating than in the homeland of the
brothers Grimm.

The little girl’s internal torment is reflected in her bewilderment. Her spread fingers, as if
in readiness to flee, echo the tendrils of the tree branch above. But this is not artistic analogy.
The girl is physically, umbilically part of this environment, of its same nature, betrayed into
its fleshy casing, subject to its rank decay. The dendritic space containing her is intensely
corporeal, claustrophobic, thorn-hedged.

Her shaggy hair and torn clothes, her outspread fingers are not analogous to the lichen and
mistletoe draped snake-like in the trees, but anatomically of the same stuff. Leaving heaven,
she has awoken betrayed into the physical world, formed of its substance, a blot in a patch of
damp. This is the body of the corporeal mother, antithesis of the Virgin Mary in heaven. The
thick cross-hatching creates images and shadows which rise and fall out of a semi-conscious
darkness.

The figure of the little girl seems frozen in mid-step. Her environment transcends her
utterly. Its size dwarfs her. Her youth becomes ephemeral compared to the forest’s great age.
Her shadow spreads out to trace a crucifix.
Peake’s close-woven pen technique conjures a mass of ghostly images in the mind: the cap and face of a grotesque jester, damned souls, salamanders, lizards, bats, ghostly shapes in the negative spaces, forms of larvae, worms or indeterminate reptiles. There is disturbing ambiguity between shadow and real objects, animal and vegetable, inanimate and animate, between darkness and radiance.

Once again, like the decorated damp patches Maeve Gilmore saw on the walls of his London living place, this image allows fantasy free expression. But Peake is still rescuing something on the brink of oblivion. He wants us, before our surface minds dismiss the tale too readily, to hold it up to the light and turn it this way and that.

5. Cat and Mouse in Partnership

The story of “Cat and Mouse in Partnership” begins: ‘A certain cat had made the acquaintance of a mouse, and had said so much about the great love and friendship she felt for her, that at length the mouse agreed that they should live and keep house together.’ (Grimm, 1946, p.90)

To provide for winter, they store a pot of fat under the altar of a church. It isn’t long before the cat finds it necessary to attend a christening at the church, and begins the first of three raids on the pot of fat. Each time, when she returns home, the mouse asks: ‘What name did they give the child?’ ‘Top-off,’ the cat replies after her first outing, ‘Half-done,’ after her second, and ‘All-gone,’ after her third. The mouse’s suspicions grow:

“First top-off, then half-done, then — ” “Will you hold your tongue,” cried the cat, “one more word, and I will eat you too.” “All-gone” was already on the poor mouse’s lips; scarcely had she spoken it before the cat sprang on her, seized her, and swallowed her down. Alas, that is the way of the world. (ibid., p.92)

At first sight, the moral seems simple: A mouse should never trust a cat.

Peake goes immediately to the heart of the story: the close relationship between the two creatures (Fig. 28 on next page). Here are cat and mouse in partnership, conversing. The cat wears a Cheshire grin. Her whiskers shoot out vigorously – there may be traces of shiny fat upon them - her coat is thick, her paws folded contentedly, reinforcing a Sphinx-like attitude, giving away nothing.
Her stony eyes focus not on the confused little mouse, but three degrees to the mouse’s right, on some inscrutable object of thought or desire — the memory of that delicious fat perhaps. We fear for the mouse when those eyes will turn full on her.

The mouse, in comparison with her friend, is thin, hunched, anxious, her back nearly bald, her tiny belly empty, her eye large, liquid, tired and resigned. She perches trustingly on the warm seat of the cat’s tail, her own tail trailing limp and exposed. She wants desperately to have faith in this all-powerful self-confident cat. But, as in the story, we sense her underlying skepticism: ‘Top-off! Half-done! . . . they are such odd names, they make me very thoughtful’ (ibid., p.92).

The viewer is struck immediately by something ‘grotesque’ about Peake’s image, and I choose the description deliberately because it is so often associated with his work. What is this grotesqueness?

The cat’s neck is abnormally long. Neck and body are weasel or ferret-like. It is the minaret-like neck, however, which is the source of our aversion to the cat: her neck and jaunty tilted head resemble a phallus, and the phallus is endowed with a face: smiling, cold and deceitful. The bristled, rounded back and hind leg continue the analogy. This mother cat,
‘god-mother’ cat, who has a compulsive need every now and then to attend church for another christening, Peake portrays as an androgynous predatory appetite showing no compunction, a wild creature with demurely, modestly folded paws, in a false display of cultural refinement or domesticity. Her desires demand satisfaction. She sneaks off to the church, ‘seized by another fit of longing’, or when her mouth begins to ‘water for some more licking’ (ibid., p.91).

After eating the last of the fat, the cat tells herself philosophically, ‘When everything is eaten up one has some peace’ (ibid., p.92).

Looking at Peake’s image from yet another perspective, the cat’s body and elongated neck suggest the conventional representation of church and steeple. The little mouse, therefore, sits dutifully, faithfully, on a pew inside, looking to the altar for redemption. However, the moment the mouse recognises the truth of her suspicions, she is devoured, mercilessly. The cat even blames the mouse for making her eat her. ‘Alas,’ the story reminds us, ‘that is the way of the world.’

Peake’s cat, though substantial in one sense, is strangely apparitional in another. The furry body, made of a multitude of pen marks, casts no shadow, even though the little mouse casts one. Discrete pen strokes representing the whiskers, create a luminosity around the cat’s head and accentuate the steely glint in the eyes. The mouse, though thin, has genuine physical weight not shared by the fat-stealing cat. Though the two creatures appear so unified in the image, an impenetrable wall separates them. From this point of view, we might regard the mouse as sitting alone.

So, here is an image of parent and child. The child desperately seeks the protection, love and friendship of the parent, but ultimately, whether in fantasy or reality, she feels betrayed. What lies behind the inscrutable, smiling mask? It hides disturbing things the child struggles with, but has no hope of understanding: not because of inexperience or immaturity, but because this is the nature of the separateness of our individuality. We could equally see an image of every human person and God. What sort of God? The mouse peers blindly, trying to comprehend or come to terms with an ultimately unknowable creation, which will eventually eat me up and spit me out. The mouse has a belly needing to be filled just like the cat: Peake draws the mouse’s belly with great sympathy.

If the cat is Sphinx-like, the mouse is Oedipus. Like Oedipus, this little mouse will eventually reluctantly take responsibility for her own annihilation. Peake places her already inside the cat’s belly, an image of life devoured, but at the same time an image of
regeneration with her sperm-like tail. Cat and mouse are one. Peake’s resigned, trusting yet fretful little mouse, is a true fairy tale heroine, blessed by no happy ending.

6. The Valiant Little Tailor

With one flick from a piece of cloth, a little tailor squashes seven flies, which have landed on his bread and jam. To celebrate his triumph, he embroiders a girdle with the words: ‘Seven at one stroke,’ and sets off to seek his fortune, taking only some cheese and a bird he finds caught in a thicket. On a mountaintop, he meets a powerful giant, whom he invites to accompany him. But the giant treats him with contempt. The tailor shows the giant the girdle, and the giant naturally assumes the inscription refers to seven men. He begins ‘to feel a little respect for the tiny fellow’ (ibid., p.171). He challenges the tailor by squeezing a rock till water drops out of it. ‘That is child’s play with us!’ cries the tailor, and squeezes the whey out of his piece of cheese. Incredulous, the giant tosses a stone so far it is barely seen falling to earth. The tailor in turn liberates his bird, which flies out of sight and does not come down. The giant challenges the tailor to help carry an oak tree out of the forest. The tailor offers to carry the branches and leaves, while the giant carries the trunk. The tailor climbs aboard the tree, so the giant must carry his weight as well.

“The Valiant Little Tailor” centres on the adventures of a hero, a spirited trickster, who succeeds more through luck, and by taking advantage of the conceits of others, than by courage. The tailor squatted on the tree-trunk, and the giant, straining under the combined weight of tree and tailor, is the subject of Peake’s illustration (Fig. 29 on next page), which recapitulates much of my discussion in Part 1. The giant’s appearance is typically Neanderthal, with broad, flat nose and heavy brow. He has none of the ‘cute’ facial features associated with neoteny. The huge weight he bears compresses his shoulder and back muscles. The folds of nappy-like cloth around his middle emphasise the scrape of rough bark against the soft skin of his neck His eyes squeeze up with pain and justifiable suspicion, beads of sweat stand out on his brow, and his mouth draws down with effort. His arm is well-muscled. Though the right hand fingers curl gorilla-like around the branch, the left hand fingers touch the tree-wood with delicacy, almost as if touching the keys of a flute, or the fingerboard of a cello, and the finger movement is seen rippling the muscles of the left forearm. This is further enhanced by a lack of grasping thumbs, an absence of manipulation.
In Chapter 3, I talked about that time in our lives when, if we felt hungry, we were quickly fed, and if we felt tired, a giant bent down to carry us. Here we see a wish-fulfilment of return to that time. The tailor looks too scrawny to do much. But Peake’s picture confirms the child’s belief that he is in control of huge physical forces. The giant struggles to prove his strength, while the larrikin tailor sits laughing behind his back. The weight of the tree-trunk prevents the giant’s turning round. The tailor rides the great trunk, its imposing shaft between his legs. He is in control of its potency. The giant is not.

Once again, the image can be viewed in at least two aspects. One reassures a child, who identifies with the happy, larrikin tailor perched on the trunk, that the rights of personhood
are inalienable, that command over destiny is easily achievable, that hero systems are
infallible. The child is given authority to feel special. The tailor vicariously shares the
strength of the giant. The tale’s embryonic moral code demands that anyone who stands in
the way of the tailor fulfilling his destiny must be punished and ridiculed. Finally, as in all
‘rise’ fairy tales, those typically relating the central character’s rise from rags to riches, we
witness the triumph of the hero, whose noble birthright is then suitably acknowledged.

Seen from an alternate aspect, the image portrays the tailor only incidentally. Striding high
above the world, straining under impossible weight, trying and failing, it is the giant who is
its main focus. In fact, Peake gives ‘the spectator no option’ other than seeing the picture this
way. He is not flattering to the toothy, jug-eared tailor, who looks anything but valiant.
Sitting upon the tree-trunk, smugly believing it is he who lifts the huge oak, he resembles the
mental ‘homunculus’, the person in the head, the thinker, planner, and executive self, whose
priority is maintaining self-esteem. The giant walks, solid as a mountain, carrying the tree on
his shoulder, as Christ carried His cross. The contours of the muscles in the giant’s flank, and
of the folds in the cloth around his middle, flow on in the lines of the clouds. He is part of the
landscape. His fingers are an artist’s. But his power is subjugated. The intelligence meant to
be his guide has deserted him. In Chapter 1, I identified Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and
Hell* as reflecting the spirit and humour of fairy tale. Now I would like to extend my quote to
include Blake’s next paragraph, which I think has relevance to my discussion of Peake’s
illustration to “The Valiant Little Tailor”:

> The Giants who formed this world into its sensual existence, and now seem to live in it in
chains, are in truth the causes of its life and the sources of all activity, but the chains are the
cunning of weak and tame minds which have power to resist energy, according to the proverb,
the weak in courage is strong in cunning. (Bentley, 1978, p.89)

I hope the analyses of the foregoing six illustrations demonstrates how much can be
learned from careful scrutiny of images of art. The reader may or may not agree with my
interpretations. Importantly, I consider these analyses successful if they point the way to
possibilities of discovery integral to such images. Peake invites us to enter them, to dwell in
them imaginatively. He places his viewer inside them, so the viewer looks through the eyes
of a particular character, or feels absorbed in the world of fairy tale. In this semiotic process,
I am conscious that it is my own imagination which supplies ‘meaning’ to landscape,
characters and events, with my ‘options’ (Peake, 1946, p.4) of discovery delineated by
strokes of the artist’s pen. Thus the image becomes a mirror, reflecting both the creative
process of the artist and that of the viewer’s imagination, and powerfully endorsed by an underlying sense of iconicity, of form identified with content. The mirror shows us to ourselves. In Chapter 4, I referred to Charles Gilbert’s comparison of Peake and Dickens, where he mentions John Cowper Powys’ observation on Dickens’ child-like imagination: ‘The surface of things is the heart of things.’ I said then that, just as the depth of the images for *Mother Moth* is contained in their polished surfaces, so meaning is most authentic when we see surfaces as they truly are. Only when a mirror is dusty do we see its surface, yet its surface is all we see. The unitive function of the salvaged image makes it analogous to a mirror. The meaning of the image is entirely symbolic, pointing beyond itself, yet the image, in the act of its production, participates literally in the play-life of imagination, the only inclusive reality which art, defined in this way, acknowledges.

In the final chapter, I will develop this idea further, characterising, in conclusion, the role of the artist as a midwife of images, much as Socrates saw the philosopher as a midwife of ideas.
Chapter 7

Naked, Militant and Unashamed:

Art as Maieutics

A FAIRY TALE often seems like an upper storey room. Things lurk beneath. We know with certainty they are there. We may even be aware of something terribly familiar, like cooking smells from the kitchen. But no real evidence for the existence of the dwellers downstairs can be found in the ordinary room above. All an illustrator may do is document the upstairs room. Peake captures the whole tale, the whole room, in a few simple pen strokes. At the same time, his drawing serves to subtly enlarge the mysterious interstices, the cracks in the floor, through which shines the all too familiar unearthly glow of the archetypal fairy tale.

The six illustrations to Household Tales exemplify his attempt to ‘hold back from the brink of oblivion’ images which otherwise remain subliminal: something about the cat’s neck; something about the child’s aloneness in the forest, the child’s initiation into the world, the ‘brood of shadows’ amongst the trees, the folds of cloth of the three spinsters’ garments, the black unseeingness in the eye of a dead horse. Peake succeeds in forcing the spectator to look with ‘no option’. He wants us to ‘slide’ into the soul of an image, as he slid into the soul of fairy tale. He wants our eyes to reconnoiter, as if the image were a patch of damp. We are explorers in an unfamiliar land, or shipwrecked on an island. Our hermeneutics is not invalidated if a process of apophenia gives meaning: quite the reverse. We are not asked to bring anything to the pictures, neither in the way of tribute or criticism, but a vision freed from both, a vision able to re-envision. To catch the image in the act of its re-imagining: that is what these pictures set out to do, and in so doing show us to ourselves. We need only to affirm the images as more than abstractions, so as to let them replicate in us. But this can be impossibly demanding. The distinguishing quality of a ‘salvaged’ image is that it feels personal. It is revelation, authentic and cathartic. It fires enthusiasm and forges commitment. Peake well understood that all art is projection. But art is conscious projection, when the eye looks outward and sees inward.

Before summarising our argument, and elaborating on these ideas about the creative process, I feel this is an appropriate time to include in the discussion the images decorating the body of the Moth cello.
The front of the Moth cello shows an image of spinning (Fig. 30). The figure of the female spinner is a complex image, and can be variously interpreted. Spinning, of course, is a frequent theme in fairy tale. “The Three Spiners” is an example, as are “The Sleeping Beauty” and “Rumpelstiltskin”. Evidence of implements used for spinning is found consistently at sites of prehistoric settlement. Through history, most women spun and wove cloth for their families. To relieve monotony, they spun in company, passing the time by singing songs or telling stories, some of which were predictably about spinning. The art of spinning involves drawing out fibres from a distaff and twisting them into thread using a spindle. As I noted earlier, much symbolism attaches to the process. Of the three Fates, or Moirae, who apportioned human destiny, Clotho was responsible for spinning its thread. Thread as a symbol closely relates to hair. For a shivering, neotenous creature, a covering of thread substitutes for a covering of hair. Its warmth is vital for survival, and the mother supplies it. Weaved thread, liked combed hair, denotes health and vitality. The texture of
threads becomes as familiar, essential and magical to us as the feel of skin. It is hard to be aware of enculturation when it begins on such an intimate, physical level. The shawl that wraps us delivers the same comfort as our mother’s arms.

On the cello, the figure of the mother sits with distaff and spindle, her face stony and indifferent (Fig. 30). She works blindly, creating with her thread the material world, weaving the sequence of causality. There is circularity to her spinning. She herself, her hair, dress and fingers, all form part of the circle. Her hands manipulate the fibre to form thread, passing it through the fingers. On its way, it weaves the fabric of her dress. The music, the storytelling, resonates along the lines of thread, and in the spinner’s fingers. The thread is taken up by the industrious silkworm who weaves a golden chamber in which to go to sleep. Cocoons appear on the side of the cello (Fig. 32). From the cocoon, the devouring moth emerges to chew holes in the fabric. But this destructive act at the same time allows light to shine through
The light begins in glimpses of stars, ragged like bright holes (Fig. 31). The powder of the moth’s fluttering wings equates to the powder of resin, enabling the bow to set the string in motion. The music is made from the dust of destruction. The moth flies on torn and shredded wings, till its body becomes too heavy to rise. The frayed thread descends again, in winged, sticky cobwebs that obscure the starlight. The web returns to the spinner’s hair wrapped around the distaff. Imagination projects images, as the silkworm lets out its golden thread. If there is a point of origin to the circle, it is at the f-hole replacing the distaff. The f-hole is the ‘ineffable’. It is the intersection, where love, thought and material world, like the music from the cello, bubble into existence as one, from a miraculous emptiness. Of the four cellos, this one most aptly expresses the creative process, and is most closely related to the genre of fairy tale in its images.

This thesis has traced two paths. The first followed fairy tale historically, from its roots in primitive narrative, beginning with the fundamental human relationship, that of mother-child symbiosis. The fracture of this bond drives the human story. Fairy tale concerns itself with basic ontological questions, avoided by adults as pointless. Children, however, take solace that these questions are not off-limits to fairy tale, but are asked squarely without embarrassment and answered definitively in terms of the heroic. This gives the child seven-league boots, for fairy tale, in its fundamental form, chronicles the rise and unconcealed triumph of the flagrant hero-self. It tells the story at its most rudimentary, with narcissistic elements unashamedly on display. This story is the human story, the one story, the story of the human longing to identify with the heroic, played out again and again through history, the one obsession, the story of story itself. The story of the hero is common to all cultures worldwide. Anthropologist Géza Róheim heard it being told by indigenous Australians. It became the core of myths, which often describe the quest of a hero who must battle a monster to win the love of a triple lunar goddess, mother, lover, and witch. Often the hero is both conqueror and victim, must suffer death and is resurrected. Joseph Campbell called the story the ‘monomyth’.

My argument went on to see this story as the self’s celebration of its long struggle to gain separate identity. In the battle, giant forces throw and snatch the infant to and fro. One urges energetic, active expansion, the other seeks safety and passive submission. The conflict forges the nascent self, whose allegiance fluctuates, torn by fear and need, identifying first with one instinct, then another, whilst, simultaneous with its separation, several dualities arise, the most fundamental being the split of subject and object.
In Freud’s analysis, an infant at the breast makes no distinction between self and sensation. Some sources of pleasure are elusive. The breast is one. Sometimes the infant must scream to reconnect with it. There is pain, hunger and discomfort. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud writes: ‘A tendency arises to separate from the ego everything that can become a source of such unpleasure, to throw it outside and to create a pure pleasure-ego which is confronted by a strange and threatening outside’ (1930, p.4467). A sense of loss is felt, reviving the terror of that time we first came in contact with the hard, cold surfaces of the world. Securing the boundaries between pleasure and pain, good and bad, requires mechanisms of defence. One of the earliest *splits* the mother into good and bad individuals, into fairy godmother and witch. The self learns to designate itself, and its defence forces patrol boundaries that are ever-shifting and ambiguously defined.

We learned from Antonio Damasio that current neurological research views consciousness as constructed not of thoughts and language, but feeling. The brain renders subjectivity by mapping the body, and so delivers us our ‘felt’ sense of reality. The mind is a metaphor for the body, and the self a homeostatic reference point, describing its independent existence as it feels modified by constant interaction with stimuli. Diverse feelings and sensations are made to seem part of a whole. This agrees both with research into cognitive metaphor, and with Freud’s assessment that ‘the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego: it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface’ (1927, p.31).

The self then, though feeling itself an independent knowing being, can only know itself, or take itself as object, in interaction. Catching hold of itself in any other way is impossible. And despite apparent independence, the spatio-temporal boundaries of the soul more or less coincide with those of the body. The self is a mental image, a metaphor of permanence. Viewing itself as object in this way, in Lacan’s terminology, is a *méconnaissance*, a misunderstanding. (For a clear synopsis of Lacan's ideas, see du Gay et al., 2000, pp.44-50). Much of repression is devoted to disguising the self’s own deceptions about itself from itself.

Finally, following this path, we saw how the self’s most feared confrontation is with the shadow of death, whose inevitability reveals the self’s essential fraudulence. The body, self’s true home, is now identified as a place no longer safe. Physical vulnerability must be rejected. The self avoids the anxiety of death at any cost, even if that means giving up the only real possibility of life: the human body, blighted by death’s shadow. Perhaps the most tragic tale ever told laments the day we ate
and awoke to an understanding of our own flawed nature. The Fall is repeated at some stage in the life of every child. It is always ‘disobedience’. The secret discovered in the thirteenth room is always a guilty secret. Our lips are sealed. Humanity found an answer to the problem of keeping the shameful secret. But it required mental reorganisation on a profound scale. Repression helped achieve the solution: disowning the human body, dismembering experience into manageable pieces, filtering out terror, preventing the risks of spontaneity by turning behavior into a series of rituals, objects into receptacles of power, and reassuring the self that it had what it secretly lacked: immunity from death, immortality. For the illusion to succeed, the process of repression itself must be repressed. ‘Then, said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34). The self contrived to love itself again, but no longer with the easy narcissism of the fairy tale hero. Esteem replaced love, and heroism was attained through a good day at the office, a scored goal, a medal, or an academic degree. For heroism to feel meaningful, the truth about its compulsive need can never be admitted.

The second path of this thesis followed the creative development of an artist, Mervyn Peake. This strand of the argument looked at the artist’s response to the human dilemma. Peake’s early life was unusual. His wife, Maeve Gilmore, sums it up: ‘A strange childhood. Such a mixture of English nonconformity, and almost bourgeois convention. Congregational hymns, tea-parties, a straight-laced upbringing, and outside surrounded by dragons and carvings of ancient imagination and disastrous beauty’ (1970, p.23). The ‘mixture’ is reflected in much of his writing and his art. The environment was alien, there was great poverty, and the little boy witnessed many gruesome things. Particularly, he seemed very aware of ritual, costume, social hierarchy, and the trappings of power. He saw people, as fairy tale is apt to, as animals dressing up. He pondered what made people behave the way they do. Why did some ride magnificently in sedan chairs, while others must carry them? Why were some wrapped in gold silk robes and others covered in leprous sores? Perhaps frightened and confronted, he responded by drawing. His pencil was his ally, helping make sense of the world. I believe the riot of diverse cultural perspectives to which he was exposed as a child prevented his adopting a single consensus reality. Instead, he was an outsider, and remained so. He saw what he saw, and his pencil remained indifferent to the heroic. He loved
people’s foibles and idiosyncrasies. This is what he went ‘head-hunting’ to find. Affection for the subject fills his every picture. Even his parodies are composed with love. He took Rabelaisian delight in characters, and did not discriminate against greed, immodesty, cunning or lack of self-control. The Wolf in *Gormenghast* he describes as ‘undeniably wicked — but so decoratively wicked’ (Peake, p.616). Furthermore, each character appears completed and autonomous in a splendid isolation. G. Peter Winnington believes “‘essential isolation’ (G333) is the most pervasive theme of Peake’s work’ (2006, p.31). He rarely depicts groups. ‘His fiction is remarkable for the almost complete absence — and sometimes active rejection — of society’ (ibid., p.36). Heroism is a social contract.

So, ironically, after all I have argued about fairy tale in relation to the story of the hero, Peake, in his illustrations to *Household Tales*, drew barely an image of the traditional hero. There is Joringel confronting the witch, with his drooping flower between his fingers, and his bulging tights (Fig. 34).

![Figure 34](image)

And there is the goose-girl’s tragic, silent nobility. Peake drew sadness, fear, humour, slapstick, pretension, lots of funny hats, companionship, affection, humility, flying, leaping
for joy, wondering — but nothing of the heroic. I wrote in Chapter 4 that to observe a ritual
is to see one thing and take it to mean another. It is something expected of us, viewing people
via the masks of their hero-personae. The word ‘person’ originally meant ‘mask’, from Greek
πρόσωπον (Partridge, 1966, p.487). We witness social roles, a word derived from the roll of
paper on which an actor’s part was written (ibid., p.570). On rare occasions, the leaden habits
normally obscuring vision allow other perspectives to emerge. Players are then seen on a
stage, playing parts with which they choose to identify. This is what fairy tale sees: strange
creatures performing strange rituals, ‘familiar things in unfamiliar guise’ (Rackham, 1933,
n.p.). The role-playing hero may now resemble the narcissistic hero of fairy tale. We do not
admire, or want to emulate him, or identify with him, but we love him, nevertheless. We love
him as a creature. We love him for who he is.

Peake’s ambivalence toward the heroic, his inconclusiveness portraying the heroic quest
in his writing, perplexes critics. Alice Mills identifies what she calls ‘stuckness’ in his work.
Of Boy in Darkness she writes:

The problem with a reading of the boy’s adventures in terms of the monomyth . . . is that the
story’s ending is so inadequate. The Boy shows no signs of having been initiated into a new
stage of life, or of deeper understanding. If his experience alludes to Dante’s descent into
Hell, he learns nothing from it . . . The Boy retrieves no treasure from the underworld, rescues
no maiden (apart from his own presumable virginity), saves no kingdom. (2005, p.191)

Peake understood what drives the need for the heroic, and how sad is heroism’s obligatory
obscuration. Heroism is the story of history, and history, as the character Stephen Dedalus
famously remarks in James Joyce’s Ulysses, ‘is a nightmare from which I am trying to
awake’ (1968, p.40). At the end of Gormenghast, Titus ponders the world beyond the castle:

. . . it was only fear that held people together. The fear of being alone and the fear of being
different. Her (the Thing’s) unearthly arrogance and self-sufficiency had exploded at the very
centre of his conventions. From the moment he knew for certain that she was no figment of
his fancy, but a creature of Gormenghast Forest, he had been haunted. He was still haunted.
Haunted by the thought of this other kind of world which was able to exist without
Gormenghast.

One evening, in the late spring, he climbed the slopes of Gormenghast Mountain and
stood by his sister’s grave. But he did not remain there for long, gazing down at the small
silent mound. He could only think what all men would have thought: that it was pitiful that
one so vivid and full of love and breath should be rotting in darkness. To brood upon it would
only be to call up horrors. (1999, p.749)

Peake’s weapon against ‘horrors’ was his pencil. All his life, an implement of record
poised in his fingers enthused imagination. It gave him the security he needed to let his eyes
be vulnerable. Doodling was a technique to launch the process. It was not a process of trial
and error, scribbling until something ‘came’. It was staring and staring, until he worked up
imagination to the point of seeing what was there. The process is analogical to
Michelangelo’s discovery of the figure in the stone. The stone is stonified perception; the
paper is hollowness that imagination fills. With sharpened chisel, a ‘pencil instead of a
spear’, the artist salvages the image and, for a moment, reinstates an organic unity of vision.
But to arrive here confronts our ‘essential isolation’, our solipsism, and our creatureliness.

This brings us to the purpose behind creative art, which I noted in the Introduction, is a
subject Peake felt passionate about.

The voice of a pencil. Its lilt; its pitch; its suave and silver argument or the husky stuttering of
its leaden dagger. The voice of ink, of chalk, of pigment or stone. What are they, these
varying voices that, soundless, can be like tumult or as faint as a whisper in the next room?
From the brain in the eye and the eye in the brain they make their way, these accents, through
the arm and fingers to a canvas like a field of untrodden snow, to a cold chaos of stone, to the
square yawn of a paper page as empty of life as the manless moon. (Gilmore and Johnson,
1974, p.80)

In the introduction, I touched briefly on a decline in the status of the arts over the last one
hundred or so years. In fact, the decline has been going on far longer. The ideas of Faculty
Psychology, beginning with Christian von Wolff in 1734, partitioned the mind into distinct
functions or abilities, such as will, emotions and intellect, and became very popular during
the Enlightenment. They strengthened the divide between arts and sciences. Some faculties
were seen as subordinate. The dominant ones were cognitive. Reason and understanding
were seen as objective and rational. The lower faculties, sensation, emotion and imagination,
were subjective and bodily. Knowledge and truth were reportable only by the higher
faculties, scrupulously analysing data from sensation. Science and philosophy were rational
disciplines. Like Bela Pratt’s sculpture of ‘Science’ personified, at the entrance to the Public
Library, Boston, Massachusetts, cognition held the world at arm’s length and scrutinised it.
The aesthetic was considered incapable of disengaging sufficiently to view sensory data
objectively. Though Romantic poets and artists tried to reconnect the alienated self with
‘nature’, and though Faculty Psychology’s simplistic model of mental functions fell out of
favour, faith has continued in the scientific method as providing the best description of
reality.

On a practical level, science’s ability to impact on everyday life has confirmed this faith.
But a consequence of the scientific method is reinforcement of the subject-object duality, a
split that signals repudiation of the human body. I do not say that science sanctions the split
at its most intuitive and thoughtful level. Nobel prize-winning physicist and theoretical biologist Erwin Schrödinger

. . . cites the ‘scientific report on a crucial experiment’ given to him by a three-and-a-half year old child: ‘When you pinch yourself, it doesn’t matter to me, but when I pinch myself, it hurts.’ ‘Take note’, he says, ‘of the wonderful “it”, that recalls the famous “it” of Lichtenberg, with which he corrected the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am” (which should say “it thinks, therefore it is”).’ (Moore, 1989, p.252)

In its quest for objectivity, science prides itself on not relying on individual ‘felt’ experience. Since Descartes’s time, the subject-object boundary has shifted, allowing objective to annex much subjective territory. Mind is increasingly investigated through properties of the brain. Unthinking, extended substance has grown; unextended, thinking substance has shrunk. I believe this reflects a fear of confronting the ‘crawl space’ of the subjective, ‘individuality within finitude’ (Becker, 1973, p.26). The matter of which the cosmos is ‘felt’ to be made is verifiable common property. Outwardly, we are all star stuff. However unquantifiable is the universe’s transcendence of us ‘out there’, we point to it and exclaim about it together, unlike the ineffable interiors of ourselves, for which we have no language, other than the language of art.

Art is the science of the subjective, of ‘felt’ experience. It records not objects, nor their reflections in the flawed glass of the mediating self, but objects set free into the pure subjective, where they are returned to themselves. Art, in this view, is integration: literal metaphor, imagination reunified with its act of perception: ‘the brain in the eye and the eye in the brain’.

The designs decorating the bodies of the four Mother Moth cellos attempt to visually describe the synthesis. The cellos came about because of a passage in the book where Mother Moth describes the Mantle of Vulning: ‘A terrible suffering was anciently seared into this cloth. You will feel that by its touch. Its revelation is undeniable. But I warn you, there is no poetry sad enough to sing its song, and no cello sad enough to play it. Not a whole quartet of them’ (Bell, 2011, p.238).

In the book, the Mantle of Vulning represents two things. One is the full weight of the poignancy of death. The other is the human body, and the delicate penetration of environment through which we open ourselves to life. Life and death are, as it were, the two sides, outer and inner, of the cloak. Each cello describes the Mantle of Vulning in a different way, and each illustrates a layer of the story of Mother Moth. Each, in one sense or other, is the principal cello, and the others expound upon it, or play variations. Each has an inside and
an outside, both requisite to produce music. Images of birth, motherhood and death abound in
the book. The cello designs Birth, and birthday, is often associated with death. Death is often
associated with birth.

![Image of a decorated violin](image_url)

Figure 35

*Mother Moth* divides goblins into at least two kinds, both depicted on the Goblin cello.
The friendly, domestic goblins live beneath kitchen floors, while the stone goblins are miners
in darkness, the kin of rocks, flints and the sharp-bladed mineral stars. Goblins are
neotenous: soft, childlike creatures, sensitive, physically not robust. They fear death because
goblins at any age grow old suddenly, and die without warning. So that this does not happen,
they hide underground where the sun cannot touch them. As stone goblins, they grow scaly
and aggressive. They are creatures of feeling, fleet of foot, but easily enslaved.

The designs on this cello deliberately confuse inner and outer. The goblins in *Mother
Moth* are creatures with passage between worlds. On the belly of the cello, the goblins
emerge to the surface from under tiles that are tissue thin (Fig. 35). Yet they arrive into an empty, inner vaulted space, complete with its own atmosphere of clouds. In the back of the instrument, a door, resembling traditional depictions of the ‘door of death’, leads into the part of the cello hidden from view (Fig. 36). From here the sound emanates.

The gentle steps and wide door invite us to enter what appears as a warm, homely interior, swept and kept by the magical besom broom leaning at the doorway. The broom is female. The door of death then becomes a symbol of the womb. Outdoor brooms are seldom used indoors. Yet this broom sweeps a threshold, both inside and out. The broom, and the wetness of the shining moon reflected on the dewy stone, associates Elspeth with the damsel who sprinkles the parlour floor in Bunyan’s House of the Interpreter (1965, p.61). Having assumed the door leads inwards, the viewer lastly notices the figures of Gryll and Feemie sleeping peacefully in the shapes of the rocks, their heads laid side by side on the cold stone.
path, and Gryll’s hand supporting the cello’s waist, as in a dance. The discovery inverts the image, which now invites exit through a door leading outside. Therefore, on neither the cello’s front nor back can I be certain whether I am inside looking out, or outside looking in.

For me, art is a reaching without grasp, a readiness without expectation. I must constantly remind myself that all expression, whether poetry or mathematics, is metaphor, or at least facilitated by metaphor. ‘All perception of truth is the detection of an analogy’ (Thoreau, 1962, p.463). Art rejoices in being made of the flux of metaphor. Art rejoices in belief, not because belief is a response to objective truth, but because belief is the engine that drives imagination. We believe something because we ‘feel’ it is true. It lives in us, excites our wonder and our vitality. Art relishes mistakes, because mistakes, like Freudian slips, tell the truth. Its voice, as Peake tells us, is ‘the voice of man, naked, militant and unashamed’ (Gilmore and Johnson, 1974, pp.81-82).

I hear in his words an allusion to the Biblical story of the expulsion from Paradise, a story that must have been well known to him. The ‘voice of man’ recalls ‘the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day’ (Gen. 3:8). Questioned by God, Adam replies that he heard God’s voice, and it made him afraid because he was naked. So he hid himself. Peake revises Adam’s reply to be expressed as a work of art. It stands upon ‘the brink of oblivion’, at the Lord God’s feet, where Beethoven and Shakespeare built.

Embodied man, naked and unashamed, declares a ‘militant’ vulnerability. The God accusing him of disobedience is identified for what he is: an image of paternal authority in the mind. We have only to recall Kafka’s (1993) insightful little story “The Judgment” to know that such a God still wields very real and dangerous power. Had Adam replied as an artist, one wonders how different history might have been.

His expulsion would have gone ahead, because the more life is affirmed, the more repression moves to negate it. The vision of art matters because its rescue of images from behind the barriers imposed by repression draws attention to the illusory nature of those barriers. In this achievement, art sets us free. Superficially, it may seem concerned with making objects of beauty, even objects of disgust. Image as idol, art in the marketplace, is no more satisfying than a trip to the shops. Redintegration, finding the fractal image that holds the key to wholeness, is art’s primary goal. To allow for such redemptive reversal in consciousness, the individual strives to remain open and sensitive. Skin, thick or thin, must be unbearably, poignantly, transparent. Art assimilates all it can of death’s grotesque. We rise again with the sprightly, playful scherzo of the fairy tale hero, the remnant of that primary
birthright which was ours before repression did its work. The energy of release is like a birth, an expansion of limbs, with all the red and furious reality of the neonate.

Writing this thesis, and developing its ideas, put me in mind of Socrates’s pedagogical method, termed maieutics, which derives from Greek μαίευτικός, meaning ‘pertaining to midwifery’. In the Theætetus, Socrates refers to himself as a midwife of ideas (Plato, 2003, pp.24-26). These ideas he claims to ‘deliver’ by means of dialectics from the minds of others. The method of maieutics presupposes that the truths of philosophy lie latent within us, to be recalled to consciousness by the philosopher’s art. The word ‘latent’ comes from the same root as ‘Lethe’, the river of unmindfulness in Hades, whose name means ‘to lie hidden, to escape notice’ (Partridge, 1966, p.339). The word for ‘truth’ in Greek, ἀλήθεια, ‘aletheia’ means literally ‘not hiding’, rescued from Lethe, from oblivion. In the introduction, I called art ‘anamnestic’ activity. As F. M. Cornford points out (Plato, 2003, p.28), Socrates’ portrayal of philosophy as midwifery shares close parallels with the theory of Anamnesis, put forward in the Meno, and holding that all acquisition of knowledge about reality is achieved via recollection from a time before the human soul was incarnated. Aiding this recollection, the midwife tries to induce a state of catharsis in ‘the soul that is in travail of birth’ (ibid., p.26).

Greek κάθαρσις, ‘katharsis’, means ‘cleansing, purification’ (Partridge, 1966, p.84). Because of its modern-day association with psychoanalysis and forms of psychotherapy, we think of ‘catharsis’ as an outlet to relieve emotional stress. But its origins, preceding Aristotle’s Poetics (1987, p.58), and before its connection with Orphism and the Eleusinian Mysteries, (Campbell, 1955, pp.81-102 passim), lie in sacrificial practices to expiate blood guilt by smearing the murderer with pig’s blood, and washing away the blood with water. (Burkert, 1992, p.52). This is another example of what we saw in Chapter 5: a lineage of action sourced in the physical body, transformed by metaphorical extension into emotional experience, then sublimated into metaphysical idea.

Socrates’ philosophy frequently argues a duality between body and soul, so we may incline to believe he might have challenged the validity of a lineage that fixes the origin of soul firmly in the body. But, as I have argued, the biblical Fall takes place within the human mind. The neurosis common to humanity lies in fantasy, in the way we view the body in the mind. It is seen as an appendage, unconscious, possessing no intentionality, the predicate in the subject-predicate narrative. It becomes a mannequin on which to hang images of self-esteem, or an instrument of pleasure, or an automaton whose mechanical breakdown
threatens our survival. It is something we own. This psychic organisation is what I believe Socrates identifies as a duality of body and soul. The disorder is in awareness, and, for Socrates, awareness is all. The disorder lies in a perceived separation, and in our fantasies concerning that separation.

Psychic organisation along these lines, comprising sublimation, is a creative response to the problem of death. But the necessity of repression prevents recognition of these creative processes as essentially delusive, so their results are reified. I feel there is evidence in Plato’s works that Socrates was aware of human culture’s unacknowledged debt to the human body, of culture’s secret purpose of masking off corporeality and death. Socrates’ words from the Apology, ὁ δὲ ἄνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ (Tyler, 1866, p.70) translate: ‘The unexamined life is not the life for man.’ In Socrates’ view, goodness lies simply in being aware of why we do what we do. Nothing should hinder that discovery. Knowledge as information Socrates distrusts: only with honesty and acceptance can life be uprightly lived. ‘I suggest, gentlemen, that the difficulty is not so much to escape death; the real difficulty is to escape from doing wrong, which is far more fleet of foot’ (Plato, 1969, p.73). Socrates portrays the kind of redemption that leads to acceptance of truth as a catharsis, thereby removing prejudice and revealing the fictions human life relies on to sustain itself in the face of creature anxiety. He explains that ‘the god constrains me to play the part of midwife to others, but does not allow me to have a family myself’ (Plato, 1875, p.16). He denies possessing any wisdom. Under conditions of repression, the self can have none.

I feel that Socrates’ notion of maieutics is an appropriate characterisation of the method of art in its revelatory aspect. The way I developed the images for Mother Moth has strongly influenced this view. Working with the book, I became aware of the ontological shaping-power of imagination. Making the images, and reflecting on their production during the preparation of the thesis, allowed me to produce a coherent account of my own creative outlook. This has considerably benefitted my creativity. After producing the images for the book, and working on the thesis, the culmination of my ideas was expressed in the Mother Moth cellos. I was gratified, on the day of performance, that, through the inclusion of the cellos with their designs, the audience was immersed in a synthesis of the arts: hung pictures; the hardbound copy of Mother Moth, which constituted an aesthetically pleasing object appreciated through the sense of touch; the music, evoking the atmosphere of Mother Moth; the selections from the book read aloud; and finally, the sculptural, three-dimensional appeal of the decorated cellos, exhibited in a sympathetic environment, and then taken down and
played. I believe the exhibition and book launch was an effective culmination to the project, and argued convincingly for the claims made in this thesis.

As human beings, we are embodied. Though seemingly the most obvious fact about life, it is the one we least accept, blind even to our own mechanisms of denial. The purpose of art, I believe, is to repair humanity’s sight, to bring us back to our senses. Thus art rescues images from ‘the brink of oblivion’, and the implications of the process are profound. The artist is the midwife of these images. But, like Socrates, the artist has no family. She lays no claim to the newborn. She is but the midwife. Imagination is the mother.
BELL, A. 2011. Mother Moth, Fountaingate, Bell.
BOLK, L. 1926. Der Problem der Menschwerdung, Jena, Fischer.